

Filmic Representations of Migration. A Romanian in France: *Stella*

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Résumé: En se proposant de présenter le réseau complexe de confrontations interculturelles et d'exposer le canon euro-centriste qui s'oppose à l'appropriation de l'altérité, soit-elle interne ou externe, la plupart des films qui traitent du phénomène de la migration se focalisent sur la juxtaposition entre les constructions culturelles de l'Ouest, imaginées par les sociétés-domiciles de l'Est, et celles de l'Est, imaginées par les sociétés occidentales qui hébergent ces premières. Notre travail se donne pour but d'identifier et d'analyser cet entrecroisement, tout en mettant en discussion la stéréotypie de genre et les politiques du pouvoir patriarcal, en faisant recours au film documentaire „Stella”, réalisé par Vanina Vignal, et au cas symptomatique de son personnage homonyme, qui choisit de quitter la Roumanie seulement pour rester prisonnière dans un camp d'émigrants à Paris.

Mots-clés: film, représentation, migration, genre

1. Introduction

Bringing cultural heterogeneity into a single paradigm presupposes power structures which enforce a centrist perspective on the narration and reception of individual cultures – one that may be observed in the mediation carried out by filmic texts. Multiculturalism exposes all this through focusing on the issue of Eurocentrism, whose main premise is that the entire world gravitates around Europe (generative of a unique source of meaning), which involves a complex, contradictory and historically unstable discourse, and relates oppressively to both its external and internal others. Furthermore, polycentric multiculturalism aims at restructuring intercommunal relations within and beyond the nation-state in keeping with the inner dynamics and outspoken ideals of diverse communities. Power, energy and struggle are brought to the fore, in an attempt at revealing the untruth of the consideration of cultural identity as a consolidated set of practices, meanings and experiences, and at approaching it as multiple, historically determined and constantly in the making.

The analysis of images and stereotypes (dominant in film), together with their transgression, consequently needs to be achieved through the lens of polycentric multiculturalism so as to avoid essentialist, reductionist interpretations that reproduce the very racism they were designed to counter. In other words, the decoding of stereotypes has to have in view their principal roles and functions: indicating patterns of prejudice in apparently random choices and phenomena; inflicting psychic devastation or stirring intercultural conflict through their internalisation as defining traits or the negative impact of their dissemination; underlining the fact that they result from social control rather than from errors of perception.

2. The Reality of Migration

In recent years, migration has become a widespread phenomenon, mostly due to the societal changes brought about by the fall of communism and their impact on the labour market. In the case of Romania, starting with 1990, the employment policies grew restrictive and elitist, leaving many on the outside through reduction of positions in the public sector, high requirements from the still feeble but demanding private sector or failure to provide state sponsored professional training for job mobility into other domains. Doubled by the increasing costs of living and the governing atmosphere of insecurity characteristic of the big cities, the loss of decent work places and the absence of motivating career possibilities drove many to the countryside, reversing the trend prevalent during the communist period. If the elderly, however, could readjust to the rural environment (that they had been brought up in), the young (who had not experienced it previously) could not. More and more people started

looking for work abroad (appealing also due to the past experience of closed frontiers during communism), thus increasing the number of migrants.

Some of the Romanians chose to emigrate legally, either by applying for jobs abroad (especially if they were highly experienced professionals) or through employment programmes organised by the national government or by NGOs. Others (the majority unfortunately) chose to assume the status of illegal immigrant. Of these, a small number managed to obtain work permits and foreign citizenship through marriage or prolonged residency, the rest continuing to stay illegally in the receiving countries.

The same post-communist, post-integration realities apply to women, only more poignantly so, since many of them have been taught to accept second rate jobs and to dream half-dreams about their future. As for the Romanian gypsy women, their fate is even worse: they marry in their early teens, give birth to as many children as possible, are sent out to beg and give everything they earn to the domineering male figure in the family/community. The fact that during the last decades the number of women leaving the country has tended to increase constantly is an indicator that emigration is also an answer to the persistence of forms of patriarchy and a mentality that continues to limit women's opportunities in the process of neo-accumulation and the public sphere.

3. Filmic Representations of Migration

Recent documentary films on migration and women [1] oppose representations of home to representations of host societies. The main aspects of the home country that they deal with seem to be: the generation gap, which deepens the precipice of expectations with regard to money, career and status (in J, T and GW, the idealistic, rebellious youth fight back the inertia of their parents and undo the ties with the land and the community); the more delicate question of Romanian history and the country's apparent social involution and economic downfall (in J, T, GW, LT, S); the problems in the medical system at home (S); nostalgia for the communist age before 1989 (S); the Romanian/Roma confusion and cultural myth making prejudice (BF, S); the German ethnic minority problematic – from integration to disintegration and reintegration (BF, LT).

Regarding the hosts, their social and economic situations are portrayed as: difficult but still providing low paid employment for the immigrant (Ireland, France – in J, T, GW); flourishing and excluding foreign illegal labour (France in S); offering opportunities for decent survival (Germany – former home for the protagonists of LT); having a dangerously black component (Serbia, Macedonia, Holland – in HT) and incredibly primitive and worthy of contempt (Romania itself – for the old people in BF).

Interaction with the institutions is avoided, and thus they are more than criticised (in J, T, GW); instead, people tend to go to representatives of the underworld for help and counselling (J, T, GW, S, HT), the battle being primarily one of obtaining work permits and citizenship – never actually conferred. A special situation is that of HT, where illegal emigration is the least of the characters' worries. In the case of LT, however, emigrating is done by the book, with the implication of the mayor's office, the police, the foreign embassy.

The home and host police is recurrently mentioned and feared, not only for its imposing the law (systematically broken because no opportunities are offered, no rights guaranteed), but also for the fact that it turns a blind eye to pornography and the activities of the prostitution mafia (J, T, GW, S, HT). Additionally, HT invites the public at large to address the police, the prosecution and various other foundations and NGOs – in need of popular support for their missions to be accomplished. As for BF, it makes no particular reference to present day institutions, as its narrative flashbacks bring to light older structures of authority: the extreme communism of the Siberian labour camps or the closely knitted system of the Nazi dictatorship.

Along the lines of gender representation, the film documentaries illustrate the mechanisms of centrist positions through zooming in on symptomatic cases of migration, of written and misread otherness. For the home country, the basic dichotomies of the social (and economic) environment are rural/urban and old/new. Within it, Romanian women carry the traces of patriarchy and seem to be comfortable with their status of subordination. The moment they aspire to freedom from ties, they significantly end up even worse. In the host countries, women are discriminated twice: for being women and for being foreigners.

Discrimination is represented as a consequence of a money oriented society, whose empowered patriarchal centre governs the female fringes and manipulates their constitutional and international rights. Whether at home or abroad, women are crushed by the socially constructed myth of superwoman which, unlike that of superman, does not have positive connotations. Wives, mothers, lovers, cooks, working women etc, they all do their best to fit prefabricated models, but fail and suffer in the process.

Women as second rate citizens is the leitmotif in most of the recent documentaries focusing on women and migration. Although equally treated as criminals where the breaking of patriarchal law is concerned, they are prone to the freedom of victims of lawlessness.

A smaller version of societal patriarchy may easily be traced in the inescapable institution of marriage they are trapped within. The documentaries present women either as enslaved by their spouses or as entrusting themselves to devious male characters, under the spell of potential future marriages.

When it comes to associations, foundations, NGOs dedicated to the protection and instruction of women, their very existence tells the sad tale of their condition, inescapable as long as domination will stay focused on gender and as long as women will accept the yoke.

Gender stereotyping has frequently been associated with patriarchal power politics and with social and cultural constructions of femininity and masculinity. Consequently, the emerging canonical narratives on gender identity need to be exposed and defamiliarised for oppressing, displacing or repressing manifestations and representations of the complexity of gender.

In short therefore, the biological factor aside, the social has constantly influenced the development of gender identity. In the case of women, a number of recurrent issues have been brought up: the revaluation of their experiences; the challenging of their representations as “other”, “lack” or part of “nature”; the examination of power relations and reading for political purposes, to show the extent of patriarchy; the recognition of the role of language in making the social and constructed seem transparent and natural; the questioning of the popular notion of the death of the author/authority and discussing the subject positions constructed in discourse; the clarification of the ideological base of supposedly “neutral” or “mainstream” interpretations of gender roles.

Replacing (his)story with her story seems a difficult enterprise, yet revealing the manipulative strategies in building memorable characters and events which portray woman as secondary or as margin will eventually contribute to doing just that. The documentary films of recent years show classic cases of gender discrimination, deepened by the overlapping discriminatory practices fuelled by race, nationality, ethnicity, language and history.

4. A Case Study: “Stella”

4.1. Film overview

Genre: documentary, part of a trilogy on Romanian women; Produced by: Vanina Vignal [2]; Released: 2006; Aims: shaking off prejudiced opinions about and stereotypical representations of migrants in general and Roma people in particular, casting a new look on gender relations in the Romanian society; Duration: 77 min.; Languages: Romanian and French; Characters: Stela Mărgean, Marcel Mărgean (Stela’s husband), Gabi (Stela’s sister);

Settings: Paris, France and Brăila, Romania; Patrimony award – Cinéma du Réel 2007, France.

4.2. Film summary

Stella (a Romanian former worker) and her gypsy husband Marcel migrate to France to solve a medical problem that the latter has. Once in France, they try to find jobs and live in decent conditions. However, since they are illegal immigrants, they are forced to live in a decrepit Parisian ghetto in Saint-Denis, have no resident permits and constantly fear that they might be arrested by the police and deported. To provide for themselves, Stella and her sister Gabi (also having emigrated) are forced to beg. Eventually discovered by Vanina Vignal and helped along with their medical issues, Stella, Gabi and Marcel return home, to Brăila and attempt reintegration.

4.3. Film Analysis

In *Stella*, the home country (Romania) is backgrounded, but represented in terms of present day economic problems (which makes some nostalgic for the communist past and its apparent welfare), difficulties in obtaining proper medical care (now very much dependent on personal and institutional finances) and intolerance with the Roma community.

Stella comes to shed light on this broader social paradox: “for a vast majority of Romanian workers – who had been idolized and financially assisted by the regime – the brutal shift to democracy has meant a vertiginous downfall. Against their will, these people have ‘fallen into democracy’ with no instructions, help or explanation. Suddenly faced with political and economic liberalism, they have the feeling that they have been propelled into a world that no longer needs them, which has led some of them to lament the safety of the previous regime.” (Vanina Vignal). The documentary’s homonymous character (already struggling with marginalisation due to her decision to marry outside the mainstream) is determined to leave when, added to her problems with the new order and with unemployment (Marcel being the passive spouse/child in the marriage), her husband’s health asks for special treatment and extra money.

The host or destination country (France) is represented, on the one hand, along the lines of prosperity and strict legislation with regard to illegal labour and, on the other, in connection with the same prejudicial patterns of thought regarding the Roma, this time, however, assimilated with the Romanian. Foregrounded, by contrast, is the ghetto with its primitive living standards and its insecure overall atmosphere.

What may be observed (and used in the analysis of the documentary under focus) with regard to Eastern/Western frames is the fact that, while Romania is sooner translated on film from a social standpoint, France is presented in terms of ideological issues. In as far as interconnections and mutual contamination are concerned, what emerges is the idea that the ‘fall’ of the former is the current state and influence of the latter, and that the problems of the latter are the doings of the former – both cultural myths of otherness that the films aims at deconstructing.

In their new situation and aware of their in-betweenness, like the rest of the illegal immigrants, Stella and her family are reluctant to interacting with state institutions, solving problems as they arise by resorting to underworld solutions and mediators instead. The police, for instance, are avoided since they embody law-enforcement but are perceived as corrupt also (an image carried across frontiers by migrants from Romania into France).

In terms of gender roles (juxtaposed to those of the migrant and embodied by Stella herself), the Romanian heritage imposes patriarchal norms. The prototype of the superwoman, Stella is the breadwinner of the family, a good wife (spoilng her husband Marcel by tending to his every marital, medical or culinary need), lover, friend, chaperone and entertainer. As for the French context, it contributes even further to her secondary status by also discriminating on her nationality and/or ethnicity by marriage – readily associated with criminality.

Stella's shrewdness helps her overcome demanding circumstances. Not a gypsy herself, she takes on the gypsy look expected by the French, thus exploiting a cultural stereotype to attain her goal: that of earning enough to survive by begging in the streets of Paris. Stella (and Gabi, her sister) manages to adjust to various external and cultural circumstances that she has inflicted on herself and that she needs to cope with, but remains nostalgic after her previous life back home (see the many photographs of her younger self she keeps looking at), despite the fact that it was one of a margin due to her marrying into the Roma community, but a better tolerated margin than the one she is currently exiled to in France. At the same time, she seems keen to express her femininity and independence: she doesn't forget to paint her nails, or do her hair, or smoke for that matter – a luxury she can only afford inside their humble abode in the ghetto.

Stella thus emerges as a woman with a will and a way, at odds with society, but not giving in to its impositions. The only times she can afford to be herself, to open up to the world, to confess to feeling lonely, to express her inner feelings, to cry is when surrounded by other women (the reporter/film maker included). Actually, it is through Vanina Vignal and her project (rather than with the aid of specialised institutions) that Stella is given a voice and allowed to tell the story of an invisible woman and her silenced womanhood. As Vignal puts it on the documentary's internet homepage, "I have offered Stella a space within which to express herself and she has occupied it in an honest, subtle, dynamic, sensitive manner. Her words are true, articulate, and reveal a genuine ability to analyze."

The film therefore serves a social, as well as a cultural and artistic purpose, successively narrating on one woman, two worlds and plural world views. Its open ending seems deliberate and cautious, in that it gives the text roundedness and portrays the situation as cyclical. Not offering clear-cut solutions or information on whether Stella will choose to remain at home or to embark on yet another journey abroad, it allows for multiple resolutions serving multiple purposes, but points to future problems with integration within the Romanian society or within the larger European one (since Stella is perceived as an outsider in both), thus offering food for thought.

5. Final remarks

Cultural and gender identity have always posed problems of representation. It is all the more commendable therefore to tread on this ground while also tackling intercultural encounters. *Stella* has the merit of challenging outmoded attitudes and mentalities, of honestly zooming in on an individual case of marginalisation so as to bring to attention its complexity and constant metamorphosis, together with the historical situation determining it. Crossing cultures story-wise, its protagonist is caught in between parallel mirrors, which reflect the real and its reflections – overlapped to expose the differences in perception (East/West, Margin/Centre, Feminine/Masculine), which in turn is controlled to serve social purposes. The woman holding the narrative together is empowered by the indoors (therefore familiar!?) narrating task assigned to her, although her incapacity to express herself in French outdoors symbolises her silencing and subjection in society. She is perceived as the other, but represented as strikingly familiar; her masculinisation reinforces her femininity and emphasises her determination to oppose patriarchy. Defined in terms of conflicting facets, Stella does not emerge as the victim of the intercultural clash, but embodies it wholly.

Notes

[1] Alongside *Stella* – S, worth mentioning in this respect are: *The Last Peasants. Journeys* – J, *The Last Peasants. Temptation* – T and *The Last Peasants. A Good Wife* – GW (produced by Angus McQueen in 2002, 2003, 2003); *Leaving Transylvania* – LT (produced by Dieter Auner in 2006); *Beyond the Forest* – BF (produced by Golden Girls Filmproduktion – Gerald Igor Hauenberger in 2007); *Human Traffic* – HT (produced by MTV – An MTV Exit Special in 2009).

[2] Vanina Vignal is a French film director who, for the past fifteen years, has had close connections with Romania which, as she herself confesses, has become her second country. *Stella* – focusing on the working classes – is the first of a filmic trilogy on Romanian women that she is still working on. The second is *On Each Side* (awarded the *Louis Lumière/Villa Médicis hors les murs grant*) – on the lower middle class – and the third is intended to centre round the ruling class formed in the context of the year 1948, with special significance in Romanian history.

References

<http://www.stellafilm.com/en/aboutstella.html> – last accessed on November 18, 2010

Filmography

Stella (2006), Dir. Vanina Vignal, France