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'For Venus smiles not in a house of tears'¹

Interethnic relations in European cinema

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ABSTRACT In the 1990s, several European filmmakers addressed the Romeo and Juliet motif of 'impossible love' in the context of multiculturalism. A heterosexual love affair between people of different ethnic backgrounds allows filmmakers to address issues of racism and deconstruct racial stereotypes. In the films discussed in this article, the tragic love affairs point to the unwillingness of European countries to become pluralistic and multiethnic societies. Some films have attempted to represent interethnic love relations more hopefully, celebrating happy endings of mixed race couples. The success of such films may indicate that the genre of comedy has won over the tragedy of the Romeo and Juliet topos in cinematic representations of interethnic love relations. Perhaps European cinema is ready to embrace constructions of European identity as hybrid, diverse and multiple.

KEYWORDS *love, multiculturalism, postcolonialism, racism, Romeo and Juliet, unlikely couple*

The unlikely couple

Hollywood cinema has a long tradition of the 'unlikely couple', involving a heterosexual romance between people of different convictions or backgrounds such as class, religion or age (Wartenberg, 1995). Such 'dangerous liaisons' meet with great opposition from family, friends, colleagues and society at large. Contrary to the Hollywood convention of happy endings, such films usually finish tragically. Although the 'unlikely couple' is a well-known topos, until recently Hollywood cinema rarely used this convention to portray *interethnic* relations. The exceptions are, of course, the classics *West Side Story* (Robert Wise, 1961) and *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (Stanley Kramer, 1967). More recently, the 1990s saw a small surge in Hollywood films on interethnic love, of which the best known is the rather pessimistic *Jungle Fever* (Spike Lee, 1991) and the latest is *Monster's Ball* (Marc Foster, 2001), for which Halle Berry was the first black woman to receive an Oscar for best actress in a leading role.

ARTICLE

European cinema does not consist as much of coded conventions and set genres as Hollywood cinema, yet the theme of the 'unlikely couple' is part and parcel of western culture as it harks back to the classic topos of the tragic love between Romeo and Juliet in Shakespeare's play of 1595. Although European cinema has been slow in responding to the great shifts in its population that came with postcolonialism, in the 1990s several European filmmakers addressed the Romeo and Juliet motif in the context of a multiethnic society. Some films even explicitly refer to Shakespeare in intertextual playfulness, for example in the titles of the French film *Romuald et Juliette* (Coline Serreau, 1989), the Danish film *Rami og Julie* (Erik Clausen, 1988) or the Dutch film *Julia's geheim* ('Juliet's Secret', Hans Hylkema, 1987). In the Italian film *Pummarò* (Michele Placido, 1990) the interethnic romance starts under Juliet's balcony in a courtyard in Verona where a doctor from Ghana recites Shakespeare off by heart, wondering whether Romeo could not marry Juliet because he was black. Most films, however, do not make such explicit references to Romeo and Juliet, but are more loosely inspired by the theme of impossible love in a multiethnic society.

Film and television critics have been concerned about the lack of adequate representations of ethnic 'others' in European media (for example, Ross, 1996; Shohat and Stam, 1994). It seems that, between the Scylla of relentless invisibility and the Charybdis of vicious stereotypes, there is a wide gap that is – slowly – being filled with the work of filmmakers from a range of ethnic backgrounds, representing the diversity and hybridity of postcolonial culture. Somewhere in that landscape, there are a few white European filmmakers who have tried to visualize modern European multicultural societies. In this sense, at least some contemporary filmmakers seem to share Guerrero's concern that:

in a society that is rapidly pluralizing, and where the invisible, dominating social construct of 'whiteness' faces the prospect of being just another large minority past the year 2000, we must push our social vision to imagine what soon will become inevitable: an eruptive, almost infinite variety of miscegenations spreading across the political horizon, blurring all binaries and oppositions, subverting the norm, transgressing not only differences of color, but class, gender, and sexual orientations as well. (Guerrero, 1993: 180)

Most films are not as subversive and transgressive as Guerrero would like, but there are certainly some European films representing the pains and pleasures of mixed couples and their 'miscegenations'.

In this article, I want to explore some themes and metaphors in European films dealing with interethnic love relations. I have chosen films from different countries portraying various ethnicities, ranging across migrants, immigrants, asylum seekers, nomadic gypsies and white Europeans of several national backgrounds. My choice is based on: unity of location (Europe); unity of period (the 1990s); and the thematic unity



of the Romeo and Juliet motif (a heterosexual interethnic relation).² I will first discuss some theoretical issues related to cinematic representations of interethnic relations in two classics, *A Taste of Honey* and *Angst Essen Seele Auf*, and then discuss more recent European films.

Black looks

The British film *A Taste of Honey* (Tony Richardson, 1961) is neatly split into two equal parts. In the first half of the film, the working-class girl Jo (Rita Tushingham) has a love affair with the black sailor Jimmy (Paul Danquah). When he leaves her, she finds herself pregnant. In the second part of the film, Jo befriends the homosexual Geoffrey (Murray Melvin), who sets up house with her, but leaves her just before the baby is due. The film focuses on the fragility of white families, probing the problems of adolescent pregnancy. Conventionally, the film is categorized as British social realism and thus celebrated for its realistic mise-en-scène, its use of location and non-star actors. Readings of the film tend to focus accordingly on its treatment of the lower classes and the issue of sexuality rather than on the issue of 'race' (see, for example, Cook and Bernink, 1999: 88–90, 266–8). The film was both hailed for the sympathetic treatment of its effeminate homosexual character (Russo, 1987) and later attacked for avoiding discussions of 'race' and the effects of racism (Young, 1996).

Lola Young argues that *A Taste of Honey* demonstrates a contemporary response to white people's disquiet at 'the presence of black seamen in British ports and their sexual liaisons with white women' (1996: 87). This involves a preoccupation with the purity of the white 'race' and the dread of 'miscegenation' and 'race mixing'. Therefore, Young argues, in the narrative of this and similar films, the perpetrator of the sociosexual taboo is threatened with punishment; in the case of *A Taste of Honey*, Jimmy 'is dispatched . . . never to be seen again' (1996: 91). I was struck by the sympathetic treatment of the black sailor in the film. He is kind, caring and dignified, and Jo and Jimmy seem happy in their mutually loving romance. Jimmy's abandonment of Jo comes rather as a surprise to the spectator and it is suggested that the unfriendly response of Jo's parents has a lot to do with him not returning after he has sailed away.

In the first kiss scene, the desire and love between Jimmy and Jo are represented in sparkling images of lights. The intense gaze of the young man and woman looking at each other and leading to the first kiss allows both a position of active desire. It seems to me important that the black man is allowed to look at the white woman with love and desire (a look that is reciprocated) without being criminalized or stereotyped within the narrative. To put this into context, I turn to some theoretical explanations of relations of looking in cinema.

Several film critics have pointed out that processes of looking are informed not only by gender (as feminist film theory has tirelessly argued), but also by 'race'. The 'male gaze' in Hollywood cinema, as put forward by Laura Mulvey (1989[1973]), involves a masterful male character who commands the camera's look at the female figure, presenting a position of pleasurable voyeurism for the male spectator. Jane Gaines (1988) was among the first feminist film critics to argue that the male gaze is not a universal given, but is rather negotiated through other categories of power such as 'race' and class. In traditional cinema, the black man's sexual gaze is socially prohibited. Racial hierarchies in ways of looking have created visual taboos, the neglect of which reflected back on film theory, which long failed to account for the ways in which some social groups had a licence to 'look' openly while others could only 'look' illicitly. The racial structures of looking also have repercussions for structures of narrative. Gaines discusses the stereotyped construction of the black man as rapist in Hollywood cinema while, in times of slavery and long after, it was the white man who raped black women. The historical scenario of interracial rape explains much of the penalty for sexual looking by the black man, punished severely by being lynched, often after having been castrated. For Gaines, this scenario of sexual violence, repression and displacements rivals the Oedipal myth so prevalent in film theory.

Manthia Diawara (1993) argues that, in the American classic *Birth of a Nation* (D.W. Griffith, 1915), 'the narrative of miscegenation links isomorphically with the Oedipal narrative of incestuous desire, an assault on the symbolic order of the Father which merits the most serious punishment – lynching' (1993: 214). According to Diawara, *The Color Purple* (Steven Spielberg, 1985) and other contemporary Hollywood films reinscribe the image of the 'castrated Black male' (1993: 214). To return to *A Taste of Honey*, we can now see that Jimmy is neither presented as the black rapist nor as the castrated black male; that is, he is fully allowed to look at the white girl as his object of desire and to act on his look of desire. Although it is true that Jimmy disappears from the film, he only does so after the spectator has witnessed his loving relationship with Jo, and their loving farewell does not nearly compare to the 'severe punishments' of black male characters in Hollywood cinema. Their sexual union is represented chastely but blissfully in the sparkling lights of the sky, turning into the lights of a funfair. Although *A Taste of Honey* focuses on the plight of the pregnant young girl, its moments of happiness are situated in the interracial romance.

Male vulnerability

58 Another European classic on interethnic love is *Angst Essen Seele Auf* ('Fear Eats the Soul', Rainer Fassbinder, 1974), filmed with the ruthless



realism characteristic of Fassbinder's cinematic style (see Elsaesser, 1989). Sixty-year-old cleaner Emmi Kurovski (Brigitte Mira) falls in love with a much younger Moroccan 'Gastarbeiter' (as immigrant workers were then called in Germany), Ali ben Salem M'Barek Mohammed Mustafa (El Hedi ben Salem). The double taboo of an interethnic marriage between people of different ages proves too much for their family and friends to cope with. The couple meet with open hostility to their union. As a consequence, Emmi and Ali experience deep trouble in their relationship, leading to Ali developing an ulcer. The last scene in which Emmi visits him in the hospital is a reference to the ending of the Hollywood melodrama *All that Heaven Allows* (Douglas Sirk, 1955). This latter film features an 'unlikely couple' from different classes and inspired Fassbinder to rewrite the class drama as an interethnic love story.

Angst Essen Seele Auf succeeds in endearing the two protagonists to the spectator although neither of them is particularly likeable. Ali is rather silent, grumpy and morose and Emmi is full of prejudices and unashamed of referring to the time when she was a member of the Nazi Party 'like everybody else'. For their marriage dinner, the couple go to what used to be Hitler's favourite restaurant in Munich. The film thus suggests a continuum between prewar German fascism and postwar prejudice and intolerance against immigrants. This kind of critique of German fascism is typical of the New German Cinema of the 1960s and 1970s. According to Elsaesser, Fassbinder 'saw Fascism in relation to the present' (1989: 267), in the daily life that he so skilfully traced in his social realist films, thus 'establishing above all a continuity within discontinuity' and making the past seem uncannily familiar.

As Silverman (1992) argues, Fassbinder is a director who puts identity at risk. Making films about women, homosexuals and immigrants, he has always refused to create positive images of marginalized groups. Elsaesser writes that in Fassbinder's melodramas the heroes are victims because they are 'so ordinary as to be banal, the fact that they are devoid of special insight, but also of grand self-delusions, makes them exemplary figures of victimisation: or rather of the (social, psycho-sexual processes) that make victims' (Elsaesser, 1989: 138). Silverman points to 'Fassbinder's radical refusal to affirm, his repudiation of positivity in any shape or form' (1992: 126). This can be seen in a significant scene in the film where Emmi's friends come to visit for the first time since the marriage. In Ali's presence, the women discuss how beautiful and proper he is for 'taking a shower every day', as Emmi boasts. She asks him to bare his arm and the women touch and admire the softness of his dark skin and the strength of his muscles. Without saying a word, Ali goes away, leaving Emmi in tears. Ali visits a barmaid with whom he has sex. The camera stands at some distance and films Ali while he slowly undresses in the dark. In this lengthy shot, Ali is framed by the window,

curtains and a door while the camera also frames him by lingering on his naked body in the background.

The scene takes place in silence and is awkward to watch because it does not revert to any scopophilic conventions. As the spectator is not sutured into the scene through music or conventional camera work, s/he is painfully aware of the objectification of Ali. The scene repeats Ali's sexual objectification by Emmi and her friends just previously, but now makes the spectator complicit. According to Silverman, *Angst Essen Seele Auf* 'evacuates the masculinity and insists upon the vulnerability of the *Gastarbeiter*' (1992: 154) in this unorthodox representation of the gaze. Fassbinder has understood that the 'human body [is] an arena of social conflict' (1992: 154) – hence the ulcer that afflicts Ali at the end of the film.

There is more to the representation of Ali than is given in this analysis of the gaze. The objectification of the black male can be read as 'racialized sexuality' in the terms of Abdul JanMohamed (1992). JanMohamed offers a Foucauldian critique of the intersection of sexuality with race in American culture, with its roots in slavery and racial segregation. He argues with Foucault that, whereas bourgeois sexuality is recognized by a 'discursive density', racialized sexuality is characterized by 'a peculiar silence' (JanMohamed, 1992: 102). According to JanMohamed, 'Racialized sexuality refused or failed to develop a dense discursivity primarily because white patriarchy's sexual violation of the racial border – the master's rape of the female slave – was an "open secret"' (1992: 104). This open secret led to a silence and repression in American society about sexuality and race which is far removed from the confessional and scientific discourses so central to bourgeois white sexuality. Silence and repression do not produce 'the will to knowledge' that Foucault attributes to bourgeois sexuality, but rather produce allegorical structures and stereotypes. The matrix that JanMohamed sketches of racialized sexuality involves the stereotype of the 'hystericized, oversexualized body of the black male' (1992: 105), feminized or infantilized in literal or symbolic forms of castration (1992: 107). He has less to say on the subject of the black woman other than as the object of desire for white men, raped and 'forcefully appropriated' (1992: 108).

The concept of racialized sexuality indicates that 'the process of racialization is always already a process of sexualization, and the process of sexualization is also always already . . . a process of racialization' (1992: 112). In the context of the films that I discuss in this article, JanMohamed's account of racialized sexuality may offer pertinent insights into the dynamics of interethnic love relations. To come back to the scene in *Angst Essen Seele Auf*, we can now see that Ali is indeed feminized through his objectification, first, by the women and then by the camera. His later ulcer can therefore be read as a symbolic castration.



The penultimate scene in which he dances with Emmi and falls to the floor in agonizing pain points to such a reading. This begs the question of whether the stereotype of the oversexualized black male is as popularized in postcolonial Europe as in the USA. In his book on images of blacks in European popular culture, Pieterse (1992) suggests that the European perspective on the black male is not really different in spite of the history of colonialism rather than slavery in Europe: '[t]he equivalent of the "black brute" of the American South is the "primitive savage" of Europe's Africa' (1992: 179). Let me immediately add that none of the films that I discuss here show such blatant racist imagery. Rather, it seems to me that the myth of the oversexualized black male is carefully avoided in *A Taste of Honey* or painfully deconstructed in *Angst Essen Seele Auf*. The films are thus early attempts at creating a critical cinematic discourse on interethnic love relations.

Postcolonial Europe

After a discussion of these European classics, I now turn to more contemporary films featuring a Romeo and Juliet theme. But let me first briefly discuss postcolonialism in contemporary Europe. By postcolonialism I mean the historical condition of both the dismantling of colonialism in the second half of the 20th century and the rise of globalization (for a good introduction on postcolonial theory, see Williams and Chrisman, 1994). Globalization involves a continued political, economic and cultural hegemony of western domination. This Eurocentric hegemony comes under attack from multiculturalism. Eurocentrism as a dominant model of civilization is, for Shohat and Stam (1994), a paradigm according to which Europe is seen as 'the unique source of meaning, as the world's center of gravity, as ontological "reality" to the rest of the world's shadow' (1994: 1–2). European culture is forced into cultural heterogeneity by multiculturalism, by which I mainly refer to the multiethnic societies that European countries have become.

In this article, I want to trace some of the cinematic explorations of such a multicultural perspective. 'Europe' is, of course, not to be understood in monolithic terms. The differences among the complicated and unevenly racially distributed histories in the various nation states are considerable. However, I am not so much concerned here with those variations, but rather with the structure of 'othering' as it is represented in critical art films from different European countries. Here I take a structuralist position: racism is basically a *structure* in which the ethnic 'other' is excluded from the dominant norm of 'Europeanness', which is equated with 'whiteness'. The structure of racialized sexuality, for example, overrides national or cultural differences.

Films are fictional representations and I am therefore wary of creating

too facile a mirror relation between the films and contemporary debates surrounding immigration, migration and refugees or the rise of the Far Right in many European countries. The aesthetic parameters of cinematic representations of interethnic relations are surprisingly similar in films made in different European countries. The aesthetics are typical of European art cinema: poetic realism, privileging style over plot, scarcity of dialogue, non-star actors and a critical stance. Films do not reflect reality, but construct representations. As such, it is interesting to analyse in an admittedly small corpus of films how European cinema tackles social and cultural issues of multiethnic society.

The journey

The first two examples that I discuss are from Italy and Germany – two countries that share a fascist past. Both films are fiercely critical of the racist attitude of white Europeans to economic immigrants or refugees. The metaphor of the journey is a well-known topos to indicate someone's psychological development. In the Italian film *Pummarò* (Michele Placido, 1990), the journey stands metaphorically for the harsh process of a Ghanaian doctor learning how Europe treats his fellow Africans in the diaspora. Kuaku Toré, a doctor, travels to Italy to look for his lost brother. Played by Thywill Amenya, the doctor represents the 'quietly dignified and intelligent urban black man' for which Sidney Poitier became famous in Hollywood cinema (Ross, 1996: 16). The word 'pummarò' is southern Italian slang for tomato and refers to the mostly black tomato pickers in the south of Italy, where Kuaku witnesses the brute exploitation and violence of the mafia. At night, the illegal tomato pickers sleep in empty graves in a cemetery, suggesting that illegal workers are 'dead' to society.⁵ Kuaku moves on to Rome where he looks for his brother's girlfriend, finding her among the black prostitutes who live in deserted train wagons along the railway. The film makes a bitter point about the sexual exploitation of black women, living in dire circumstances at the edges of the city. Thus, the film poignantly comments on the marginalization of African immigrants to the point where European countries force them to live in a veritable 'valley of hell', not far removed from the poverty they wished to escape.

Leaving the hypocrisy of Catholic Rome behind for the wealthy north of Italy, Kuaku finds a picture of relative integration in Verona. African labourers enjoy a middle-class life, taking Italian classes and organizing multicultural parties in the local social centre. Here, Kuaku starts a love affair with the Italian teacher Eleonora (Pamela Villoresi). Although the portrayal of their interethnic love affair is rather predictable and romanticized (their first night together occurs after the aforementioned balcony scene), the representation of racialized sexuality is more complicated. Writing on Hollywood cinema, Guerrero states that, in black



man/white woman relations, the white woman is usually 'devalued in some subtle way' (1993: 173), whereas Pieterse, writing on European popular culture, claims that the black man is 'almost invariably depicted as grotesque' (1992: 184) and in a socially or physically inferior position to the white woman. Maybe these dissimilar observations point to different kinds of racially gendered stereotypes in America and Europe. In *Pummarò*, we see neither stereotype; the relationship between Kauku and Eleonora is one between equals in terms of class, education and beauty. In the love scene, Kuaku is represented as a gentle and caring lover. Thus, the film avoids both the denial of sexuality that was the fate of Sidney Poitier (Ross, 1996: 62) and the stereotype of the oversexualized black male body. Eleonora's sexuality is, however, represented as rather hysterical. Although she is at first portrayed as a professional teacher with experience in multicultural situations, as soon as it comes to sex she seems ill at ease with her body. In this way, the film repeats the stereotype of the hysterical white female and sets it up in opposition to the black body as more 'naturally' sexual.

When the couple are attacked by local skinheads, the woman breaks down and shouts at Kuaku to leave. It is more Eleonora's lack of courage than the intolerance of the social environment that signals the end of their relationship. Kuaku travels further north in search of his brother. He is taken from the train by the police in Switzerland and searched internally for drugs. This is the familiar image of a naked black male humiliated by the brute enforcement of white law. In Germany, he finds out that his brother was killed in a discotheque in what was a racially motivated murder. When he has reclaimed his brother's body from the authorities, together with the brother's pregnant girlfriend from Rome, *Pummarò* ends with the couple walking over a Christmas market covered in snow accompanied by the tune of 'Silent Night'. The highly cynical image of a white Christmas, with its promise of peace, symbolizes the hypocrisy of Eurocentrism's murderous logic which marginalizes and excludes its ethnic 'others'.

The island

Opposed to the metaphor of the journey stands the symbolism of the island. The island features magnificently in *Lebwohl Fremde*, made by the Turkish German Tevfik Baser (1991). After a divorce, Karin (Grazyna Szapolowska) withdraws into her holiday home on an island in the North Sea. During her stay, asylum seekers are housed in caravans on the island. The islanders respond with great hostility, even setting fire to one of the caravans. One day a Turkish man shows up at Karin's isolated house and she takes him into her home. Karin has to comfort him at night when he has terrible nightmares and they develop a tender sexual relationship. As in *Pummarò*, the interethnic relationship is between two

equals; they are both self-contained and educated. Sexuality does not seem to play an important role for these intellectuals. Sex is rather presented as a source of comfort and intimacy for two lonely people. Thus, the stereotypes of racialized sexuality are avoided.

Not speaking each other's language, they can only communicate without words. This is one of the most interesting aspects of the film because the Turkish character Deniz Varlik (Müsfik Kenter) is never translated for the viewer. We hear Deniz speak but, like Karin, we cannot understand him. The non-Turkish viewer is thus put in the same position as the asylum seeker being thrown into a language and culture that one does not comprehend. During the day the man types furiously, reciting aloud in Turkish what he writes. In a lyrical scene, Karin and Deniz walk on the beach in the rain and wind while he talks to her, clearly reciting poetry, and Karin says, 'this is so weird, I have understood every word you said'. Such slightly romantic scenes point to the power of love and understanding that goes beyond language or cultural differences. The film is mostly constituted of images of the island surrounded by the sea, beaten by the rain and wind, capturing the grey light that is so prominent in 17th-century Dutch and German landscape painting. The harsh power of nature dwarfs the humans into diminished figures struggling against the elements. At the end of the film, the island is flooded by the sea and the islanders are saved by marine helicopters. Deniz is arrested and sent back to Turkey without Karin being able to save him. In a gruesome scene, which breaks with Karin's point of view in the narrative, we see how he is tortured to death in a Turkish prison. In Germany, Karin publishes a translation of his forbidden poetry which he has dedicated to her.

Deniz's death is not a consequence of the interethnic relationship, as Guerrero argues is typical of Hollywood cinema: 'interracial unions usually end in separation or tragedy, with the person of color being eliminated' (1993: 173). The film, however, makes it perfectly clear that Deniz dies for political reasons because he is refused asylum. The island can be read as a metaphor for 'fortress Europe' – a closed off space refusing to take in refugees. The powerful image of the sea flooding the island recalls the language of politicians speaking of 'waves' of aliens and asylum seekers 'flooding in'. *Lebewohl Fremde* makes a strong point about the harsh treatment of refugees by Germany and it does so with beautiful imagery and very few words.

From these two films, we can gather that processes of othering are not particularly dissimilar in Italy or Germany. Whether it is the Italian mafia, Catholics or skinheads, Swiss policemen or German middle-class citizens, the structures of exclusion are depressingly similar, ranging from exclusion from jobs or housing to sexual exploitation, physical attacks or arson.



Nomadism

So far, postcolonial migrants and refugees are the male party within the Romeo and Juliet paradigm of an interethnic love affair. In two films on European nomads, Roma gypsies, the ethnic other is a woman. The position of gender in ethnic relations may have to do with the demographic fact that the first wave of migrants and refugees is often made up of men and that women seldom travel by themselves, but mostly as members of a family.⁴ In both films I discuss here, the Roma woman is firmly established within her own community and has great difficulty in acquiring the freedom to enter a relationship with a white European man.

The nomadic lifestyle introduces metaphoric elements of the journey as discussed above. In the Italian film *Un'Anima Divisa in Due* ('A Soul Split in Two', Silvio Soldini, 1993), security officer Pietro (Fabrizio Bentivoglio) falls in love with a Roma girl whom he arrests for theft. He stubbornly pursues Pabe (Maria Bakò) in spite of her watchful brothers who guard her honour. After they have eloped together, the film carefully traces Pabe's change from a 'gypsy' into an Italian woman. The journey is therefore mostly an inner one whereby Pabe painfully adjusts to living inside a home and working in a factory. Her transformation is visualized by a gradual but complete change in looks: no more colourful gypsy skirts, but black miniskirts; a radical cut of her hair; glamorous make-up. Meanwhile, Pietro looks more and more gypsy-like by growing his hair, moustache and sideburns, wearing colourful blouses and gold jewellery. In the end, Pabe is devoured by nostalgia for the nomadic life of the Roma community and she travels back by train to the last camp where she left her community. On the train, she wears a mixture of gypsy and western clothing, indicating her 'split soul'. In the last shot, she comes to a deserted camp. The film thus suggests that there is no possible way back and that she has to move on, following the nomadic life that she had left behind.

Another nomadic lifestyle is featured in the French film *Gadjo Dilo* ('The Crazy Stranger', Tony Gatlif, 1998). The 'crazy stranger' is the young Frenchman Stéphane (Romain Duris) on the road to Romania, looking for a singer he has heard on a cassette. Fascinated by a Roma girl Sabina (Rona Hartner), he ends up in her village hoping to find the singer through her. It takes months for the ice to break between Stéphane and Sabina. Only through a love affair between them does he realize that none of the Roma understood any of his French; hence, Sabina becomes his interpreter. At the end of the film, he recognizes that his quest for the mythical singer will come to nothing. After several attacks by Romanians who finally burn down the Roma village, Stéphane destroys the cassette and joins Sabina and her clan in their nomadic journey. Here, nomadism is presented as freedom rather than as a journey of loss, as in *Un'Anima Divisa in Due*.

Gadjo Dilo was quite a success in European art cinemas. This is probably due to the energy of the film, full of dance and music, and to its optimistic ending. It is the only film in the corpus I discuss here in which the 'ethnic other' is a white European. It is through the eyes of Stéphane that we see the intolerance and prejudice of white Europeans against gypsies. This rather unique point of view is quite refreshing, but the disadvantage is that the Roma remain 'other' for the spectator. But this may be the point of the film: however 'other', nobody should respond to alterity with aggression and violence.

Contrary to *Un'Anima Divisa in Due*, *Gadjo Dilo* is made by a man of Roma descent.⁵ However, there are some problems with the representation of Sabina in the film. Continually lifting her skirts and cursing in sexually explicit language, she represents a wild sexuality that is far from the ideal of white womanhood's chaste and 'civilized' (i.e. repressed) sexuality (see Dyer, 1997). It is troubling that her words are translated for the spectator, but not for Stéphane who cannot understand her. This makes for a certain disingenuousness. There is some voyeurism involved in the depiction of female sexuality. Sabina is set up as a sexual object equally for Stéphane and for the spectator, and the film does little to counteract her objectification. The image of Sabina differs widely from Pabe in *Un'Anima Divisa in Due*, who is much more subdued – if not downright oppressed – by the patriarchal structures of her Roma clan where the men guard her 'honour' vigilantly. The love scene in *Un'Anima* is represented as giving Pabe a freedom that she did not have before. That freedom signifies simultaneously the loss of her family and community.

It seems to me that the portrayal of Sabina as the 'free and wild gypsy woman' is an example of racialized sexuality. The stereotype of the sexualized 'dark' woman is reinforced when Stéphane and Sabina have sex for the first time and frolic about naked in natural surroundings, indicating a close relationship between sexuality and the natural. The representation of Sabina as close to nature, and hence as 'primitive' or 'savage', falls under a process of metaphorization that Shohat and Stam see as the key colonialist trope: namely 'animalisation' (1994: 137). Sabina's foul language also positions her in the range of the uncultivated. Comparable to the image of the sexualized African woman in European popular culture, Sabina's nudity and wild singing and dancing 'form part of a European metaphor for uninhibited sexuality' (Pieterse, 1992: 179). According to Pieterse, the result was an eroticization of the black woman, a 'lyrical view of the Black Venus' that became predominant in Europe at the end of the 19th century (1992: 183). I will return to this point later.

The European tradition of a certain admiration for the erotic black woman stands in stark opposition to that of America. Although such images were not devoid of ambiguity, the attitude in Europe (with the notable exception of Britain) towards eroticism and sexuality was less



moralistic (1992: 183). In *Gadjo Dilo*, the image of the sexually wild and free woman is nowhere met with moral hostility. Rather, her abundant sexuality is celebrated and, as the interpreter, Sabina performs the important role of introducing Stéphane (and the spectator) to Roma culture. She is also depicted as a strong and independent woman. So perhaps, in the end, her sexual objectification is countered by her role as cultural ‘ambassador’ for the Roma.

Hybridity

The films that I have discussed so far stress the tragic dimension of the Romeo and Juliet saga (with the exception of *Gadjo Dilo*), confirming Guerrero’s and Young’s observations that interethnic relations in cinema usually end badly. In the final part of this article, I discuss more optimistic portrayals of interethnic unions. These include films that portray interethnic relations between Asian and black people and films that belong to the genre of comedy.

Ross observes that, in visual media, the real taboo is ‘a loving and fulfilling black-on-black partnership’ (1996: 137). Few films have been made yet about interethnic relations between different ethnic groups, taking into account the cultural fusions of a pluralistic society. As filmmaker Mira Nair said: ‘I believe strongly that to be a Masala, to be mixed, is the new world order’ (cited in Stuart, 1995: 212).⁶ It seems that such films are predominantly made by directors from ethnic minority groups. In *Bhaji on the Beach* (Gurinder Chadha, 1993), a British Asian social worker organizes a day trip for a group of diverse women of Indian descent to Blackpool. The film raises many issues such as domestic abuse and the violence of authoritarian husbands and fathers, while it also pokes fun at the political correctness of the younger women. When the characters speak Punjabi to each other, it is not translated for the spectator, giving an authentic feel to the film (Ross, 1996: 49). The interethnic love story is only one of the many stories in the film and it concerns Hashida (Sarita Khajuria) who becomes pregnant by her black Caribbean boyfriend Oliver (Mo Sesay) just when she is about to enter medical school. After some quarrels, the couple decide to stay together and face up to the expected anger of Hashida’s extended family.

Bhaji on the Beach is a film in which the Romeo and Juliet motif is a minor one. Other political issues such as the oppression of women are presented as more urgent – or, rather, the love between the Indian woman and black man is embedded within the gender relations of the patriarchal family. The film *Flight* (Alex Pillai, 1997) shares this feminist critique of patriarchal violence. An illicit relationship between a Muslim man and Hindu woman, both of Asian descent, forces the young woman to flee from her family to a women’s shelter. At the end of the film, the shelter is burnt down by her male family members, killing

several women. Here, the context of the fire is black-on-black violence related to the issue of gender while, in *Lebewohl Fremde* and *Gadjo Dilo*, the arson is presented as a racist attack on foreigners. In other British films, multiethnic relations are related to questions of gender, (homo)sexuality and wider political issues.⁷ Few British films feature a straightforward Romeo and Juliet theme within interethnic relations in order to expose nationalistic and racist attitudes, but instead present much more embedded and contextualized stories. This level of complexity may be connected to the presence of relatively more integrated postcolonial subjects as well as to the body of academic thought on the issue of postcolonialism. But perhaps this is too optimistic a view and it could be argued instead that the mainstream (i.e. heterosexuality) is not represented in British cinema dealing with multiethnic relations.

Black Venus

My last two examples are French films, allowing me to return to the representation of black women in French culture. The French comedy *Métisse* (also known as *Café au Lait*, Mathieu Kassovitz, 1995) resembles *Jungle Fever* in its dynamic portrayal of multicultural youth culture in Paris, with its many clubs for jazz, blues, pop and ethnic music.⁸ *Métisse* features a love triangle between the black Catholic Lola (Julie Mauduech), the rich and upper-class black Muslim Jamal (Hubert Koundé) and the penniless Jewish Félix (played by the director Mathieu Kassovitz).⁹ The film thus combines various ethnicities with different religions, adding to the transgression of all kinds of boundaries. Lola is pregnant without knowing which of her two boyfriends is the father. When the young men find out about each other, they first clash, but soon enter into competition to become the ideal father and husband. *Métisse* ends rather optimistically with the two men reconciled in the maternity ward. They bend over the child in the cradle, whom the spectator does not see, thus leaving us in a state of uncertainty as to the baby's paternity.

While the film explicitly plays on different skin colours, it inverts the stereotypes by making the black Jamal the son of rich diplomats and the white Félix the son of impoverished Jews. Lola, however, falls into the category of the gorgeous 'Venus'. Being the object of desire between the two men, she remains rather a mystery to the spectator. The fact that she cannot choose between the men is a necessary tool for the plot, but it makes her a vague and indeterminate character. The film thus fails to represent a black woman as other than an eroticized beauty. While I turned to a more theoretical exploration of the representation of black masculinity at the beginning of this article, I will now explore in more detail how cultural critics have analysed representations of black femininity.

68 Most American female critics point to the history of the mass rape of



black women by white men during and long after slavery (as we have already seen in JanMohamed's account). bell hooks refers to the cultural norm of 'rape as both right and rite of the white male dominating group' (1990: 57). Gaines has argued that, in American culture, the black female is signified as non-human. This renders black female sexuality as the great unknown in white patriarchy, that which is 'unfathomed and uncodified' and yet 'worked over again and again in mainstream culture because of its apparent elusiveness' (Gaines, 1988: 26). In Hollywood films, black women's sexuality is represented as an even greater threat to the male unconscious than white female sexuality, and thus invokes greater violence.

Rape is also 'an apt metaphor for European imperialist colonization of Africa and North America', according to hooks (1990: 57). As Pieterse writes: 'From time to time colonial abuses are cast in the allegory of rape – the rape of a continent, the rape of Bengal, the rape of the Congo' (1992: 173). Shohat and Stam explore Freud's metaphor of female sexuality as 'the dark continent' and its tropes of 'penetration' and 'discovery' (1994: 149). The process of exposing and denuding the dark female has come to allegorize the forced penetration of the East and the South. Pieterse traces how the dark female of unknown continents can be turned into an eroticized object of desire because she is geographically at a distance: 'A characteristic of exoticism is that often it does not survive proximity' (1992: 183). Thus, contrary to America, Europe produced a 'lyrical view of the Black Venus' (1992: 183) which, according to Pieterse, is predominantly a French phenomenon. This, therefore, is the French equivalent to racialized sexuality, as JanMohamed analysed it in the American context.

Let me state that the corpus of films I am discussing does not represent any kind of rape or violence against black women. Films depicting interethnic love relations are critical portraits of the racist attitudes of white Europeans and are eager to expose rather than repeat racist stereotypes. Having said this, it seems to me that the representation of black women differs significantly from that of black men. First, films feature fewer black women in interethnic relationships than black men. European cinema resembles American movies in the absence and invisibility of black women. Very few films make reference to the problems of the sexual exploitation of black women, as in *Pummarò*; even here, it is not really the subject matter of the film. Second, black women in interethnic love relations feature mostly in French films. In its portrayal of black women, French cinema reverts back to the tradition of the Black Venus. In view of the history of cinematic representations of black women, *Métisse* falls into the trap of representing the black woman as an eroticized object of desire, not unlike Sabina in *Gadjo Dilo*. Although more research is needed for a transcultural comparison of British and French cinema's representations

of interethnic relations, I want to suggest here that British films seem to verge more towards a feminist critique of the plight of black women and French films towards a more eroticized image of black femininity.

When Venus laughs

The last film I shall discuss is the French comedy *Romuald et Juliette* (English release title *Mama, there Is a Man in Your Bed*, Coline Serreau, 1989) because of its refreshing view of interethnic relations. The film depicts the improbable romance between the white, small, arrogant and rich company president Romuald Blindet (Daniel Auteuil) and the black, big and maternal cleaning woman Juliette Bonaventure (Firmine Richard¹⁰), mother of five children from five different fathers. As in *Métisse*, the soundtrack is supported by blues, jazz and African music.

Romuald is framed by a food poisoning scandal and somehow it is the cleaner Juliette who is able to help him out. In the beginning, he just ruthlessly uses and exploits her. He even manages to sleep in Juliette's bed in her cramped apartment while her children sleep on the floor and she sleeps in the bath after he has been thrown out by his own wife. When Romuald starts wooing her and buying her all sorts of presents, Juliette demands respect and, in her dignity, refuses him, telling him everything that is wrong with white arrogant men of power. Only after he is thoroughly humiliated will Juliette take him on as her sixth husband. For bell hooks, *Romuald et Juliette* is therefore a unique film, as it 'raises challenging questions about the difficulties of having a partner who is of a different race and class' (1994: 54). The 'challenging questions' are put to the wealthy white man, who must 'learn to understand, appreciate, and value her [the black woman's] world' (1994: 54). hooks seems to underestimate the force of the genre of comedy because, in a happy ending, Romuald's name is cleared and he is reinstated as the company president and returned to his wealth and power.

Many comical moments in the film play on the black/white issue. Romuald's company produces 'Blanlait' yoghurt which is really white milk gone sour. There are references to whiteness in a negative sense, as in whitewashing black money. While the characters in the film are all stereotyped, this is typical of comedy. As Andy Medhurst argues, 'comedy cannot function without resort to stereotype, since jokes need victims and such victims must be accepted by the audience in some way as constituting an appropriate butt' (cited in Ross, 1996: 99): *Romuald et Juliette* is unashamed in pushing stereotypes beyond the pale. The comedy makes the spectator laugh at the white man, never at the black woman. In fact, this is the only film discussed here that is critical of 'whiteness' in its relation to power and wealth. Is it not significant that such criticism is represented in the genre of comedy and therefore smoothed over in a happy ending?



Juliette is a most interesting character. As we have seen, most European films feature a black man/white woman relationship rather than the reverse. *Romuald et Juliette* is still one of the few European films to date that portray a black woman in a relationship with a white man. Moreover, Juliette is big and not particularly beautiful; she is represented as a maternal figure, if not a fertility goddess. The film thus plays on the stereotype of the black Venus, but with a twist on the familiar representation of racialized sexuality. Considering the tradition of the eroticized black female in European (especially French) art and literature, the homely figure of a strong, capable and independent woman with her rolling laughter is refreshing indeed. She is not just a Black Venus, she is a Venus Who Laughs. In this context, it is interesting to note that Hollywood could not produce the American remake of this film because, as bell hooks writes, 'no big white male stars wanted to play the leading role' (1994: 54). She adds that: 'By Hollywood standards (and this includes films by black directors), a full-figured, plump, black woman can only play the role of mammy/matron; she can never be the object of desire' (1994: 54).

Romuald et Juliette ends with a romantic wedding in front of a white community gasping at the sight of a hugely pregnant Juliette and the tiny Romuald at her side, and behind her the five black ex-husbands and their five children. When Romuald proudly presents his wife to his friends and colleagues, they break out in a roaring applause. The last image shows the extended white and black families picnicking on the lawn of Romuald's immense country mansion. Juliette announces with a peal of laughter that their child will be called Caramel. It is probably no coincidence that this blissful picture of interethnic harmony can only be celebrated by the genre of comedy.

Conclusion

Considering the proliferation of theoretical and political debates on multiethnic societies in Europe, surprisingly few filmmakers have tackled such issues in their work. My claim is that filmmakers who address multiculturalism often do so by framing the issue within an interethnic love relation. The European films that I have discussed in this article are nationally embedded while addressing the dismal consequences of postcolonialism or globalization. English films deal with British citizens of Caribbean and Asian descent, German films with Turkish immigrants, Italian films with African itinerant workers, French films with postcolonial subjects from the Maghreb, and so on. Despite historical and demographic variations, the films discussed here are remarkably consistent in their critique of white racism and practices of exclusion. The films leave no doubt that the intolerance of white Europeans leads to the suffering and sometimes to the death of the

ethnic 'other'. In such cases, the love of one white woman or man cannot save the migrant, asylum seeker or nomad. The tragic love affairs point to the reluctance of European countries to become pluralistic, hybrid, multiethnic societies.

While structures of exclusion and 'othering' are strikingly similar across the European films I have discussed, the differences in cinematic representations of interethnic relations have mostly to do with gender and thus with racialized sexuality. The violence of racist attitudes is shown in relation to male immigrants or refugees who are the objects of physical attacks or humiliation. Black women are represented as objects of desire in French films. This makes for a more lyrical view of black femininity and also for a happier ending of the cinematic narrative, but such eroticization is still a structural part of the process of othering. British films, on the other hand, are more critical of the position of black women, both in white society as well as in their own communities. This preliminary conclusion points to the necessity of more research into the various ways in which gender and ethnicity are intersected in European films.

The Romeo and Juliet motif places the locally embedded interethnic love relation within a familiar framework for the western spectator: the great tragedies of the Renaissance. This allows the filmmaker to represent the interethnic love relation as a classical drama of human pain, suffering and death. While *Romeo and Juliet* is a tragedy, some European films have attempted to represent interethnic love relations more hopefully, celebrating the happy endings of mixed couples and their offspring. In 2001, the Swedish comedy *Jalla! Jalla!* (Josef Fares, 2000) swept large audiences into European art cinemas. Making fun of the sterility of white sexual relations as well as of the plight of arranged marriages, the film ends happily with two interethnic marriages between white and Lebanese Swedes. The huge success of this film may indicate that the genre of comedy has won over the tragedy of the Romeo and Juliet theme in cinematic representations of interethnic love relations. Maybe we can take this as a sign that Europe in its many different nationalities is ready to embrace multiethnic society. Then the goddess of love, Black Venus, may smile in a house that is no longer 'full of tears', as in Shakespeare's play, but in a house full of love.

Notes

1. The title is taken from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (Act IV, line 8).
2. I make no pretensions to including every film on interethnic love. I have excluded films from the Balkans and Ireland because of the complications of war. In some cases, I was limited by the availability of films in an English version. Due to the notorious difficulties of distributing foreign language films among European countries, I would not be surprised if certain relevant films have escaped my notice.



3. Italians do not dig graves in the earth, but build cemeteries of marble or concrete boxes on top of each other into which the coffin is slid.
4. I don't take into account here the issue of the traffic in women. A Dutch art film on that issue, *De Poolse Bruid* ('The Polish Bride', Karim Traïdia, 1998), involves a love affair between a Dutch farmer and a runaway Polish sex slave. I have not included this film, however, because it does not feature an interethnic relationship.
5. Tony Gatlif was born as Michel Dahmani in Algeria and made numerous films about gypsies and gypsy music, for example, *Vengo* (2000) and *Latcho Drom* (1993).
6. Mira Nair directed the American film *Mississippi Masala* (1990) about the relationship between a woman of Indian descent and a man of African descent. She tried to get the lights right for the bold love scenes: 'I wanted it to be almost monochromatic – just about the skins – so that the sensuality of the two colours emerges' (cited in Stuart, 1995: 216). It is one of the few films to date that dares to celebrate the intermingling hybridity of brown and black skins.
7. There are quite a lot of provocative British films about multiethnic society, for example, *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985) and *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* (1987) by Stephen Frears and Hanif Kureishi, *Young Soul Rebels* (1991) by Isaac Julien, *Mona Lisa* (1986) and *The Crying Game* (1992) by Neil Jordan. These films portray complex interethnic relations, mostly in relation to homosexuality, thus I have not included them in my discussion.
8. In a film database on the Internet, it is mentioned that 'Mathieu Kassovitz has been called the Jewish Spike Lee because of his vibrant, kinetic visual style'. [Accessed October 2002: <http://www.us.imdb.com/>]
9. The same three actors play again in Kassovitz's hard-hitting drama on ethnic riots in the suburbs of Paris, *La Haine* ('Hatred', 1995); see Bluher (2001) and Schroeder (2001).
10. Richard plays the maid in *8 Femmes* (Francois Ozon, 2002): between the mammy and the maid – what else is new for black actresses?

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