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Migration and Space in Contemporary Austrian Cinema

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Barbara Albert's feature-film debut *Nordrand* [*Northern Skirts*, 1999] formed a watershed in the history of Austrian cinema. After more than fifty years, it was the first Austrian film to be nominated at the Venice Film Festival with one of its cast members, Nina Proll, awarded the prestigious Marcello Mastroianni Prize for emerging actors. *Nordrand* was the first of a number of critically acclaimed Austrian films at the turn of the millennium.¹ It put Austria back on the international cinematic map — not just concerning awards and recognitions, but quite literally in spatial terms. *Nordrand* presented an image of Austria, of Vienna in particular, that broke with previous traditions. Rather than idealizing the historical and architectural singularity of the city, the film confronts its viewers with 'generic [...] urban settings': high-rise apartment blocks, post-industrial landscapes, bus terminals and railway tracks.² Yosefa Loshitzky suggests that the Vienna depicted in Albert's debut film is not just 'brutal' and 'unappealing', but that it constitutes a 'non-place'.³ Marc Augé, who popularized this term, describes non-places as spaces of transition and anonymity that lack a discernible identity.⁴ When *Nordrand* first appeared in international cinemas, this break with the visual conventions of Austrian film proved so drastic that some critics did not recognize Vienna at all. Confounded by the absence of imperial grandeur, the renowned journalist Stephen Holden for example believed the film to be set in 'a southern Austrian town near the Slovenian border'.⁵ The urban landscape becomes seemingly arbitrary as Albert

¹ To name just a few: the Grand Prix at the Cannes Film Festival 2001 for Michael Haneke's *Klavierspielerin* [*The Piano Teacher*], the European Film Award in 2005 for Michael Glawogger's *Workingman's Death*, the FIPRESCI Prize in 2009 for Jessica Hausner's *Lourdes* and of course the Oscar for Stefan Ruzowitzky's *Die Fälscher* [*The Counterfeiters*] in 2008.

² Mary Wauchope, 'Place and Space of Contemporary Austria in Barbara Albert's Feature Films', in *New Austrian Film*, ed. by Robert von Dassanowsky and Oliver C. Speck (New York and Oxford, 2011), pp. 108–21 (p. 111).

³ Yosefa Loshitzky, *Screening Strangers: Migration and Diaspora in Contemporary European Cinema* (Bloomington, 2010), p. 47.

⁴ Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (London and New York, 1995), pp. 77–78.

⁵ Stephen Holden, "'Northern Skirts': War Can Sneak Devastatingly across a Border', *New*

presents the audience with a harsh contrast to the romanticizing aesthetics of the *Heimatfilm*.⁶ On closer inspection though, the aspects of contemporary Vienna that she chooses to represent are strongly reminiscent of historical conditions in the city at the beginning of the twentieth century, a period that often serves as the background for its idealized portrayal. As in 1900, it appears as ‘borderland, outpost, and bridge’,⁷ as ‘Central Europe’s crossroads between East and West’.⁸ Rather than as a place of fixed national characteristics, Vienna is portrayed as a space in which identities become porous and negotiable. In one of the principal scenes for example, the film’s protagonists, who are all from different cultural backgrounds, celebrate New Year’s Eve in front of St Stephen’s Cathedral. For Nikhil Sathé, this sequence represents the ‘premier central Austrian space’ as ‘a cacophonous mix of languages and peoples where anyone, regardless of nationality, can participate in the rituals of national identity by waltzing’.⁹ *Nordrand* highlights the permeable and transitive qualities of space. For the film’s characters, to escape the constraints of their cultural and social heritage means to transgress boundaries, both physically and figuratively. As they navigate the urban setting, they gradually develop a sense of themselves as autonomous subjects.

In recent decades, the experience of migration and diaspora has gradually developed into one of the central topics of European cinema.¹⁰ Similarly, questions of trans- and multiculturalism have become of crucial interest to Austrian filmmakers in recent years.¹¹ Barbara Albert’s *Nordrand* marked the first of a number of films that reshaped the image of Austria through the lens of migration. Taking *Nordrand* as its starting point, this article will examine examples of the interplay of space and migration in three further Austrian films of the last ten years: Nina Kusturica’s *Little Alien* (2009), Ed Moschitz’s *Mama illegal* (2012) and Arman T. Riahi’s *Die Migrantigen* [*The Migrumpies*, 2017]. The

York Times, 29 March 2000, <<https://partners.nytimes.com/library/film/032900skirts-film-review.html>> [accessed 28 December 2017].

⁶ Regarding the decentralized gaze in Austrian cinema, see Nikhil Sathé’s article in this volume.

⁷ Wauchope, ‘Place and Space’, p. 109.

⁸ Loshitzky, *Screening Strangers*, p. 47.

⁹ Nikhil Sathé, ‘Crossing Borders in Austrian Cinema at the Turn of the Century: Flicker, Allahyari, Albert’, in *New Austrian Film*, ed. by Dassanowsky and Speck, pp. 227–50 (p. 238).

¹⁰ Daniela Berghahn and Claudia Sternberg, ‘Locating Migrant and Diasporic Cinema in Contemporary Europe’, in *European Cinema in Motion: Migrant and Diasporic Film in Contemporary Europe*, ed. by Daniela Berghahn and Claudia Sternberg (Basingstoke, 2010), pp. 12–49 (p. 18).

¹¹ Jutta Landa, ‘Lovable Foreigners: Gestures of Cross-Cultural Embracing in Austrian Film’, in *After Postmodernism: Austrian Literature and Film in Transition*, ed. by Willy Riemer (Riverside, CA 2000), pp. 94–105; Martin Brady and Helen Hughes, ‘Import and Export: Ulrich Seidl’s Indiscreet Anthropology of Migration’, in *New Austrian Film*, ed. by von Dassanowsky and Speck, pp. 207–24; Sathé, ‘Crossing Borders’.

selection includes documentaries as well as feature films, and directors with and without biographical experience of migration.¹² Drawing on theoretical approaches by Michel de Certeau and Homi K. Bhabha, I will explore how these films position their migrant protagonists within space and how the discourses of migration and topography are interwoven. The purpose of the comparison will be to identify prevailing motifs and concepts, but also to examine their transformation within specific settings and genres.

I

‘Every story is a travel story — a spatial practice’.¹³ Space, or to be precise, the ways in which people inhabit and act within spaces, plays an important role in Michel de Certeau’s studies of everyday culture. He differentiates between space and place, mirroring the dichotomy of strategy and tactics that forms the central motif of his work. Like Michel Foucault, de Certeau is interested in the structures and mechanisms (‘strategies’) through which social power is established and exercised. He puts his emphasis on individual everyday practices (‘tactics’) which subvert and supersede the social and cultural order. On the level of territorial practices, places correspond with strategies. They are distinct locational ascriptions that do not allow for ambiguity. De Certeau illustrates this idea using two examples: maps as visual representations of places and urban planning as their deliberate creation. He gives the famous example of the view from the top floor of New York’s World Trade Center. From this perspective, the city, de Certeau argues, becomes visible as a whole, as a geometrical network. On a semiotic level, this viewpoint resembles a demystification of the urban — the act of making cities readable: ‘It transforms the bewitching world by which one was “possessed” into a text that lies before one’s eyes.’¹⁴ At the same time, de Certeau asserts a change in the viewer that is highly significant for this article: the viewer’s ‘elevation’ simultaneously denotes their metamorphosis into a ‘voyeur’.¹⁵ As the panoptic view rests upon a unilateral relation between beholder and that which is beheld, it is also deeply entrenched in a visual logic of power.

Space by contrast only exists through the actions of the individual. Referring to one of Structuralism’s cornerstones, Ferdinand de Saussure’s distinction between *langue* and *parole*, de Certeau compares space to the spoken word, the specific utterance. Each *parole*, each speech act, concretizes

¹² Nina Kusturica came to Austria as a refugee from Bosnia in 1975. Arman T. Riahi fled from Iran in 1983. His brother Arash T. Riahi’s feature film *Ein Augenblick Freiheit/For a Moment Freedom* (2008) is inspired by his family’s journey to Austria and is discussed in Nikhil Sathé’s article in the present volume.

¹³ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1984), p. 115.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

the abstract structures of the *langue*, actualizing, reinforcing, but possibly also undermining them. Accordingly, de Certeau conceptualizes space as the momentary realization of place, made up through individual movements. Space is 'practiced place'.¹⁶ Thus the counterpoint to the viewer is the walker, someone who does not just perceive a location, but who inhabits it. For de Certeau, the map's counterpart is the tour as an individual route through space. De Certeau's notion of place and space lends itself particularly well to the analysis of film due to its emphasis on both the visual and the individual. The four films in question provide a perspective on migration that is focused on the singular lives of their subjects. In de Certeau's terms, they strive to depict the social phenomenon of migration 'from below'. Hence, we witness the tension between a world that is divided up into marked-out cultural and political places and the individual stories of the films' protagonists which unfold in a spatial continuum that transgresses these boundaries.

The dichotomy of places and spaces is most markedly visible in Nina Kusturica's documentary *Little Alien* where de Certeau's opposition forms a central structuring element, offering a model through which to read the film's spatial narratives. *Little Alien* is concerned with the fate of unaccompanied minors from countries including Somalia, Afghanistan and Morocco, who seek asylum in Europe. We learn only fragments about the refugees' lives and in this refusal to construct cohesive biographies, the film gives an insight into their experiences of perpetual insecurity. Similarly, through the testimonies of the young protagonists, we witness how fixed places dissolve into subjective experiences of transitory spaces. In a central sequence, a group of young men from Afghanistan, poring over a large map, discuss different routes to Austria. While their fingers trace the map, crossing the borders of one country after another, their conversation revolves around the hardships they have endured. Kusturica confronts a European viewer's reality, shaped by the representational idea of states and nations as places, with the emotional and embodied experience of the refugees. Their spaces of migration are not distinguished by names, cultures or political boundaries, but by their recollection of torture, abuse and mistreatment.

Maps as visual representations of political borders are interspersed throughout Kusturica's documentary, often on the walls of government agencies or aid organizations. Even though they do not seem to fulfil any obvious purpose, on a symbolic level they indicate the state's claim to power over its territory — not least through the enforcement of migration laws. Similarly, when Alem and Jawid, two young Afghans, are invited to an Austrian school to talk about their experiences, a large map depicting Asia and Europe is put up behind them. Yet it proves utterly inadequate as a representation of the embodied spatial experience of the two boys' journey to Austria, which revolved around their hideouts and the memory of snow in the Afghan mountains. At the same

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 117.

time, the visual omnipresence of maps is a constant reminder of the impact of political division on individuals. Kusturica raises questions why the value and dignity of a young person's life is so thoroughly determined by the place where he or she is born. The film's underlying preoccupation therefore is the clash between place and space. Each of the unaccompanied minors can be seen to bear witness to how political conceptions of place fail to match their lived experience of the world as a globalized space. As they hide in freight ships, lorries and trains, the young migrants appear as illegal stowaways amidst the international flow of commodities.

II

In minute terms, *Little Alien* examines how human displacement is intertwined with economic globalization. An early sequence of the film encapsulates the spatial implications of this relationship, when a nameless boy in the Moroccan port-town of Tangier attempts to hide underneath one of the lorries lined up to cross over to Europe. After laconically asking the driver for permission, he crawls underneath the car, searching for a space that could serve as a shelter. His skilful movements suggest that this is not his first attempt to be smuggled across the ocean. As the lorry starts to move, he slowly disappears from the camera's gaze and the film cuts to images of the port and the traffic that surrounds it. While from a broader angle, this scene revolves around the port-town of Tangier and its status as a transport hub between North Africa and Europe, the scene's most significant space remains invisible. It is the small area underneath the lorry's hold, where the wheels provide cover from the penetrating gaze of the border police. Although it is inhumane, dangerous and ill-fitted for the impending journey, it is — at the same time — the only source of faint hope.

As suggested by de Certeau when he contrasts the view from a skyscraper with the streetscape, the difference between place and space is also one of visibility. To regard the world as a set of clearly defined places requires the panoptic power of de Certeau's observer from above. On street-level, the realm of space, the visual circumstances are radically different. It is evident that the individual's vision is much more limited when situated below. Moreover, in the case of refugees, the crucial question seems to be who or what cannot be seen at all. Time and again, the protagonists in Kusturica's *Little Alien* confirm that visual cover is vital when being forced to cross borders illegally. Yet, as demonstrated in Ed Moschitz's *Mama illegal*, to remain invisible is not just relevant for refugees on their escape routes, but remains a determining factor in the lives of many migrants, whether they have to leave their homes for political or economic reasons. In *Mama illegal*, the eponymous mothers are women from the Republic of Moldova who regularly leave their families in order to work in Austria and Italy. Their illegal status confines them to occupations in private homes, where they work as cleaners or carers, constantly

in fear of being discovered when they are outside. At the same time, the gendered separation of labour provides easier opportunities for women to work undiscovered in Western Europe so that ultimately they take over the responsibility for the financial survival of their families, while their husbands remain at home. Both Ed Moschitz's and Nina Kusturica's documentaries attempt to give a voice and an image to their protagonists and so make visible what normally goes unseen. For one, this means showing their paths of transit, and in the case of *Mama illegal* also the conditions at home, but it is also about visibility within the countries where they end up. When Moschitz follows the Moldovan women in their daily routines in Austria and Italy, his camera also enters the houses of their employers. We are given an intimate insight into the harsh contrast between the women's own makeshift accommodation and the affluent middle-class homes of the people they work for. However, as we never see any of the employers, the latter spaces appear oddly empty. Similarly, the people smugglers who facilitate the women's journeys, and to whom they are financially indebted, never appear in front of the camera. The logic of visibility is inverted. To be unseen indicates power. Although the film's premise makes this inversion unavoidable, it nevertheless raises the question of what the film would have been like if either employers or smugglers had been given a voice and a face: whether consciously or not, in its current form, the film reproduces the imbalanced power structures of migration.¹⁷

As in the two films already discussed, questions of visibility and perception are also central to Arman T. Riahi's *Die Migrantigen*. In this case, however, it is less a matter of being seen or not, but rather of who a person appears to be. The film tells the fictional story of Benny, a struggling actor, and Marko, who is trying to keep his small advertising agency afloat. Because of their lifestyle, their professions in the creative industries and despite their respective Egyptian and Serbian backgrounds, the two friends seem to embody the quintessential Viennese bourgeois bohemian. One day, however, they are approached by a film crew shooting a television series about an ethnically diverse neighbourhood in Vienna, the fictive Rudolfsgrund. Seizing the opportunity to escape their financial troubles and knowing that this is what the producers want to see, Benny and Marko pretend to be local petty criminals. They try to fulfil as many clichés about migrants as possible and soon become the stars of the show.

A comedy of errors, residing solidly within the genre, the film exploits the tension between preconceived notions of ethnic difference and the real lives of second-generation immigrants. Its critical undertone denounces the media for

¹⁷ In the film's official press material, Moschitz explains that he first met one of the film's protagonists when he employed her as a babysitter: <http://www.mamaillegal.com/upload/MIL_Pressemappe_final.pdf> [accessed 7 August 2018]. He speaks openly about his own ambivalent feelings in this situation; however, this personal aspect is not included in the film itself. In fact, both documentaries, *Mama illegal* and *Little Alien*, chose to focus exclusively on their protagonists without voice-overs or the film crew ever appearing in the picture.

reproducing clichés rather than representing more complex and multifaceted realities. Whether Benny and Marko are perceived as migrants or not depends on the way the camera portrays them. Yet again, this perception is influenced by a spatial factor: the reason the film-team ‘recognizes’ them in the first place is because of where they find them. The two friends visit Marko’s father who lives in Rudolfsgrund. Their ethnic heritage becomes significant only against the backdrop of this supposedly troubled neighbourhood. Benny and Marko are *who* they are because of *where* they are, as social assumptions about a place determine its inhabitants’ identity. During the course of the film, however, this relationship is turned upside-down. By the end, it is the two protagonists who shape the public image of Rudolfsgrund and, instead of being determined themselves, the protagonists are shown at work consciously creating and reappropriating space as a cultural entity.

To return to the initial example of Barbara Albert’s *Nordrand*, the film’s plot similarly follows a narrative of self-empowerment, dissolving places into spaces. The film introduces us to its female protagonists, Jasmin and Tamara, through a number of scenes in which they are abused and oppressed by co-workers, lovers, and in Jasmin’s case most severely by her father. All of these sequences are indoor shots, set in their workplaces, their boyfriends’ apartments or Jasmin’s family home. The enclosed character of these locations often feels claustrophobic; the protagonists seem trapped. This is particularly true with regard to the flats in the Nordrand council estate in which the two women grew up. In one sequence, we see Jasmin, who still lives at home, witnessing her father sexually abusing her younger sister in their shared bedroom. For Tamara, in contrast, home life has become lonely as her parents and her brother have returned to Bosnia, leaving her the sole occupier of their house in Vienna. Both of the women are portrayed as living in hauntingly ‘unhomely’¹⁸ conditions. The resolution that the film then offers is a liberating dynamization of these spatial relations. Jasmin finds her way out by leaving the oppressive family sphere. This is quite literally depicted as a transition from the inside to the outside when she escapes from her father through the window of their ground-floor flat. Tamara on the other hand decides to leave Vienna in order to be reunited with her family. The film’s final shots follow her gaze through the window of a train at the landscape she is passing through. Places of oppression have become spaces of transition that the protagonists navigate with self-confidence. Thus, as has

¹⁸ The choice of words is meant to reflect the twofold meaning of the German ‘unheimlich’, usually translated as ‘uncanny’, but also implying a condition of non-homeliness. Cf. Sigmund Freud, ‘Das Unheimliche’, in *Gesammelte Werke*, 18 vols (London, 1947), xii, 227–68. Homi K. Bhabha uses the term ‘unhomely’ to describe a ‘paradigmatic post-colonial experience’ in which the ‘domestic space becomes sites for history’s most intricate invasions’: a ‘displacement’ that confuses ‘the border between home and world’, when ‘the private and the public become part of each other’. Homi K. Bhabha, ‘The World and the Home’, *Social Text*, 31/32 (1992), 141–53 (pp. 141–42).

been pointed out, the film's main theme is the transgression of boundaries.¹⁹ Nikhil Sathe asserts that *Nordrand*'s visual staging reflects an aesthetic of the margins.²⁰ Repeatedly, Tamara and Jasmin are shown in front of windows, glass walls, or on the edge of bridges and rivers. At the same time, Austria's border to the South and East plays a significant role in the film, as Tamara's boyfriend Robert is stationed there during his military service. He is therefore part of the reinforcement of these political boundaries between 1991 and 2011, euphemistically called 'Assistenzeinsatz' [assistant service], during which the army supported border police in deterring illegal immigration. This storyline alludes to the public assumption that political borders need to be protected by force and the persistent portrayal of migrants as invaders — images ingrained in Austria's public memory, particularly in the minds of a whole generation of young men, given the country's mandatory military service.

With regard to the significance of spatial and cultural, political and mental boundaries in the films discussed, I want to complement de Certeau's theories with Homi K. Bhabha's concept of the Third Space. While de Certeau's emphasis is on the power dynamics of space as well as individual tactics of subversion, Bhabha's spatial concepts are grounded in postcolonialism and are thus concerned with questions of cultural identity and difference, as well as their variability and negotiability. Following Bhabha, I will elucidate how the various locations of the films in question serve as social spheres in which cultural ascriptions are produced, but also challenged and renegotiated. The quintessential spatial formation within this approach consists of the margins and the associated phenomenon of liminality as a counter-concept to the notion of fixed cultural entities.

III

'A boundary is not that at which something stops but [...] that from which something begins its presencing.'²¹ Homi K. Bhabha prefaces his seminal study *The Location of Culture* with a quotation from Martin Heidegger's *Bauen, Wohnen, Denken* [*Building, Dwelling, Thinking*, 1951].²² While Heidegger's concept of space [*Raum*] and location/place [*Ort*] differs significantly from de Certeau's — and for the purpose of this article, I will adhere to the latter — Heidegger's observation on borders is important for my argument as he stresses their constitutive rather than their delimiting qualities. This becomes one of

¹⁹ Sathe, 'Crossing Borders'; Mary Wauchope, 'Place and Space of Contemporary Austria in Barbara Albert's Feature Films', in *New Austrian Film*, ed. by Dassanowsky and Speck, pp. 108–21 (p.111); Loshitzky, *Screening Strangers*, pp. 46–52.

²⁰ Sathe, 'Crossing Borders', p. 236.

²¹ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York, 1994), p. 1.

²² Martin Heidegger, 'Bauen, Wohnen, Denken', in *Gesamtausgabe*, 102 vols (Frankfurt am Main, 1975–), VII, 145–64.

the foundations for Homi K. Bhabha's Third Space as a sphere for the negotiation of cultural differences.²³ Bhabha operates with spatial metaphors throughout his work and the Third Space is not necessarily a topographic phenomenon in itself. Rather, it is an inherent ambiguity at the core of any intersubjective cultural expression. In temporal terms, it can be regarded as the act in which meaning is created or negated, modified and altered as a processual rather than a fixed notion:

It is that Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew.²⁴

In this application of Jacques Derrida's *différance* as the constant deferral of meaning, the other is not perceived as the oppositional negation of the self, but in fact as an intrinsic part of the constitution of selfhood. The idea of binary oppositions thus dissolves into the notion of ineluctable cultural hybridity. Borders and boundaries are, in spatial terms, those zones which serve to summon the essentialist illusion of culture through their localizing and encompassing power: the imagination of cultures as homogeneous entities rests upon the delimiting force of spatial and social boundaries to distinguish between them. At the same time, the closer we inspect these areas of liminality, the more difficult it becomes to tell the difference between inside and outside, self and other. Rather than being zones of clear-cut distinction, the transitory character of marginal spaces challenges seemingly stable notions of cultural identity. What is generated within these liminal Third Spaces is a negotiation of cultural differences, enabling the emergence of hybrid in-between realities that are neither inside nor outside, neither one nor the other.²⁵

Using Bhabha's postcolonial critique of cultural essentialism as a framework, my analysis will now turn to specific spatial constellations within the films under investigation. On the one hand, I will explore political and geographical borders as some of the very real obstacles in the journeys of migrants. On the other, I will examine zones of conflict within these boundaries where the struggle between a fixed notion of cultural identity and its inevitable dissolution is rendered visible: the domestic space, in particular the family home, and schools as educational institutions. As symbolic spheres, these zones are united in their task of homogenizing meaning and stabilizing cultural hierarchies. As we will see, they complement the border spaces from within and are seemingly at odds with Bhabha's conception of cultural hybridity.²⁶ However, the films'

²³ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p. 37.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

²⁵ Jonathan Rutherford, 'The Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha', in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. by Jonathan Rutherford (London, 1990), pp. 207–21 (p. 211).

²⁶ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p. 15.

visual and narrative structures uncover the mechanisms of suppression and exclusion at the core of these spatial and social constellations, as well as various forms of resistance, for example Jasmin leaving her family in *Nordrand* or Benny and Marko breaking into the television studio in *Die Migrantigen*. In addition to the spatial significance of borders, schools and the domestic sphere, all of the films under discussion present locations that contain elements of the Third Space. Within the visual and narrative logic of film, Bhabha's topographical metaphor is turned into tangible spaces in Austria: a bus terminal, a Turkish restaurant or a television studio. The conflict-ridden negotiation of differences is embodied by the films' characters.

IV

In a reflective essay on *Little Alien*, Nina Kusturica identifies borders as '[d]as ewige Thema' [the never-ending topic].²⁷ In accordance with Heidegger and Bhabha, she speaks about the essence of the world in the concept of the border: 'In der Grenze liegt das Geheimnis der Welt' [The secret of the world lies in the border].²⁸ Borders, especially in a political sense, are those spaces that help constitute, but at the same time also challenge what is contained within them. In an allusion to Hans Christian Andersen's *The Emperor's New Clothes*, Kusturica identifies power and visibility as the two crucial factors in this relation.²⁹ Borders and the hierarchical cultural orders they create exist as long as people believe in them: 'Wenn aber die Grenzen verschwinden, verschwinden auch [die] Welten, die sie definiert haben' [Once the borders disappear, so do the worlds that they defined].³⁰

The contrast between the artificial yet absolute character of borders is most strikingly illustrated in the opening sequence of *Little Alien*. The first shot presents the viewer with a strip of woodland and three coloured poles marking the border between Ukraine and Slovakia, one in each country's national colours and a third white one in the middle. The three poles are mere indicators for what cannot be seen: the border itself. The liminal space is produced in an act of demarcation and for it to become real it requires the viewers' imagination, because all we actually see is a clearing with three wooden posts. As if to emphasize further the tension between the visible and the invisible, the film then cuts to a shot of a night-vision camera, shifting the focus to the mechanisms of sight itself. The device, we learn, belongs to a police station in Slovakia. We see a busy building with several rooms filled with computer screens, monitoring

²⁷ Nina Kusturica, 'Über Grenzen — Eine Reflexion zu *Little Alien* (2009)', in *Zooming in and out. Produktionen des Politischen im neueren deutschsprachigen Dokumentarfilm*, ed. by Aylin Basaran, Julia B. Köhne and Klaudija Sabo (Vienna, 2013), pp. 236–54 (p. 249).

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 252.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 250.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 250–51.

the border. On one of them, a night-vision video shows three people cautiously crossing a flat strip of land. We can recognize their blurred shapes as they attempt to avoid the border's security devices. The English-language voice-over of one of the Slovakian policemen accurately describes the relationship between the authorities and the migrants as one of visual power:

They have no idea that there is a camera system. It's a darkness. They don't see anything. [...] Absolutely clear picture. [...] Those people have no idea that somebody is waiting in front of them and they will catch them any minute. [...] That's the end of the trip. For them.

The questionable triumphalism in the border guard's commentary exposes the momentous impact of borders on people's identities. It used to be the Iron Curtain that defined the relation between Slovakia and Austria, and Barbara Albert's *Nordrand* recalls the aftermath of this symbolic demarcation between 'East' and 'West'. Now it is the EU's external frontier that marks the difference between inside and outside, guard and migrant, citizens and the stateless. It is this line of demarcation that grants the Slovakian policemen their status and security, while twenty years previously it could well have been them trying to cross borders into a safer and more prosperous future.

Similarly, in Ed Moschitz's *Mama illegal*, we come to understand that old ideological divides in Europe have not dissolved, but merely changed form and position. For the people in Moldova, the 'West' lies across the border, in Romania. The women that the film portrays rely on people smugglers to take them from one side to the other and interviews with the local population repeatedly refer to the dangerous routes they have to take, as well as to rumours about women who were murdered on the way. It becomes apparent that the migrant workers are not only subject to the financial needs of their families, but also to the border's own economic regime. Their illegal status and the vast amounts they need to pay the people smugglers compel them to stay abroad for as long as they can, for months, often years, at a time.

In accordance with de Certeau's observation of subversive spatial tactics, Moschitz's documentary also records unexpected instances of solidarity, for example when Aurica, one of the film's protagonists, finally returns home and is questioned about her missing visa by the Moldovan border patrol. The policeman is willing to believe her when she tells him that her passport was stolen in Austria, something he must have heard many times from people without a visa. He even apologizes and expresses his regret for the inconvenience. The official representing the border regime suddenly appears as an ally in Aurica's struggle. Corresponding to de Certeau's ideas, the individual chooses whether to comply with the implicit laws of a place or to undermine them through their actions. Thus, the films in question observe the realities of the border as a space that shapes and reshapes social relations.

V

While the liminal space of borders is a recurrent motif in all of the films discussed, they are also concerned with the conceptual opposite of the border zone — something I will refer to as the ‘domestic’. This term refers to places and institutions that seem to be pillars of unity and stability in enclosed cultural entities. In the films discussed, the domestic takes on various shapes and forms, such as family homes, administrative offices and educational institutions. These are characterized by clear social hierarchies and power structures — seemingly lacking the permeability and volatility of Bhabha’s Third Space. Yet the films’ protagonists relate to them with ambiguous emotions. While the four films portray the domestic as a place of exclusion, often even oppression, it also signifies a lost state of belonging, embodying a nostalgic sense of unambiguousness that seems to be unattainable for the migrant subject.

The ambivalent nature of the domestic is most apparent in Barbara Albert’s *Nordrand*. In both her family flat and her boyfriend’s home, Jasmin is a victim of physical and sexual violence. At the same time she is desperately striving for love and approval from men. Working as a waitress at Aida, one of Vienna’s largest coffee-house chains, she engages in an affair with her superior, a liaison that is soon reduced to a mere economic relationship when she needs money for an abortion. The other female protagonist, Tamara, works as a nurse in a public hospital. Like Jasmin, who is portrayed as an outsider among her colleagues at the coffee-house, Tamara is mistreated by her sadistic supervisor. Despite the bleak realities experienced by the two characters, on a metaphorical level, both workplaces also represent their hopes and dreams of caring relationships and a positive acceptance of their femininity. These desires are juxtaposed with the hostile social relations within the hospital on the one hand, and the staging of stereotypical femininity in the coffee-house on the other: Aida’s corporate identity is centred on the bright pink, figure-hugging uniforms of its waitresses, the so-called ‘Aida-Damen’. The film’s key message lies in the fact that, over the course of the story, the two protagonists are able to realize these deficiencies in their lives and construct an alternative community by moving in together.³¹ Through female solidarity, they create their own *Heimat*.

As in *Nordrand*, the domestic forms an ambivalent motif in *Mama illegal*. For the three women portrayed, the private home can be a space of exploitation, yet also one of self-realization. The safety of working in a non-public environment enables the women to take on the role of financial provider. However, as their frequent quarrels with their husbands demonstrate, this transition causes significant friction. In both cases, we witness self-confident women making every effort to be in charge of their lives and their families’ fate. Much of the money they earn is spent on the renovation and expansion of their homes in

³¹ Dagmar Lorenz, ‘A New Community of Women: Barbara Albert’s *Nordrand*’, in *New Austrian Film*, ed. by Dassanowsky and Speck, pp. 82–93.

Moldova. Long shots of houses under construction along the main road of their village illustrate how the protagonists are by no means singular cases. None of their husbands, however, appears to embrace the change in gender roles. Although they cook, clean and take care of the house — their routines mirroring those of their wives while they are abroad — once the women return, the suppressed conflicts come to light. It seems as if the men have lost their place within the family.

Most drastically, this becomes evident in a sequence towards the end of the film when Aurica is back in Moldova and we learn that her husband has committed suicide. We see her on a well-kept balcony decorated with plants and flowers, as she explains that she had hoped for a place like this since her childhood. She tells the camera that her husband took his life underneath the balcony. As in this particular scene, indicated by the contrast of life and death, above and below, the film repeatedly brings up questions of guilt and remorse. On a number of occasions, the women blame themselves, regretting their decision to work abroad and the emotional effects on the families they have left behind. Yet again, this is a matter of perspective and visibility as many of the determining factors in their lives cannot be seen in the film. One wonders whether the women have ever had a choice at all. In conversations with the film's protagonists, the complex financial dependencies in which they are trapped become apparent. With liabilities that often stretch far beyond their immediate relatives, the eponymous mothers portrayed are among the weakest links in this chain, while none of the profiteers ever appear in front of the camera. They remain invisible.

Schools form another recurrent location within the filmic paradigm of migration that illustrates what Homi K. Bhabha calls 'unhomeliness': the 'estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world'.³² As one of the pillars of cultural normalization, in *Nordrand*, *Little Alien* and *Mama illegal*, schools exemplify the 'post-colonial condition'.³³ In one of *Nordrand*'s first sequences for example, we see Tamara and Jasmin as primary school classmates, singing the Austrian national anthem. A shot-reverse-shot sequence, in which Jasmin appears in a group of friends, but Tamara is shown on her own, visually establishes the foreign girl as the outsider who does not belong. The anthem then becomes the ambivalent insignia of both, standing for claustrophobic inclusivity in Jasmin's case and relentless exclusion for Tamara.

Inclusion seems to be the main impulse when in *Little Alien*, Alem and Jawid are invited to speak in a school about their experiences as refugees. However, the filmic set-up makes the classroom appear as a space of pronounced differences rather than one of dialogue, as the two protagonists never appear in the same shot with the adolescents they have come to speak to. At one telling point, they are asked about their first experience of snow in Austria by a pupil who is

³² Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p. 13.

³³ *Ibid.*

evidently unaware of Afghanistan's climate and topography. The teacher who is moderating the conversation is unable to bridge the gap between the pupils and the refugees, nor can Kusturica's camera. Instead, the visual setting underlines the differences between the two groups. The persistent notion of 'otherness' undermines the obvious common ground between the Afghan teenagers and their Austrian peers.

Mama illegal follows Aurica's daughter to her school in Moldova, where one of her teachers lists each child in her class who has at least one parent permanently living and working abroad. By the end of this sequence, it is clear that almost the whole class is affected. Later in the film, we see Aurica's daughter together with her teacher trying to recite a Mother's Day poem. The scene recalls idealized notions of motherhood and of school as one of the institutions that aims to promote and amplify these values. When the girl fails to find the right words and breaks into tears, it becomes clear how unsustainable these traditional domestic models are in the light of contemporary social realities.

VI

While the domestic is presented as a sphere of conflict and strained ambiguity, the four films also introduce a series of counter-images through locations that allow for cultural hybridity and polyphony. Even though these locations are often transitory and ephemeral, they allow for a momentary recalibration of the antagonisms that shape the discourse of migration. Ultimately, they also suggest the liberating perspective of a free play of cultural differences in the suspension of conventional preconceptions.

In *Nordrand*, for example, these qualities characterize Vienna's main bus terminal, a recurrent location and the film's discrete centre of gravity. The lives of both Jasmin and Tamara, but also those of the two male protagonists, Senad, a Bosnian refugee, and Valentin, an illegal immigrant from Romania, can be seen to intersect here. Located at the heart of Vienna next to Wien Mitte railway station, the bus terminal is where the coaches from neighbouring countries in the South and the East arrive, bringing hopefuls in search of a better future — or taking away those who decide to return, whether they have succeeded in making their fortune or not. At the same time, the station and the adjacent shops and bars also offer shelter to those left stranded with nowhere else to go. As a decisive representation of the reconceptualization of Vienna's urban identity after the fall of the Iron Curtain, the film revolves around this space of transition — of arrival and departure. In accordance with Bhabha's concept of the Third Space and both on a topographical and a narratological level, it exemplifies the 'way in which cultures recognize themselves through their projections of "otherness"'.³⁴

³⁴ Ibid., p. 17.

In *Little Alien*, we encounter a setting that works in a similar way, this time a Turkish restaurant in the vicinity of Austria's largest refugee reception centre in Traiskirchen. It is the backdrop against which we observe conversations between Somali refugees or where we watch the Afghan boys playing pool. Only small hints, like a map of Turkey on the wall or a group of older men smoking far in the background, remind us of the primary cultural inscriptions of this location. The gendered connotations of the oriental coffeehouse contrast with the self-confidence of the Somali women. In an ironic doubling of the actual constellation, they imagine their lives as stars of a soap opera and jokingly develop fictional plots of romance, crime and intrigue.

While the fictional reappropriation of the mediated self appears merely circumstantial in *Little Alien*, this subject becomes central to the plotline of *Die Migrantigen*. As Benny and Marko realize the negative impact their depiction of Rudolfsgrund has had on the neighbourhood, they decide to set the record straight. Without the film-crew knowing, they produce an episode that puts Rudolfsgrund in a more positive light and breaks with the stereotypes the show had been exploiting. In order for this to be broadcast, Benny and Marko have to sneak into the studios and get the tape on air themselves. By envisaging the media as a tangible spatial entity, in this case represented by Vienna's iconic Funkhaus, the film shifts towards a narrative that must be read metaphorically rather than literally. Two migrants take control of their mediated image and the way they are being perceived. Staged as a break-in, their act of self-empowerment is depicted in spatial terms.

In all the films in question, media are present in various forms, whether as television reports from the Bosnian war in *Nordrand* or the night-vision device in *Little Alien*. In *Die Migrantigen*, however, we witness the transformation of media as a panoptic visual authority into a space that can be inhabited, challenged and subverted. In de Certeau's terms, the film is about a transition from place to space when Benny and Marko decide to enter the broadcasting studios in order to cease being exploited and instead become the autonomous subjects of their own televised stories. At the same time, the film's protagonists come to embrace their heritage without denying their autochthonous selves. Their episode, the play-within-a-play, does not resolve the masquerade. It rather underlines the performative quality of cultural identity as Benny and Marko rely on their fictive characters in order to put across their positive message about Rudolfsgrund. The protagonists' adopted roles have become part of who they are. As suggested by the film's title, as well as its setting, a compound of the working-class Rudolfsheim-Fünfhaus and the bourgeois Alsergrund, hybridity forms the structuring principle of *Die Migrantigen*. The film's guiding theme is the 'double self', being oneself and other at the same time.³⁵

As the chosen examples have shown, the narratological consideration of migration in contemporary Austrian cinema is intricately interwoven with

³⁵ Ibid., p. 20.

the cinematographic exploration of space from the most private and intimate spheres of the domestic to the national and supranational. Whether it is the young refugees in Nina Kusturica's *Little Alien*, the migrant workers in Ed Moschitz's *Mama illegal* or the fictional characters in *Nordrand* and *Die Migrantigen*, the filmic representation of migration is infused by a persistent 'unhomeliness' as an unsettling of spatial certainties. We follow the journeys of young men and women across cultural and political borders, but we also witness how the symbolic status of spatial and social spheres can be redefined through the actions of the film's protagonists. Thus, the fixed notion of distinct places, of inside and outside, as well as a clearly drawn demarcation between those spheres, is rendered precarious. At the same time, the concept of migration as movement from one point to another is questioned. The women in *Mama illegal* strive to sustain their homes by leaving their families. In the end, the worlds they return to are no longer the same. They have changed, just like the women themselves. Similarly, the characters in *Nordrand* remain in transit, something that at least the female protagonists can now perceive as a state of freedom. In the closing credits of *Little Alien*, we learn that none of the asylum applications has yet been accepted. The final sequence, however, follows the young Afghan men on a trip to the Austrian mountains, where they have a snowball fight, take pictures on their phones, laugh and tease each other. For a moment, they seem like any other group of boys on an outing. In this quintessential Austrian scenery, coalescing with the image of the mountain tourist, yet again they have become invisible. As we recall the sequence in the school and the conversation about first snow, it seems that the protagonists are both at home and at the same time utterly estranged. Finally *Die Migrantigen* dissolves the stereotypes associated with migration into masques that can be interchanged at will. Similar to the ancient Greek satyr play, it resolves the tension of the inherent tragedy within the discourse of migration by revealing its performative character. Thus, in different yet complementary ways, all the films discussed exhibit and, at times, circumvent the social power structures between self and other that shape the spaces of migration in contemporary Austria. They enact a momentary suspension and displacement by means of cinema's potentially subversive gaze.