

CHAPTER 3

Just Like Us

Migration and the ‘Prosthetic Western’ in Contemporary German Cinema

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The coronavirus pandemic has brought a new, and wholly unexpected, dimension to notions of borders and restricted freedom of movement with countries the world over imposing lockdowns, tiers, red lists and vaccination passports to attempt to control and monitor mobility internally, as well as internationally. But for all that COVID-19 has preoccupied so many of us for so long, there has been no respite for those who have been forced to flee for their lives or to seek a better way of life during, and since, the pandemic. The ongoing tragic loss of life of refugees in the English Channel, the Mediterranean and the Aegean Sea, as well as events on the Poland-Belarus border in the winter of 2021, and even more disturbingly, the ongoing nightmare in Ukraine, have all brought the plight of refugees back to the fore with disturbing media images. The political wrangling about responsibility between the states implicated in these situations has been accompanied by loud calls for humanitarian, yet measured, responses to them. As an editorial in *Der Spiegel* remarks: ‘There is a political majority in Germany and many countries in Europe for a controlled immigration policy, which is based upon economic and humanitarian criteria, but not for open borders. Fences do not contradict a humane immigration policy; they simply establish the prerequisites for it’ (Neukirch 2021: 6).¹ In the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, which prompted a raft of new public health measures across many countries, and compounded by the subsequent cost of living crisis and the squeeze on energy supplies stemming from the Ukrainian war, the risk is understandably acute that the plight of refugees might be lost again to extreme ‘compassion fatigue’ (Moeller 1999). Perhaps now, more than at any other time, the potential of cinema, as Maria Rovisco argues, to ‘provoke contemplation, increase sensitivity, inspire a debate and further understanding of distant others’ (2013: 152) has never been more

desperately needed (see a similar argument being made by Peruzzi, Bruno and Massa in this volume).

The focus of the present chapter is on exploring cinema's ability to inspire empathy in audiences for the plight of migrants by analysing three twenty-first-century German films with migration as their primary focus. Of particular interest is the way in which the films each adapt the genre of the Western, either literally or metaphorically, to tell their tales. Arguably the oldest of the popular genres, the Western lends itself as an effective medium for such explorations with its traditional focus on 'pacifying and settling the frontier' and the 'encounter between civilization and untamed, sometimes, savage nature' (Langford 2005: 63). Langford describes the mythic and metaphorical importance of the genre in forging American identity, indicating that the wild 'frontier acted as a "safety valve" for potentially explosive class conflicts by allowing marginalized social elements . . . to start afresh and forge their own destinies' (2005: 63). The traditional American Western generally deviates little from this more positive reading, depicting the opportunities afforded those pioneers or migrants who seek their fortunes out west. Exemplified by films such as *How the West Was Won* (Marshall, Hathaway, Ford, 1962), more often than not these films conclude with the protagonists' success in building new lives, albeit after overcoming violence or lawlessness, or struggles with nature. Its adaptation in our case studies, however, shifts the focus squarely onto the often insurmountable or fateful challenges posed by the inhospitable environments in which the migrants find themselves, and where their futures remain resolutely uncertain.

In the particular context of the three case study films, by embedding their narratives in the framework of the Western, a genre familiar to European audiences on account of the so-called Euro-Westerns, which during the 1960s and early 1970s were produced 'in such numbers that . . . they often exceeded Hollywood's own yearly Western production count' (Broughton 2016: 2), these German films are more accessible than the typically auteur-driven productions of accented, or cosmopolitan, cinema. Indeed, German audiences have a particularly strong affinity with the genre as evinced by a long tradition of film adaptations in the 1960s of German author Karl May's stories of the Wild West, most often starring Hollywood actor Lex Barker as Old Shatterhand. West German Westerns such as *Der Schatz im Silbersee/The Treasure of Silver Lake* (Reinl, 1962) and *Winnetou/Apache Gold* (Reinl, 1963) were popular in both Germanies, and were themselves spoofed by Michael 'Bully' Herbig's *Der Schuh des Manitu/Manitou's Shoe* (2001).

As Lee Broughton argues very persuasively, the European Westerns as a whole were significant adaptations of the American examples in offering 'consistently positive and progressive representations of racial and gendered Others' (2016: 3). In particular, the German Westerns presented positive depictions of Native Americans, most obviously the character of Winnetou, with whom Barker's Old Shatterhand, 'a hero cast in an obviously German mould' (Broughton 2016: 47), becomes a blood brother. In the context of the 1960s, and specifically the trial of Adolf Eichmann in the early years of the decade, Broughton posits that the racial harmony depicted in the films 'can be understood to overwrite and replace the wholly immoral actions of the Nazis' (2016: 47). Irrespective of how successful that replacement process proved to be in a broader socio-political context – the decade of violent terrorism in the Federal Republic from 1967 to 1977 suggests it was relatively ineffective – the present chapter posits that by adapting the Western more broadly, and earlier German adaptations of the genre more specifically, the potential to 'generat[e] empathy and articulat[e] an ethical relation to the other' (Landsberg 2003: 149) is enhanced by the audience's familiarity with these films and their associations with racial harmony. Moreover, by then presenting the Germans as economic migrants, thereby assuming the role of the Native American 'Other' in the Karl May Westerns, the films offer a prosthetic means for audiences to better understand the migrant perspective in Germany at a time when xenophobia has become, and remains, alarmingly more overt and prevalent, especially in the wake of the war in Ukraine. As such they might also be seen to contribute to a new German cinema of intercultural dialogue (for a discussion of intercultural cinema within the Bulgarian context, see Anisimovich in this volume), which attempts to build bridges between communities at the local level and thereby ease tensions by seeking common ground for a more cosmopolitan understanding of different subject positions (Evans 2018).

In exploring the representation of refugees and migration in German cinema and written in the aftermath of the so-called 'refugee crisis' of 2015, Malte Hagener dismisses the popular misconception of these events as 'unprecedented', underlining how '(forced) migration and the displacement of larger groups of population have a long history in most countries of the world. Consequently, the cinema, ever since it existed, has addressed many aspects surrounding the realities and imaginations of the issue' (2018: 110). Unprecedented such events may not be, but that so many films in the twenty-first century have increasingly focused on migration, forced or otherwise, underscores the scale of the problem the world now

faces, especially since 9/11. As a consequence, there has been a commensurate, and significant, increase in scholarly interest in such films (e.g. Berghahn and Sternberg 2010; Grassili 2008; Hake and Mennel 2012; Loshitzky 2010; Ponzanesi 2012; Rings 2016) with a specific focus on the European experience of migration through various lenses. The present chapter will contribute to this body of work by exploring three German case study films, namely *Lichter/Distant Lights* (Schmid, 2003), *Gold* (Arslan, 2013), and *Western* (Grisebach, 2017). In particular, it will elucidate the ways in which the filmmakers actively seek to evoke empathy by deploying what we might call ‘prosthetic affect’, since each either equates experiences of German characters directly to those of refugees or migrants, as in *Lichter*, or specifically reimagines the German characters as economic migrants, thereby rendering them ‘Other’, in the cases of *Gold* and *Western* (see Anisimovich in this volume for further discussion of othering and reversing othering in the context of Bulgarian cinema). German, and by extension Western European, viewers are therefore brought closer affectively to the migrant perspective to such an extent that they might more readily see themselves in the characters in question. Each film thus endeavours to stimulate the contemplation and sensitivity Rovisco hopes for. But these German films cannot be ascribed to ‘accented cinema’ (Naficy 2001) or what Rovisco calls ‘cosmopolitan cinema’. Significantly, the films are not ‘screening strangers’ (Loshitzky 2010), but Germans, just like the domestic audience.

Hagener asserts that cinema can serve as ‘a kind of laboratory in which different scenarios could be played through, different situations could be experienced, and different (subject) positions might be occupied’, and thus in that capacity it can contribute to a ‘wider social debate’ on the topic of migration (2018: 110). Rovisco broadly concurs, though in introducing the notion of cosmopolitan cinema, she goes further by arguing that ‘as a mode of production [it] invites structures of feeling (i.e. care, compassion and empathy) that enable new affective and intellectual engagements of the audience with “others” whose access to cultural dialogue is severely limited’ (2012: 154). More precisely, she defines cosmopolitan cinema as one that ‘plays out experiences and representations of borders and mobilities’ (2012: 149). As *Lichter* makes clear, it is in such locations that the hierarchies of power are fully exposed, in terms of those able to penetrate the frontier with ease and who can avail themselves of agency and networks available to them, and those for whom it is impermeable and who lack both.

With its setting on the border between Germany and Poland, at the time of the film’s production an accession country to the EU, *Lichter* sensitively captures this

tension between flow and stasis, with its multi-stranded narrative following seven discrete groups of characters comprising Germans, Poles, and Ukrainian refugees. The action takes place specifically in the twin locales of Frankfurt an der Oder and Stubice. Once united before the Versailles Treaty redrew the national boundaries in 1919, the two towns now face each other over the forbidding Oder River, a far more overt, physical barrier than the boundary policed by the German border guards on the bridge linking the two conurbations, a reality underlined when one of the desperate refugees loses his life while attempting to traverse this natural, wild frontier.

Cinematically, from the outset, with his deliberate violation of the 180-degree rule, Schmid reunites the two towns once again, conflating them around the border, in order to highlight the arbitrary nature of this frontier and the resultant inequalities of mobility much more starkly. For the Ukrainian refugees we see at the start of the film, being told by the amoral traffickers that the distant lights of Stubice are, in fact, the outskirts of Berlin, the border proves all but impenetrable, while for a number of German characters, who can move unhindered, it is as if the division of the towns had never occurred. Nevertheless, Schmid carefully ensures that freedom of movement does not automatically equate to a better quality of life. The German characters are all flawed, morally or emotionally, and the material despair of hapless Eastern German businessman Ingo Mehrtens specifically is directly comparable to that of the migrants, who have travelled to Germany in the hopes of achieving the kind of life, and prosperity, that eludes him. Thus, the cinematic conflation of the two locales, with the action passing seamlessly from one side to the other without obvious visual signposting at times, reflects the shared, and interconnected, experiences of all the characters, be they migrant or indigenous.

Lichter presents a series of ethical and humanitarian challenges for the viewer, relating to German historical responsibilities to its neighbours, with Schmid intimating that the Federal Republic has wilfully turned its back on Eastern Europe, even as, at the time of the film's production, the EU was on the cusp of expansion in that direction.² It is just such an ethico-political dimension that Rovisco highlights as a key component of cosmopolitan cinema, which seeks to generate debates about 'issues of human dignity and their violation and, ultimately achieve a shared understanding of what constitutes a human being in the contemporary world' (2012: 153). The challenge is to represent these concerns in nuanced ways cinematically that invite empathy, but without exploiting the suffering as mere

spectacle. In this respect, Rovisco's concern with a form of cinema that can generate empathy and ethical responses in the viewer recalls Alison Landsberg's notion of 'prosthetic cinema' (2003).

Although Landsberg's specific theoretical focus is on the history film, it is the shared concern in how stimulating empathy in the viewer can strengthen cinema's impact that interests us here. For, as Rovisco underlines:

If the suffering of the distant other is beyond comprehension, audiences can easily claim distance or strangeness as a reason for not understanding. Thus, one of the key challenges for those involved in the making of cosmopolitan cinema is how to articulate the dignity of the lives of suffering 'others' – not as objects of pity – but as fully fledged subjects in the specificity of their culture, history and place. (2012: 155)

The mere representation of the migrant experience alone is not enough, as it might generate sympathy, which, as Landsberg points out, can reinforce the victimhood of the other and thus create an unwanted hierarchy: 'sympathy implies condescension, for the sympathizer looks down on his/her object, and in the process reaffirms his/her superiority' (2003: 147). By contrast, she argues, 'the experience of empathy . . . is not purely emotional but has a crucial cognitive component' (Landsberg 2003: 147). Drawing on Siegfried Kracauer and Walter Benjamin, Landsberg posits the 'technologies of reproduction' as 'particularly powerful conduits for the generation of empathy' (2003: 148) and argues that cinema's capacity to facilitate 'a sensuous engagement with the past' (2003: 149) allows memories conveyed on screen in an historical context to be grafted onto those watching 'like an artificial limb' (2003: 149): 'I call these memories prosthetic to underscore their usefulness; because they feel real, they help to condition how an individual thinks about the world, and might be instrumental in generating empathy and articulating an ethical relation to the other' (2003: 149). Although Landsberg is looking primarily at cinematic mediations of the past, it is axiomatic how films that focus on the migrant point-of-view might similarly evoke sensuous responses in the viewer. For if memories can be grafted onto the viewer through commodified images, then so too can experiences.

By portraying the migrant characters as either challenged or trapped by the demanding, even perilous, circumstances they find themselves in, each of the case study films evokes what German director Rainer Werner Fassbinder identifies as

the affective power of Douglas Sirk's classic Hollywood melodramas. With particular emphasis on Sirk's *Imitation of Life* (1959), an exemplar of the ways in which melodrama shapes its narrative around characters confined by the social structures they inhabit, Fassbinder notes: 'Both [characters] are right and no one will ever be able to help either of them. Unless, of course, we change the world. We all cried over the movie. Because it's so hard to change the world' (Fassbinder 1992: 89). The cinematic grafting of migrant experiences onto the audience operates in the same way, generating an 'authenticity of affect' (Evans 2010: 11) and thereby creating a connection with these characters. We are affected by the same fervent desire to change the world for these people, people just like us. So, in the case of *Lichter*, by directly juxtaposing the material despair of Ingo with that of the Ukrainian couple, Dimitri and Anna, in particular, whose futile efforts with their tiny baby to wade across the river with impecunious, if well-meaning, Polish taxi driver Antoni nearly end in tragedy, the film's prosthetic dimension is visible. Whereas the refugees are defeated by a literally insurmountable obstacle, the German is unable to overcome figurative barriers in the same place. By bringing the audience close to both perspectives and equating them cinematically, not only by conflating the space between them but also by means of the tight handheld camerawork, common to both narrative strands, that brings us in greater proximity literally to the characters' point-of-view, the 'sensuous engagement' with their fates is reinforced. We are not detached observers; we are directly implicated in their lives in quite visceral ways. We are moved emotionally by their, and our, inability to 'change the world'.

What Landsberg does not take fully into consideration is the important role that genre tropes might play in accentuating the prosthetic process. It seems plausible that the potential impact of such images and motifs might be enhanced all the more when the generic framework of a film is both popular and familiar, such as in the Western. In all three case studies, the decision to adapt the Western with a very specific German focus might be seen as an attempt to mitigate the risk of audiences becoming desensitized to images of migration and refugees. Not only has the German Western traditionally identified closely with the Native American character in the *Winnetou* films, as Broughton maintains, highlighting the kinship between the (imagined) German protagonist and the racial 'Other', but these contemporary reworkings and reimaginings of the Western in a German context also present the migrant 'Other' in a fresh way, especially at a time when the issue has remained a vexed political topic in Germany, in particular since 9/11. Following

the refugee summer of 2015, it has become ever more marked in the country both by the rise of the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), the right-wing political party initially formed to militate against the euro bailouts in the wake of the economic crisis in Europe but latterly morphing into an alliance of, often extreme, far-right views, and symptomatic of a resurgent xenophobia within German society at large (Neufeld 2017). Moreover, by shaping or inflecting their narratives of migration around a German point-of-view, and presenting their protagonists as, or equating them to, migrants, the films seek to counter that disinterest prosthetically.

Films about migration are often automatically, and understandably, associated with transnationalism, and scholars such as Steven Vertovec feel the concept is apposite for studying migration. In underlining how it captures the specific experience and consequences of migration, he finds Caroline Brettel's definition particularly insightful:

As a theoretical construct about immigrant life and identity, transnationalism aptly suits the study of population movements in a world where improved modes of transportation as well as the images that are transmitted by means of modern telecommunications have shortened the social distance between sending and receiving countries. (Brettel in Vertovec 2003: 642)

Nevertheless, a broader tendency exists to frame transnationalism as an always positive dynamic, especially when used without appropriate contextualization (e.g. Halle 2008). Rovisco for one objects to the concept for the way cinematic representations thereof appear to posit 'an increasingly borderless world' (2013: 148). As is underscored by the events of 2015, and their direct impact upon the 2017 German Election, the shortening of social distance between countries in and of itself is not always unproblematic, nor does it render borders redundant. The tragic events on the border between Poland and Belarus, for example, and the ongoing tensions within the EU about how to tackle the refugee situation continue to cast a long shadow, complicated all the more now by Brexit, the coronavirus pandemic and the increasingly bitter war in Ukraine.

Some of these conceptual problems can be overcome by deploying the notion of translocalism instead. Often linked to transnationalism as Greiner and Sakdapolrak underline, translocalism tends instead to focus on "place" as the setting of grounded movements' (Greiner and Sakdapolrak 2013: 377). If the transnational focuses on the greater ease of movement, and the reduction of

social distance between countries, whilst interrogating the national, the translocal might perhaps invite us to explore more closely what happens after that initial process of mobility has been completed, and focus on the issues arising from adaptation to, and integration into, the receiving communities at the local level. Doreen Massey has argued passionately for an understanding of place as inherently dynamic, 'as the sphere of coexistence of a multiplicity of trajectories' (2005: 63), which chimes with translocalism's focus on "what flows through places" and "what is in them" (Greiner and Sakdapolrak 2013: 377). In this way, the suitability of the Western as a medium for exploring migration is reinforced, as a genre in which space, movement and settlement within the nation play key roles, literally and figuratively, throughout the genre's long history. Moreover, as David Lusted argues, 'Westerns appear to provide a fictional space to consider one's own identity in terms of racial and ethnic difference' (2003: 9), which underscores the genre's fruitfulness for exploring the translocal dynamic within communities affected by migration.

Arslan's *Gold* follows seven German migrants seeking their fortune in the British Columbian Gold Rush of the late 1890s, which, as Mareike Hermann notes, is a powerful commentary on the 'economic, emotional and material realities of immigration' in the twenty-first century (2019: 82). The German fortune-seekers all immigrated to North America some time before the narrative present, although that has neither brought them happiness or economic stability nor prepared them for the challenges they will face in the wilds of British Columbia for this second translocal migration. It is the hopes they pin on finding gold in this desolate region that drive them, and consequently expose them to life-threatening risks. No matter that they might have the experience of transnational mobility behind them, their very obvious otherness in this locale, which Herrmann's New Materialist reading of the film elucidates convincingly, highlights the material despair that has driven each of them to undertake this perilous quest. When one of the locals they encounter along the way learns of their plans to reach Dawson, a settlement hundreds of miles away, by a dangerous inland route, he remarks: 'Really expect to get there?'. It exposes not only how migration has not fulfilled their aspirations hitherto and merely exacerbated their sense of despair, but also their incredible naivety about the nature of their perilous journey into the wilderness, as well as an arrogant unwillingness to listen to local wisdom. What is striking in *Gold* is how each member of the group lacks any sense of nostalgic longing for *Heimat*. They seem not to be at home anywhere, afflicted by an

out-of-placeness that forces them to keep moving in restless pursuit of a potentially impossible dream.

A similar out-of-placeness afflicts the German construction workers in *Western* in modern-day Bulgaria, albeit that Grisebach also draws heavily on the tropes of the genre as her title intimates. The Germans talk disparagingly about their Bulgarian hosts, for whose benefit they are building the hydro-electric plant, and chauvinistically hoist a German flag above their compound. It is a regrettably deliberate evocation of the German presence in this region during World War II, as if this were a little piece of home away from home, conquered from the locals. The sudden mysterious theft of the flag, and the discovery that people have been prowling around the camp – recalling ‘clichéd scenes in countless films of cowboys and settlers menaced by shadowy “Indians”’ (Guest 2018: 32) – reflect how ill-at-ease the men feel in this strange new environment, reminiscent of Arslan’s fortune-hunters who appear to stumble blindly from one problem to the next. The construction workers are ultimately unable to remain disconnected from the village, but also unable to integrate there either. And yet, to remain at home in Germany would mean long-term unemployment; in Bulgaria they are effectively economic migrants like their counterparts in *Gold*.

Just like the traditional American Western, *Gold* and *Western* both conjure up symbolic geographies to highlight the tensions between the German migrants and the indigenous population, focusing in particular on the peril or violence that ensues. Superficially, *Lichter* deploys fewer obviously Western tropes, and yet its evocation of ‘the darker metaphors of contested territory and imperialist empire’ (Guest 2018: 32) so typical of the genre, as well as the questions it poses about identity as Lusted indicates, similarly shape the action of Schmid’s film. As a consequence of her guilt about the privileges her nationality bestows upon her, Sonja, the interpreter for the German border police, assists the Ukrainian refugee Kolja in his efforts to reach Berlin. The only migrant who achieves his goal, Kolja is smuggled across the border in the boot of Sonja’s car. For German characters, such as Sonja, or Marco, the smuggler, and Wilke, the building magnate, the border with Poland is porous. Although Sonja’s motives are genuinely humanitarian, in the case of the latter two, this freedom allows them to extract economic gain from the national identity.

Marco regularly traverses the border by train with contraband cigarettes, which he tosses out of the window to his waiting accomplice on the outskirts of Frankfurt. Wilke, although on the face of it engaged in less overtly criminal activity, has

bought land outside Stubice, with the intention of building a factory. Though clearly a potentially positive investment in the local economy, especially in the context of Poland's imminent accession to the EU, the project empowers Wilke to act like a neo-imperialist, recalling the period of Prussian hegemony over this particular region, but also any number of villainous landowners or outlaws in the West who 'run' the town.³ This unwholesome impression is compounded still further when Wilke buys the company of Beate, a Polish student and interpreter, and her friend Monika, for a party he throws for a potential investor, with the overt intention of sleeping with her. That she complies with his unsavoury wishes, to the chagrin of Philip, her idealistic ex-boyfriend and one of Wilke's architects, merely underlines the gulf between the haves and have-nots in post-communist Europe. For the pragmatic Beate, this transaction represents an opportunity too good to refuse, and echoes the desperation of the Ukrainian refugees hiding in the town, who attempt to wade across the perilous river, the wildest of frontiers.

The Polish and Ukrainian characters in *Lichter* are united by a lack of power and social capital, which forces them to behave in ways that appear risky, demeaning or immoral. As such their desperate actions mirror those of Ingo Mehrtens on the other side of the river in Frankfurt, who goes to extreme lengths to try to save his floundering business, when unable to secure the credit he needs. His tale is a cautionary one, reflecting the hollowness of promises of 'blühende Landschaften' (flourishing landscapes) made to East Germans during the *Wende* period by then-Chancellor Helmut Kohl. While some such as Wilke, one imagines, did benefit from the socio-political changes, others such as Ingo and his associate Simone have not flourished. The former solicits help from some of the 20 per cent unemployed in the region, including the latter, to distribute leaflets advertising his mattress shop, in the misguided belief that those without work spend time in bed and thus require new mattresses. He gambles everything on this flawed business model, but, already unable to pay his Polish secretary, Antoni's wife Milena, or any of those who help him, he ultimately has his stock repossessed to pay off his debts. When Simone, who sticks by him out of sympathy, suggests they open a food stand, he breaks down telling her he is bankrupt; his haplessness and poor business sense are symbolized by his literal short-sightedness and thick spectacles, and the heart-rending performance of Devid Striesow. Juxtaposed alongside the despair that drives the Ukrainians, such as Dimitri and Anna, to risk wading across the Oder, Ingo's fate underscores the migrants' mistakenly idealized impression of life on the other side and the specious promise of economic wellbeing Germany

offers. For the likes of Ingo and Simone, Berlin is as unreachable as it is for the refugees; Kolja, the exception proving the rule, only fulfils his dream of reaching Potsdamer Platz due to Sonja's guilt-fuelled intervention.

The German migrants in *Gold* and *Western* similarly lack social capital and networks of sufficient quality for a successful integration into the host country. This fundamental problem is aggravated still further by the mutual suspicion, even outright hostility, that exists within the two groups, in ways that recall the tense social dynamic in John Ford's *Stagecoach* (1939), in which the eponymous vehicle contains a microcosm of post-Civil War America, riven with ideological and class divisions between North and South, rich and poor. Whereas these tensions are overcome harmoniously in this classic Western, evincing the myth-making elements of the genre, in which fortunes are made, solidarity prevails in extremis, justice is done, and vengeance is justified, they remain unresolved in the German adaptations here, further highlighting the existential vulnerability of the characters and the greater potential for nuance in European Westerns.

In *Gold*, Laser is the leader of the group simply by virtue of the fact that he is in possession of a childish rudimentary map of where gold might be found. The fact that he possesses some nuggets, reputedly from the Klondike, convinces the group that he knows what he is doing, although it is the flimsiest of justification for their trust. It quickly transpires that he is as unfamiliar with the terrain as they are, and the others' suspicions about his ulterior motives quickly mount. When he is caught trying to abscond with the group's money, the majority decide that he should hang, rather belatedly concluding that he is simply an embezzler, akin to the traffickers in *Lichter*; it is Emily who releases him out of compassion. Yet, when Emily initially joins the group of prospectors, she is viewed with suspicion herself by Maria Dietz, the wife of the cook, Otto, as a single woman in a group of men. In reality, she keeps herself to herself as much as possible, fending off the gauche romantic overtures of Müller, the journalist, on several occasions. Gradually, however, she becomes closer to Boehmer, the eastern European 'packer', whom the others treat simply as a lackey and with the same arrogant disdain that they display towards the Native Americans they encounter along the way. In this regard then, *Gold* deviates somewhat from the racial harmony of the Karl May Westerns from the 1960s, while simultaneously recalling the same apparent disdain for those from Eastern Europe that motivated Schmid to produce *Lichter*.

That Emily and Boehmer survive the longest on the quest does intimate the importance of social capital in such a situation, in that they forge an initially more

pragmatic, then later intimate, bond in contrast to the rest of the dysfunctional group. Tellingly perhaps, they are also the most tolerant of the indigenous people they encounter. Nevertheless, Boehmer is killed, as his violent past catches up with him – Arslan's apparently ironic reversal of the conclusion of *Stagecoach* – and Emily stubbornly decides to continue her quest alone; the fragility of such capital is thereby reinforced starkly. The film ends uncertainly with the lone mounted figure riding off into the distance, another thousand kilometres to go. As much as she appears to be the moral centre of the film at certain moments, and thereby represents the primary identification figure in the Western, even Emily ultimately disregards the locals' wisdom. By the same token however, she, like myriad refugees seeking a new life in Europe, clearly has nothing left to lose, driven by the desire to change the world for the better.

Similar suspicions to those directed at Emily confront Meinhard, the taciturn loner who joins the construction workers in *Western*. He too prefers his own company to that of his colleagues. Doubts surround his background – ostensibly he is a former legionnaire who has seen active service, although there are hints that this might be a myth he does little to dispel like the classic Western protagonist – and the foreman, Vincent, in particular dislikes him. When Meinhard tames a wild horse on one of his lone rambles in the sunbaked mountainous wilderness around the construction site, Vincent is openly envious. After the horse, tellingly called Tornado, is fatally injured in an accident when Vincent tries to ride it himself, the two men then become rivals for the affection of Viara, one of the women in the village. But the group of Germans as a whole spend their evenings drinking, smoking and sparring with each other in ways that reflect the enforced necessity of being together in Bulgaria for work, closed off from the village nearby, but without developing any genuine solidarity with each other either.

It is while riding that Meinhard finds his way into the remote village, the first of the Germans to do so, and where he subsequently, and understandably, prefers to spend his time after work. Rather than disparage the local population like his colleagues, he forges a genuine bond with some of the villagers, deepening the mistrust of his workmates, most especially Vincent. The horse reputedly belongs to one of the prominent villagers, Adrian, the de facto chief of the tribe whom he later befriends although neither speaks the other's language; they literally become blood brothers, like Old Shatterhand and Winnetou, although their bond is rather an exception proving a rule. For a man who does not readily seek conversation, the

language barrier is a blessing. Meinhard subsequently moonlights as a bodyguard for Adrian, some of whose associates in this remote region appear to be engaged in decidedly nefarious activities, but superficially at least, he is able to build a modicum of the social capital his colleagues lack. Nevertheless, far from home, this capital proves as fragile as that in *Gold*; first the horse is killed, then a villager who lost money to Meinhard in a poker game exacts his revenge by ambushing the drunken German at night. Despite the apparent warmth and sincerity of their relationship, Adrian's patronage is insufficient to protect Meinhard and *Western* ends as openly as *Gold*, with the protagonist's future path uncertain. Having spoken of buying a property in the village, it is unclear whether Meinhard will either be welcome, or able, so to do.

Just as the Oder in *Lichter* presents a perilous obstacle for the migrants, the representation of the remote landscapes in both *Gold* and *Western* accentuates the challenges, and dangers, facing the German migrants. Despite the seemingly idyllic settings in both cases – the wilds of British Columbia in *Gold* and the Rhodope Mountains, close to the border with Greece, in *Western*, which are frequently captured in long shot – these are locations so redolent of the classic Hollywood Western, be it the Texan desert wastes or Monument Valley, in which the landscape assumes literal, metaphorical and often mythical qualities in narratives predicated on the difficulties of eking out existence in these often contested, inhospitable and hostile spaces. In both films, danger lurks in these isolated landscapes, whether it be the wild terrain itself, which takes its fateful toll on horses in both films, or the hidden animal trap that Müller steps in, at the cost first of his foot, and then his life in *Gold*. In the absence of any genuine sense of solidarity within the group, combined with a disparaging attitude towards the locals – the Native Americans in particular are seen as primitive by the Germans – the characters in *Gold* repeatedly take the wrong option, or choose the wrong path literally, despite being given advice by those with local knowledge. As a consequence, the group is whittled down inexorably until only Emily remains. As Hermann notes, '[Arslan] emphasizes the ominous consequences that the dangerous and destructive journey has on prospectors and on the world around them' (2019: 80).

Although the workers in *Western* may not be prey to comparable perils, nature still presents them with a series of morale-sapping obstacles to overcome. Their initial arrival on site is hindered by fallen trees, and the river on the construction site itself presents a series of logistical challenges. Indeed, water is the most

precious commodity in the region, as evidenced by the way it needs to be shared between two communities but is now also required by the Germans. Rather than seeking some sort of mutual accommodation to solve the problem, it becomes a competition. In this remote region of Bulgaria, the Germans' arrogant self-perception as the dominant group is exposed, further alienating those whose help and cooperation they require. Their condescension towards the locals, echoing the prospectors' attitude to the Native Americans in *Gold*, is reinforced both by Vincent's disparaging comments about the village existing in a time warp, so backward, it seems, compared to Germany, and his crass jokes about reoccupying Bulgaria again after seventy years. The possibilities of intercultural dialogue evolving, and succeeding, in this locale seem as remote as in *Gold*.

The German migrants might all be seen as 'translocal subjectivities' to a degree, which, as Conradson and McKay posit, emerge 'through both geographical mobility and multiple forms of ongoing emplacement' (2007: 168). Superficially, the term seems to have positive connotations, characterized as it might be by 'the fidelity and commitment that most transnational migrants continue to feel towards family, friends and community in particular locations' (Conradson and McKay 2007: 168). However, the case study films each, in their way, expose how 'the maintenance of these affiliations may be emotionally and materially intensive' (Conradson and McKay 2007: 168), especially when the sense of emplacement is so clearly problematized in each instance. In truth, the migrants' affiliations with their families, friends or *Heimat* all seem fragile at best. Moreover, their social interactions, with each other and the indigenous population, and their engagement with the environment in general, are abrasive and result broadly in negative, even destructive, experiences, either by virtue of their inability to adapt to their surroundings, or their condescension and prejudices towards the host nation. As such then, the films evince the potentially damaging 'emotional and affective states that accompany mobility' (Conradson and McKay 2007: 169), which in all cases accentuate the lack of emplacement most of the characters feel. It is the films' 'sensuous engagement' (Landsberg 2003: 149) with the migrant experience, deploying the generic tropes of the Western to elucidate an out-of-placeness, which might prosthetically 'generat[e] empathy and articulat[e] an ethical relation to the other' (Landsberg 2003: 149). In their different ways, they draw the viewers into identifying with the characters, most especially the protagonists and their fates, ultimately because they are just like them; they are not 'Other' in the manner of migrant representations in the cosmopolitan cinema posited by Rovisco.

Although there is no obvious protagonist in *Lichter* with its seven narrative threads, Schmid's film interweaves, and juxtaposes, the fates of all characters in the cinematically conflated town Frankfurt/Stubice, carefully avoiding any crude representational dichotomies. Thereby, *Lichter*, more overtly than the other two films, reflects structurally how 'by addressing flows and circulations of ideas, symbols, knowledge', translocality 'offers a stimulating perspective from which to engage with subjects such as the impact of a globalizing world on non-migrants' (Greiner and Sakdapolrak 2013: 380), as well as the affective impact of mobility on the migrants, perhaps best evidenced with the Ingo/Milena/Antoni/Dimitri/Anna constellation.

In *Gold* and *Western*, the fact that neither protagonist reveals much about their past intimates a complete lack of any significant affiliation with home; they have left everything behind because there is nothing to leave behind. We learn merely that Emily left Bremen for Chicago, one of circa six million Germans to emigrate to the United States between 1830 and 1900, and has come to the Klondike to escape divorce and drudgery as a maid earning a dollar a day.⁴ The strong, determined, but emotionally scarred woman who continues her quest alone at the end of the film is very different from the hopeful prospector who arrives by train at the start. Irrespective of the veracity of his presumed experience as a foreign legionnaire, the impression still pertains that Meinhard is running away from his past. In a rare, ephemeral demonstration of emotion, he betrays grief for the loss of his brother to Adrian, which appears to deepen their bond. Although he talks of settling in the village, when asked by Vincent why he is in Bulgaria, he indicates that his motives are as mercenary as his work colleagues', a fact reinforced by his stubborn refusal to reimburse the villager after the poker game.

Despite their primary focus on the protagonists, both films provide fleeting glimpses of other characters' stories to explain their presence so far from home and expose their equally fragile affiliations. Like Emily and Meinhard, they are all motivated by the hope of finding financial security. Some, such as Vincent, are driven by a deeper despair. The boorish foreman is overheard at one point on the telephone to his partner in Germany, confronting the disintegration of his relationship because of his enforced absence for work. It renders his flirtations with Viara, and his manner in general, as macho attempts to mask how demoralized and lonely he feels, and perhaps envious of Meinhard's silent stoicism. Rather than cast Vincent as the traditional Western villain to Meinhard's lone hero, Grisebach,

like Schmid, eschews the crude dichotomies of the genre and depicts the affective impact of migration on both men realistically and sympathetically.

Similarly, in *Gold*, Arslan grants each character the opportunity to reveal something of their life story. Like Emily, all are hopeful that finding gold will change their fortunes, although it is Joseph Rossmann who seems the most desperate figure, and the most deserving of empathy. His inability to cope mirrors that of Ingo in *Lichter*, a wretched figure with whom he has much in common. He is driven by a desire to provide for his family, a picture of whom he is poignantly shown gazing at. Like Emily he has hitherto failed to find what he was hoping for in America, but unlike the protagonist, he feels an additional weight of responsibility on his shoulders because of his family's dependence upon him. He appears the least robust emotionally and psychologically for the quest, and his mental health progressively deteriorates with each attritional twist of fate for the migrants. Following the death of Müller, with whom Rossmann was closest, the three remaining Germans discover a suicide hanging from a tree. His desperate suicide note reads: 'Bury me here where I failed and send this letter to my family. My beloved wife, my beautiful children. I didn't make it. Forgive me.' This clear-cut echo of Rossmann's own situation accelerates his mental disintegration, reflected with pathetic starkness in the way he strips naked and disappears, running into the lonely woods to an uncertain fate in the wilderness. The scene powerfully encapsulates both the desperation that inspires migration, and the debilitating, potentially destructive, impact it can have on individuals, such as those migrants who have risked their lives to cross the Mediterranean or to escape from conflict zones in the Middle East to reach Europe in the summer of 2015, and beyond.

That films of this kind might have been needed in Germany either side of the refugee crisis summer of 2015 was evidenced starkly by *Spiegel* journalist, Dialika Neufeld, in 2017, when she highlighted an alarming rise in racially motivated crimes targeting those from ethnic minority backgrounds:

1190 of these criminal acts related to incidents of racially motivated violence, grievous bodily harm, arson, and deprivation of liberty, which represented a rise of 300 per cent compared to 2010. In 2016 a third of Germans believed the country to be in danger of losing its national identity due to the rise in the immigrant population. 12 per cent were of the opinion that Germans were naturally superior to other nationalities, according to a study conducted by the University of Leipzig, which surveys political views across the country at regular

intervals. That makes me nervous. It reminds me of how things used to be.
(Neufeld 2017: 59)

The rise of the AfD in Germany after 2015, and its continued significance as a political force in the Eastern German regions in the 2021 election, underlines the extent to which hostility towards migrants, and any perceived as Other, remains a thorny issue in the country. It is a problem that the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine have simply exacerbated. In a world still reeling from these events, there remains a need to reflect with humanity on the impact of migration, be it economic or political. As Ralf Neukirch notes in *Der Spiegel*, reflecting on the crisis at the Belarusian border:

Fences are only acceptable if they have gates. People in need must be allowed ways to reach Europe by legal means. One possibility would be the so-called resettlement of refugees from the country where they have sought protection into another in the EU. Because, in the first instance, only very few member states would participate in such a process, a country like Germany must lead the way. (2021: 6)

With their particular focus on what happens after migration at the local level, the films by Schmid, Arslan and Grisebach highlight the problems facing migrants in new spaces and places that are so challenging for those who lack agency, or the networks often associated with successful transnational mobility. The stories they tell recall those in the classical Hollywood Westerns about characters who venture out in search of a place to settle down. Where *Lichter*, *Gold* and *Western* come into their own as prosthetic Westerns is by creating stories that render the migrant Other as people just like us, which, of course, they are.

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Notes

1. All translations from the original German are the author's own.
2. It is interesting in this context to note Poland's formal demand in October 2022 for €1.3 trillion from Germany as reparations for World War II, a request which German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock firmly rejected on a visit to Warsaw: 'The question of reparations is . . . concluded from the German government's point of view' (Anon 2022).
3. One could cite *The Magnificent Seven* (Sturges, 1960) or *High Plains Drifter* (Eastwood, 1973) as two classic examples of this trope.
4. Arslan cites this figure in *The Making of Gold* (Von Boehm, 2013) on the DVD of the film.

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