

Book Review

In Permanent Crisis: Ethnicity in Contemporary European Media and Cinema

by İpek A. Çelik

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Çelik, İpek A. *In Permanent Crisis: Ethnicity in Contemporary European Media and Cinema*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015. 206 pages.

İpek A. Çelik begins *In Permanent Crisis: Ethnicity in Contemporary European Media and Cinema* with an analysis of Mathieu Kassovitz's *La Haine* (1995), a film that has become synonymous with the experience of ethnic others and marginalized classes in the streets and *banlieues* of France. Çelik asserts that the hate that courses through the film, occasionally erupting into outbursts of rage, draws on the suspense and violent event of the thriller genre. Borrowing from Sara Ahmed's theory presented in 2004, Çelik calls this exchange of emotions an "affective economy" (2) and argues that this economy and its accompanying temporality of coursing fear and hate with outbursts of rage is characteristic of the European imaginary of ethnic minorities in general—a "media-articulated temporality of crisis and urgency assigned to Europe's Others" (3).

For Çelik, this "temporality of crisis" serves to draw barriers between ethnic others and the dominant European temporality of progress. Further, she argues, images of minorities in a permanent state of crisis or stoppage veil the multivalent historical processes that contribute to the states of eruption and destitution held up as exemplary of ethnic lives. As such, Çelik's project with *In Permanent Crisis* is two-fold: first to provide examples of the temporalities of crisis in mass media and cinema across Europe, and second to contextualize these examples within a larger cultural-historical framework, unsettling their eruptive affective appeal. Çelik carries out this project through four cinematic case studies, split into chapters, focusing on various states of ethnic otherness in different European countries: *Children of Men* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2006, USA/UK) for the trope of the refugee in the UK; *Caché* (Michael Haneke, 2005, France/Austria/Germany/Italy) for French colonialism; *Hostage* (Constantine Giannaris, 2005, Greece/Turkey/Austria) for the status of Albanian immigrants in Greece, and Turkish-German minorities in *Gegen die Wand* (Fatih Akin, 2004, Germany/Turkey). Çelik approaches these works by what she calls "well-meaning directors" from the perspectives of genre theory, affect, director interviews, and formal analysis in addition to her use of news media analysis, anthropology, and sociology. The balance between these approaches is maintained in varying degrees, with the filmic topics of the chapters sometimes playing second to historical explication and speculation about a dominant white European affect and cultural identity. Despite occasional digressions, the work raises interesting questions about the ambiguities of

complicity and critique within auteurist genre film; the relation between temporality and visibility; and the tropes of the ethnic victim and victimizer.

The first chapter, “Refugees and Humanitarianism in a Dystopic Europe: Alfonso Cuarón’s *Children of Men*,” presents the post-apocalyptic action film as a response to spectacles of terrorism exemplified by 9/11 and anxieties about declining birthrates among white Europeans vis-à-vis the population growth of ethnic minorities and refugees. Çelik describes Cuarón’s intention to create a dystopia of the present and explicates his success. The chapter is most compelling, however, when she draws our attention to the background of the frame, where silent and suffering refugee and minority bodies compose the *mise-en-scène* as they wait for the redemptive action of a white savior. Thus, as Çelik argues, though Cuarón seeks to inspire an ethical relation to ethnic minorities and refugees in the film, his reliance on the tropes of disaster supports an ethics based on humanitarian crisis response. Çelik’s argument becomes less strong, however, when she asserts that this narrative trope is symptomatic of what she sees as a general European transition to humanitarianism as activism and when she asserts a major shift toward realism in dystopian films following 9/11. Describing film in the “Global North” following 9/11, she states: “A certain sobriety in accounting the historicity of the catastrophic experience, with its causes and aftereffects dawned upon the image” (34). While this claim is intuitively true, one cinematic case study—no matter how high its box office gross—does not serve as representative of a trend across the “Global North.” The medial shifts following 9/11 do beg for investigation, and I would be eager to read such an in-depth study; though, at this moment, I wonder if we might require more historical distance for such shifts to come more clearly into view.

Çelik continues her critique of a white male-dominated narrative in Chapter Two, “The Thrill of French Colonial History: Michael Haneke’s *Hidden [Caché]*.” Çelik acknowledges Haneke’s progressive intent in exploring bourgeois amnesia of France’s colonial history in Algeria but seeks to draw attention to the ethical ambiguities in mobilizing the thriller genre in this undertaking. She points out that while the French Left often refers to their colonial past to raise affects of guilt as well as to support the need for reparations, the Right does so to “address and instigate fears of its repercussions” (55). There is no denying that Haneke enters into such an affective economy of fear and guilt in order to give his film its emotional and spectacular power. Çelik analyzes how the use of the same camera for the stalker’s surveillance tapes and diegetic footage unsettles spectatorial comprehension of coherent time and place, producing an imminent threat of the eruption of the past into the present—linking “[the protagonist’s] personal and the collective conscience, the private and the public forgetting, the protagonist’s denial and the French state’s refusal to admit to the perpetration of colonial violence” (66). Thus, for Çelik, the film mirrors or acts as an allegory for the guilt associated with the legacy of French colonialism. While guilt is an operative term in this chapter, it is left under-interrogated. Çelik bases her argument on interviews with Haneke in which he asserts his intention to elicit colonial guilt in his audiences through the use of the thriller genre (65), stating that the (ideal) spectator is positioned to identify with the guilt of the protagonist. Çelik, however, provides little formal evidence for this latter assertion, allowing her investment in making an argument regarding the general European cultural milieu to overshadow a nuanced analysis of the film. As Çelik herself admits, the film’s form and mode of address place the spectator in an equally indeterminate position in relation to both the bourgeois protagonists as well as the Algerians they fear and victimize.

Notwithstanding an overreliance on authorial intention, Çelik effectively describes how *Caché*, like *Children of Men*, pulls a silent and pitiable Other into an affective economy in order to explore white bourgeois anxiety, rather than giving voice to those marginalized by their hegemony.

The Other is finally granted a voice in Chapter Three, “Balkan Borders and Transgressions: Constantinos Giannaris’s *Hostage* [*Omiros*].” Unlike the other films analyzed in this work, *Hostage* is a documentary drama—based on an event in Greece in 1999, when an Albanian immigrant hijacked a bus claiming he had been wrongly convicted and abused by police and demanding money and safe passage back to Albania. Due to the film’s real-world counterpart, Çelik spends a large portion of the chapter recounting the actual historical events as well as the reaction to the film’s release—primarily protest—both in Greece and Albania. Çelik praises the film for adding nuance and context to an event that had been sensationalized in the media, particularly the film’s exploration of the issue of emigration from Albania in addition to immigration into Greece. She points to resistance to the Albanian perspective in Greece as the source of protests and boycotts of the film upon its release, as well as the genre-mashing of docudrama and tragedy. The valorization of an undocumented Albanian viewed as a terrorist in Greece and here transformed into a tragic hero is a compelling concept, and one worthy of further exploration. Where Çelik is strong in this chapter, is in her treatment of the spatialized temporalities of Greece and Albania, pointing to how director Giannaris’s Greek camera-eye records Albania as a landscape forever in the past, barren and backwards, even as he tries to redeem the story of his tragic hero. Çelik also convincingly argues that despite Elion’s role as speaking protagonist, the narrative of his plight is only legitimized both within the diegesis and for the audience, when his suffering is revealed on his body through scars and a jarring scene of rape. She associates this legitimation through the suffering body with a larger trope of victimhood in the portrayal of ethnic others, but through the lens of tragedy, it becomes difficult not to view such eruptions of physical violence as par for the course.

Çelik begins her fourth chapter, “Ethnicity and Melodrama in the German Media and Fatih Akin’s *Head-On* [*Gegen die Wand*]” with a question: “Is there any way to situate *Head-On* as a Turkish-German minority cultural production without sequestering it as mimetic or auto-ethnographic representation of minorities in Germany?” With this question, Çelik in a way challenges herself to work against the analytical method she develops throughout her book: employing individual films as mirrors of their cultural and social environments. In not looking to *Gegen die Wand* to represent some general trend, Çelik engages in a truly nuanced formal analysis of the film’s weaving and colliding melodramatic conventions: Brechtian *Verfremdung*, Turkish *arabesk*, language, sound, and place. Building on Deniz Göktürk’s concept of “ironic melodrama,” Çelik focuses on the spectator’s gambit of emotions resulting from the film’s use of “multisensoriality [...] sonic border crossing, shock violence, and performative imitation [to] question the frames of visibility of minorities and open these frames to further debate” (111). The chapter also compellingly contextualizes the film within the history of German news media’s representation of Muslim female sexuality as repressed by regressive patriarchal and familial rule, including the media’s reflexive fascination with Sibel Kekilli (the star of the film) being disowned by her family when her work in pornography was revealed following the release of *Gegen die Wand*. While Çelik posits *Gegen die Wand* as the case study which

comes closest to providing a non-tokenized voice and role to ethnic minorities, she remains troubled by the violence and victimization that lend the film its affective power.

The epilogue of the book calls for portrayals of refugees, immigrants, migrants, and ethnic minorities that do not rely on representations of victimhood: either incurred or given. Although Çelik does not wish to deny suffering as a part of minority experiences, she worries that temporalities of crisis—though serving to draw attention to problems—keep minorities forever relegated to the margins, outside of the progressive temporality of the enlightened “Global North.” Here I was reminded of Çelik’s reference to Stuart Hall’s writing on racial stereotypes of blacks in the British media in her chapter on *Hostage*, as she worked through the potential dangers of a plot focused on an immigrant criminal. Hall argues that writing assimilated—and therefore positive—black characters only serves to reinforce stereotypical binaries, and that one must “reconsider the negative stereotype to make it ‘work against itself’” (83). *Gegen die Wand* might invite such a reading: diving into the crisis to unsettle and mobilize it, rather than maintaining the temporality of crisis as a static trope that one either accepts or rejects.

Thus, Çelik’s book offers its own critique of itself—calling for nuance and the unsettling of binaries of power and difference while drawing lines in the sand with regards to European and ethnic identities and representations. Within the context of the “temporal turn” in humanities scholarship, *In Permanent Crisis* is an intervention within cinema, media, and cultural studies, providing a compelling argument for how crisis temporalities are mediated across these valences. Chapter Four, addressing *Gegen die Wand*, is by far the most developed and effective intervention, balancing contributions to cinema, media, and cultural studies with regards to history, genre, spectatorship, sound and formal analysis, in addition to news media and cultural critique regarding Turkish-German identities and portrayals. Chapters One through Three effectively capture the social-historical moments surrounding and leading up to the production of their respective films, providing provocative and necessary media-historical records of a Europe which is itself in a state of crisis.

— Jessica Ruffin, UC Berkeley