

Chapter 12

Micropolitics of the Migrant Family in Accented Cinema

Love and Creativity in Empire

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In their seminal work about contemporary transnational society, *Empire*, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri give a special place to the body of the migrant.¹ Because the migrant refuses the local constraints of his human condition and searches for a new life and a new identity, he is positively labeled a “new barbarian” who opposes any form of normalization, one of which is the family. While Hardt and Negri are optimistic about the dissolution of the family through migration, Hamid Naficy seems more cautious in this respect. In his book on transnational migratory, exilic and diasporic cinema, *An Accented Cinema*, Naficy argues that many films that deal with migration demonstrate how difficult and even impossible it is to really leave everything behind.² The role of the camera is in this respect very significant. Through the camera, Naficy argues, the filmmaker can create a new identity indeed. He calls this a performative or discursive identity that is established by the use of the camera. However, to what extent these new identities are free from (family) constraints is more ambiguous.

In this chapter, I want to read some of the general and abstract ideas about the migrant body that have been developed by Hardt and Negri in dialogue with the more concrete images of “accented” migratory films as developed by Naficy. I will look at three films considered to be accented films, in that they deal with issues of migration: *BOUJAD, A NEST IN THE HEAT* (Bellabes, Morocco/Canada, 1992-1995), *DES VACANCES MALGRE TOUT* (Malek Bensmail, Algeria/France, 2000), and *MILLE ET UN JOURS* (Mieke Bal et al., Netherlands/France/Tunisia, 2003).³ By analyzing these films and the way in which they relate to contemporary society, and by going back to some of the Deleuzian and Spinozist inspirations of Hardt and Negri’s thoughts on *Empire*, I will argue that the family is not as easily, happily, or necessarily “shot” as Hardt and Negri seem to

¹ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2000.

² Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001.

³ I would like to thank the directors and distributors of these three films for sending me viewing cassettes.

suggest. Or perhaps, that, contrary to Hardt and Negri, one of the ways of resisting in Empire is precisely by shooting the family — with a camera.

Empire: Society of Control and Biopower

Hardt and Negri propose a total theory of the twenty-first century which they call Empire. Empire is governed by a series of national and transnational “organisms” united under the single “logic of rule” of the global market, global circuits of production, and cultural exchange. They carefully distinguish Empire from imperialism, in that the power of Empire is not centralized and does not rely on territorial boundaries. Empire is a “decentered and deterritorializing apparatus that manages hybrid identities, flexible hierarchies and plural exchanges through modulating networks.”⁴ Proposing Empire as the framework in which new subjects have to be understood, the ambitions of Hardt and Negri are high. Within the powers of Empire, which is a system without any outside (like the global market that constantly refers to itself), Hardt and Negri want to reorganize and redirect the forces that are present in the system in such a way that an alternative political model of global flows and exchanges come into being, which they call counter-Empire.

Two aspects of Empire are important to understand the way in which this global system functions: the society of control and biopower. The society of control is a concept that has been developed by Gilles Deleuze. Starting from Foucault’s idea of the society of discipline that exercises power by disciplining bodies in institutional practices and discourses (the family, school, factory, and prison) Deleuze argued that at the end of the second millennium we have entered a society of control.⁵ In a society of control, the power of the institutions has weakened because its boundaries have become less stable: electronic house arrest “opens” the prison, the factory is stretching out into the home via home-work, the school is losing its authority in favor of interactive self-learning, and the family seems to be undermined either by the internal collapse of the Western bourgeois family, combined with a boundary crossing between public and private via the media, or by the dissolution of the non-Western family by external forces like (forced) migrations. On the other hand, the power of all these institutions is even stronger, precisely because they are less tangible. Control is everywhere, although we are no longer just controlled by a gaze but by codes that contain all kinds of information about us. The moles’ tunnels of the society of discipline (recognizable

⁴ Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, p. xii.

⁵ Gilles Deleuze, “Post-script on Control Societies.” *Negotiations*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1995, pp. 177-182.

institutions and discourses of power), says Deleuze, have been replaced by the undulations of the snake (less recognizable forms of control that “crawl” everywhere). Perhaps the family, as a modulating, moving concept, might still be very powerful as well, but I will return to this point at the end of this chapter.

Biopower in *Empire* is related to the society of control in the sense that “only the society of control is able to adopt the biopolitical context as its *exclusive* frame of reference.”⁶ According to Hardt and Negri, biopower refers to a situation in which what is directly at stake in power is the production and reproduction of life itself. One might think of the medical discourse, birth control, in-vitro fertilization, and even cloning. We can watch films like *GATTACA* and television programs like *EXTREME MAKE-OVER* to see what they mean by that.⁷ Hardt and Negri give the (still rather general) example of corporate business, which symbolically and literally incorporates biopolitical forces into its functioning by seducing us into consumption. This goes for all bodies, “majoritarian” and “minoritarian,” because global capitalism is constantly seeking new bodies to absorb, and marketing is an inclusive and expanding strategy. Another aspect related to the biopolitical that Hardt and Negri emphasize as important is specifically related to minoritarian bodies, namely the mobility of “living labor” of the migrant and migratory movements that are extraordinarily diffuse and difficult to grasp. “A specter haunts the world and it is the specter of migration,” they argue.⁸ According to Hardt and Negri, the migrants of the world are the “new barbarians”: migrants who have to begin anew, construct a new body, create a new life, which also implies the destruction of older ways of life. The new barbarians see nothing permanent, “[they] destroy with an affirmative violence and trace new paths of life through their own material existence.”⁹ The new barbarians seem to be in a privileged position to create a new form of life. And all they need to do is just to be completely against the “normal” modes of life. As Hardt and Negri argue:

⁶ Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, p. 24.

⁷ *GATTACA* (Dir. by Andrew Niccol, USA: 1997) presents a world in which genetic manipulation has become the norm and children who are born without all the perfect matches are deviant and marginalized. In *EXTREME MAKE-OVER* people who are unhappy with their looks are given plastic surgery, teeth, and eye operations and new clothes, to present themselves after six or eight weeks as completely new people.

⁸ Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, p. 213. In his chapter in this volume, Sudeep Dasgupta also discusses Hardt and Negri’s biopower. While he focuses specifically on the body of the migrant, I will refer to the migrant as “multitude” and to the role of the family in migration and the political concept of love.

⁹ ., p. 216.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 215.

The will to be against really needs a body that is completely incapable of adapting to family life, to factory discipline, to the regulations of a traditional sex life and so forth. (If you find your body refusing these 'normal' modes of life, don't despair — realize your gift!).¹⁰

Paradoxically however, in spite of this negative attitude, the body of the “new barbarian” is a “powerful body produced by the highest consciousness that is infused with love.”¹¹ Here Hardt and Negri are inspired by Spinoza, and this concept of love seems to be very important for the positive creation of a “counter-Empire.” But one wonders how exactly this love can manifest itself. Hardt and Negri speak of the “creative forces of the multitude” but they remain rather abstract in explaining this creative force of love; or they become very programmatic by the end of their book, which does not seem very creative.¹² Therefore, I would like to look at some concrete “new barbarians” as presented in films that explicitly deal with migration in what Naficy calls “accented cinema,” and ask in what ways these bodies are (in)capable of committing to family life and other traditional structures of discipline and in what ways they deal with “love.” The choice for these examples of accented cinema, as an exilic filmmaking practice and a creative act in itself is of no coincidence since it may very well belong to the possible counter-strategies within Empire.

Accented Cinema in the Society of Control

The society of control, Hardt and Negri state, is glued together by what Guy Debord called the society of spectacle in which the media seem to control and manipulate public opinion and political action. And although there is no single locus of control that dictates the spectacle, it generally functions as if there were such a point of central control that especially regulates our fears.¹³ One need only think of the polarized uses of media in the Western and Arab world after 9/11 to see the truth of these observations. But resistance within this society of spectacle is also possible.

In *An Accented Cinema*, Hamid Naficy describes a growing number of transnational films that are made by migrants about diasporic and exilic subjects. Although the variations in accented cinemas are enormous, Naficy argues that a growing number of films have an “accent” compared to the dominant mainstream cinema. This accent can be understood as a transnational film movement which is

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 216.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 216.

¹² See, e.g., Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, pp. vx, 66, and 393-413.

¹³ Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, pp. 321-323.

“simultaneously global and local, and it exists in chaotic semiautonomous pockets in symbiosis with the dominant and other alternative cinemas.”¹⁴ The accents emanate not so much from the accented speech (which in itself is already an indication of movement) of the films’ characters, as from the displacement of the filmmakers themselves. Naficy emphasizes the notion that the filmmaker is not only an author, but also an empirical subject, who with his films performs certain aspects of his individual and collective identity (I will return to this point at the end of this chapter). Accented filmmakers usually work with small budgets, in artisanal, and often collective production modes. Aesthetically, certain features recur in accented films such as the epistolary narrative, in which exilic subjects seek contact with their loved ones via letter, telephone, or other technological means. Furthermore, Naficy distinguishes certain Bakhtinian chronotopes (time-space configurations) that are striking: chronotopes of the (imagined) homeland, chronotopes of a life in exile, and chronotopes of transitional zones and border crossing, such as airports, tunnels, seaports, hotels — but also in the means and symbols of transport themselves such as trains, buses, and suitcases.

The three films I discuss here can be considered accented films. *BOUJAD*, *DES VACANCES* and *MILLE ET UN JOUR* are all made in an artisanal mode with small budgets, and many tasks, ranging from direction and production to, in some cases, “acting” and editing, are performed by the mostly exilic filmmakers themselves. Furthermore, they are all films that feature some of the chronotopes of accented filmmaking and they all explicitly deal with migration. *BOUJAD*, *A NEST IN THE HEAT* is about a young Moroccan man who returns home. The film starts with images of a train that leads to an airport in Canada, and ends with his arrival in Casablanca. Then alternately we see the filmmaker with his family and images of his Moroccan hometown Boujad. While the town is getting ready for the annual harvest celebrations, it seems to welcome the filmmaker and wants him to stay as does his family. But his voice-over immediately infuses the images with regret and a kind of guilty “future directed” nostalgia, because he does not really want to return home. During the film he struggles with the idea of telling his family about his choice.

In *DES VACANCES MALGRE TOUT*, the filmmaker, often referred to in the film as Malek, and who is apparently a friend of the people he films, follows the Kabouche family to Algeria, where they are visiting their extended family for the first time in fifteen years. The film starts with archival material about the arrival of immigrant

¹⁴ Naficy, *An Accented Cinema*, p. 19.

workers in France. Father Kabouche arrived in 1964 and his five children were all born in France, have French nationality, and do not (or hardly) speak Arabic. We see the preparations for the trip, the traveling itself, and the events that occur in Ain Benen, a small village near Algiers, where the father has been building a house together with his brother since 1980. Here too, the chronotopes of transition are frequent. We follow part of the family traveling by car to the south, and the film ends up at the airport just when the children have returned to France earlier than planned. The images of the father's hometown are, as in *BOUJAD*, full of regret. This time not because the father does not want to return home, but because he would desperately like to return if everything hadn't so terribly deteriorated in the time since he left. The beach he remembers from his youth has turned into a dump, his house was never completed, and a general lack of infrastructure, basic supplies, even water, can be sensed everywhere.

Unlike the other two films, *MILLE ET UN JOUR* is not made by a migrant filmmaker, and as such, it does not officially classify as an accented film. In other respects, however, it can clearly be considered an accented film. Or, it is an accented film that seeks a dialogue between the settled subject (the filmmakers) and the exilic subject. It is made by a collective of filmmakers who film Tarik Mehdi, a young Tunisian man, whose father has worked most of his life in France and who was raised by his mother in a small Tunisian village. In 1998 he came to Paris to study and find work. In 2001 his uncle found him a bride. Ilhem Ben Ali, is a Tunisian girl with French nationality. But before they get married, the French authorities arrest him on suspicion of a marriage of convenience. In the film we see Tarek, Ilhem and her family discussing the marriage which had already been postponed once, almost cancelled a second time (the civil marriage), and finally took place in June 2003. The film is told in a fragmentary way, sometimes using archival material and home movies, and is structured around the marriages and the preparations. The images of the homeland are far less nostalgic or filled with regret, presumably because the filmmakers of this film are not migrants themselves. The homeland as presented by the archival material serves as a historical backdrop of the family histories. But this film does not deal with the literal return home, instead with a "returning" of certain traditions, here exemplified by those surrounding the marriage. During the film's end credits, we see a fourth wedding ceremony taking place in Tunisia for the people there, like Tarek's mother, who couldn't get a visa to come to France for her son's marriage. Here we have the traditional marriage which all along has served as an important reference, and which could perhaps be called a chronotope of tradition.

So, in spite of their difference, these films all speak about migration, have an “accent” and are not part of the dominant society of the spectacle. As such they can be considered counter-images of Hardt and Negri’s Empire. In all of these films, the family is clearly an issue, but not as something to (possibly) escape from. In order to understand this more profoundly, I find it useful to look at the Deleuze’s concept of micropolitics.

Micropolitics and Family Matters in Accented Films

When Hardt and Negri talk about the family they discuss it in a negative way. The traditional nuclear family, for instance, is discussed in the context of fundamentalism. Every fundamentalism, Hardt and Negri argue, proposes a “return to tradition” which really is a new invention that serves as a political project against contemporary social order.¹⁵ The image of the “traditional family” that is important for Christian fundamentalists, has actually never existed but is derived “more from television programs than from any historical experiences within the institution of the family.”¹⁶ Transnational media technologies help to reconstruct such apparently fixed constructions like the traditional nuclear family. This media family is produced within Empire but as a reaction against its floating and global powers: the fundamentalists traditional (family) values are considered to be “safe havens” with fixed patterns and the conservative roles of its members. Hardt and Negri consider this reinforcement of family values (as one possible reaction against the globalizing powers of Empire) to be imprisoning.

However, is the family always merely a negative and imprisoning institution? How do we situate the family in contemporary global society? Deleuze’s concept of politics might provide some answers. Deleuze distinguishes three “political lines” that are always entangled in what at first seems a set of metaphors: the molar line, the molecular line, and the line of flight.¹⁷ The entanglement of these lines constitutes a

¹⁵ See Laura Copier’s chapter in this volume for a discussion of fundamentalism in the family home as seen in *MY SON THE FANATIC*.

¹⁶ Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, p. 148.

¹⁷ I am referring here to how Deleuze explains politics (Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, “Politics.” In *On the Line*. New York: Semiotext(e), 1983, pp. 69-114). When Deleuze talks about the different “political lines” he does not use the word “line” metaphorically. Instead, it should be read more like a vector, a dynamic line on a map that indicates certain force fields (they are always multiple) and which can be distinguished on three “planes”: the molar line is the plane of organization; the molecular line is the plane of immanence (“From forms it tears away particles, among which there are now only relationships of speed or slowness, and from subjects it tears away affects,” p. 81); the line of flight ruptures more radical what is happening on the plane of immanence and the plane of organization.” If there are connections to physics and biology in the

real “micropolitics.” On the one hand, Hardt and Negri are right to assume that the family is part of the “molar” or “segmental political line” that segments every individual and group “molecules” into molar aggregates. These clear-cut segments function in binary oppositions: family-profession; holidays-work; man-woman, etc. Everybody is part of many of these molar aggregates and they can indeed be imprisoning. The flight from the family, which could be described as a “line of flight” in Deleuzian political terms, is then considered to be the positive political option. Hardt and Negri attribute this line of flight to the migrant who is able to resist the powers of Empire in a different way than the fundamentalists: not by reinforcing the segmental, conservative institutions but by escaping from them.

According to this logic, one might expect that accented films present such lines of flight as well. However, this does not appear to be entirely true. Looking at accented films — the three films I discuss here are examples of a much wider range — it is striking to see how important the family seems to remain precisely after one migrates. As Naficy argues:

Discursive identities create sedimentations at individual, group or national levels that cannot with impunity be erased, ignored, discarded, or replaced with new improved ones.... Even in the most radical of exilically accented films, there are always moments of sedimentation...¹⁸

Naficy clearly acknowledges that it is practically impossible to actually or completely escape without keeping some sediment that could be considered as segmental. Returning to Deleuze’s conception of politics, Hardt and Negri seem to miss two important points, particularly in relation to the family but perhaps also in their greater view. First of all, they have missed the political line that Deleuze situates in between the molar line and the line of flight, which is the “molecular line” in which both individuals and groups are loosened up very slightly, mostly imperceptibly, without breaking out of the system, but where the rules are very slightly changed, mainly through affects. A profession or a family is a hard line, but what happens underneath, what affects, attractions, repulsions, and craziness pass through the segment, Deleuze asks. At some points he even begins to call this line the “migrant line”; although he does not explain this shift and migration, molecular movements, and affects all appear

choice of these terms, they are real connections: molar blocks, molecular movements that are almost imperceptible and ‘lines of flight’. Mapping these different forces is what Deleuze and Guattari call “rhizomatics” in their *A Thousand Plateaus* (London: Athlone, 1987).

¹⁸ Naficy, *An Accented Cinema*, p. 286.

to be connected.¹⁹ Furthermore, Hardt and Negri seem to create a segmental binary opposition themselves: between Empire (imprisoning) and counter-Empire (liberating; as long as it is not fundamentalist). Deleuze's analysis of the three political lines (micropolitics) which are always in a state of interplay, however, is much more complex and much more a process of silent "negotiation," best exemplified by the molecular line that Hardt and Negri do not take into consideration.²⁰

This micropolitics, and especially the politics of the molecular line, seems to be very important in the accented films that I discuss. The issue in these films is: how to relate to the family? Should we track the migrants flight away from family (Hardt and Negri's option), or should we trace the migrant at least along molecular lines as well, where sedimentations of family can still be felt (Naficy's option)? And what indeed are the consequences of accepting the latter option for Hardt and Negri's more general analysis of Empire?

Hakim in *BOUJAD, A NEST IN THE HEAT* clearly suffers from his relationships with his family, and his decision to migrate to Canada could be seen as a way of escaping these traditional structures. However, what the film presents is his struggle with the hybrid conditions of contemporary life: how to deal with this opportunity of freedom and "new communities" that migration offers, with the longing for love and blessing from the "old community"? At the end of his film, after having gone through many emotional scenes with his family, Hakim explains why he keeps coming back to Boujad: he somehow needs his family's consent, especially that of his father, to feel accepted as an adult man, to be able to move on. The last scene expresses this beautifully. We see Hakim with his father walking in the medina, while in voice-over we hear his thoughts about how he still needs his family. Then Hakim turns around and moves to the foreground, while his father continues to walk away from the camera. When Hakim has walked out of the frame — and has thus left the scene of his home(town) — his father turns around and looks toward his son/the camera. The son is still there. During the film, we never see Hakim actually break with his family. The only way he can express his "molecular feelings" is by actually making this film, which allows him to express his attachment to his family while very subtly presenting his more negative feelings of suffocation at the same time. It is this struggle between loyalty and responsibility at home and new opportunities that make *BOUJAD* a painful account of how family still

¹⁹ Deleuze, *On the Line*, p. 93.

²⁰ Each of these lines also realizes its specific dangers: over-codification (or imprisonment) of the segmental line, micro-fascism or micro-codification on the molecular line, and (self)destruction on the line of flight.

matters in the life of the migrant. This is what Hardt and Negri describe optimistically as circulating freely and breaking away happily. Very often, blocks of “sedimentation,” mostly situated within family relations, cannot be ignored on the road to new beginnings.

The family plays a different role in *DES VACANCES MALGRE TOUT*. The entire Kabouche family lives in France and they return to their “home” country for a holiday. *DES VACANCES* is a story of different generations of migrants and their feelings about their various attachments. Instead of the tears and sadness in *BOUJAD*, the general tone of *DES VACANCES* is one of disarming passionate concern and excitement. Here the mother is more dominant. She expresses herself with a loud voice and wide flailing arm movements, and most of the children seem to have inherited this expressive trait from her. Only the father and one of the sons, Amar, are quieter. Because of the outspoken expressiveness of the family and their sharp and honest observations, the way in which they deal with the absurd situations they are confronted with is often witty. Only the father, as I already mentioned, is nostalgic and longs for his home country which no longer exists as they appear in his memories.

The filmmaker shifts between the perspectives of all of the family members and demonstrates how they deal with micropolitical movements as individuals and as a family. The oldest brother, Yousef, is frustrated by the bureaucracy involved in trying to get visas. These are problems of the segmental line that are generally huge obstacles in the ability to move around freely. In the end, he decides not to leave and he ends up remaining in France. On a terrace in Ain Benen, Amar discusses the impossible situation in Algeria and the need for migration with some other young Algerian men. What is striking about this discussion is the fact that the Algerians emphasize the need for migrants to return home *as migrants* with new experiences that can help improve the home situation. This is a discussion about lines of flight and their effects back home (to which I will return in the last section). The main focus of the film, however, is the women. The mother wonders why the people do not protest against the fact that they often do not have clean water during the summer, and she expresses her dismay directly to Malek off-camera. The two sisters, Myriam and Soraya, are particularly furious because they are not allowed to go out. As they confront their uncle with the imprisonment of their cousins, they are horrified when they hear, the imam declaring through the mosque’s speakers that women must stay inside. Myriam and Soraya express their feelings of suffocation directly to the camera. All this can be seen as the molecular movements of protest, albeit expressed in a very straightforward and

combative Algerian fashion. In the end, the children decide to return to France on an earlier plane — a very direct line of flight indeed. The parents stay behind in their unfinished house, regretting the fact that they have never been able to travel to Algeria before and offer their children some affinity with their home country. But they will no doubt follow their children back to France. The film ends with the very “accented” images of a suitcase on a conveyer belt, and the family’s passports, which show that the nationalities of the children are different from those of their parents. They are truly a family of mixed origins and mixed feelings. Despite all of their furious arguments, or perhaps even because of them, the family remains central but is permeated by all kinds of micropolitical feelings that are caused by transnational movements and intercultural encounters.

The last film I would like to discuss presents the concrete hybrid situation of migrant families living in France. Although the film as described is centered around Tarek and the wedding(s) of Tarek and Ilhem, many other characters are presented to give an impression of the role of the family in the movements of Empire. As with the Kabouche family, the children of the Ben Ali family were born in France. Ilhem is the oldest daughter and this is emphasized several times. Her father talks about how difficult it is for him to “lose” his daughter the moment she has walked away with her husband; she is a symbol of passing time, generations that move on. Her brother declares that his father will surely cry at the wedding, and he just might. Her mother tells the filmmakers that they are going to have a traditional wedding because Ilhem had requested it. Although the parents have never emphasized any tradition and have taken their kids to Tunisia purely on vacation, Ilhem was curious to find out more about her parents’ homeland.

Ilhem expresses a double sense of belonging.²¹ On the one hand, she clearly refuses traditional roles (“I will certainly not stay home after my marriage,” she declares while driving her car). But on the other hand, she emphasizes the importance of certain traditions. Tarek is proposed as a possible husband by her parents. She eventually concurs because she finds him physically attractive *and* reliable because her parents obviously agree with this choice. Ilhem seems to embody a very conscious choice of intercultural values of second generation girls who seem to easily master the molecular line of sometimes contradictory feelings. The wedding ceremony illustrates her negotiation between cultures in several ways. Ilhem’s girlfriends and cousins are all

²¹ See Wim Staat’s chapter in this volume for a discussion of the special role of the oldest sister in dealing with intercultural values.

dressed in a very French manner; yet, they sing traditional wedding songs and perform all the traditional rituals involved. Several touching moments make it clear that Ilhem does not exactly know what to do when it comes to the traditions, such as sharing a glass of milk with her husband-to-be. In a white dress, the bride throws away her wedding bouquet for the next bride as is done in the West, but she also wears a traditional outfit from Tarek's village. Men and women each occupy one side of the party room, but in the middle they also dance together. *MILLE ET UN JOUR* addresses many levels of migration, but one of its most striking aspects is this way of dealing with cultural hybridity in which the family, again, remains a very central institution, as something necessary in dealing with all this cultural hybridity, which is again a form of molecular movement and affect between cultures.

These three films present ways in which the family still matters in a micropolitical analysis that is more complex than the simple power of migrants to say "no." Although lines of flight are often desirable, these films also recognize the attachments to family relations that have become more important than the homeland's chronotope. In migration, the family often appears to become a site for molecular negotiations between cultural values with the camera as witness.

Love and Creativity in Empire: From Manifesto to Fabulation

Besides the power to say "no," the power of love is the other resisting force that Hardt and Negri emphasize in *Empire*. They argue that "love" should be the guiding principle for a counter-Empire. They interpret love in a Spinozist way. Love, according to Spinoza, has nothing to do with a desire based on a feeling of wanting something we lack, but is related to a striving to survive and create the likelihood of joyous encounters that make it possible to act and grow. In *The Ethics*, Spinoza analyzes a whole range of emotions which are all related to either sad and passive affects or joyous and active affects.²² Hardt and Negri refer to Spinoza in *Empire* as follows:

The desire (cupiditas) that rules the course of the existence and action of nature and humans is made love (amor) — which invests at once both the natural and the divine. And yet, in this final part of *The Ethics* [Spinoza], this utopia has only an abstract and indefinite relation to reality.²³

While Hardt and Negri argue that Spinoza's ethical and political models are only abstractly related to reality, they hint at the turning of the utopia of the Empire of love

²² Benedict de Spinoza, *The Ethics*. Toronto: Dover Publications, 1955.

into a more concrete political model. And so, they turn Spinoza's ideas into a political manifesto: "Today a manifesto, a political discourse, should aspire to fulfill a Spinozist prophetic function, the function of an immanent desire [i.e., "love," P.P.] that organizes the multitude."²⁴ And although they state that this is not a utopian project, nevertheless they end up calling it a materialist teleology. Hardt and Negri try to be less abstract than Spinoza by relating their ideas to contemporary global society. In the end, however, their discussions and conceptions always remain very general, so that it is hard to imagine what exactly they mean by "the activity of the multitude, its creation, production, and power."²⁵ They even present a sort of "political party program" at the end of *Empire*, which consists of three undeniably wonderful points: the demand for global citizenship, a social wage, and a guaranteed income for all, and the right to reappropriate the means of production. To me, this sounds even more utopian than Spinoza's ethical-philosophical concepts, with all of their possible dystopian side effects involving totalitarian systems. Because, if we ask how this program of the creative multitude is to function, and Negri in a television interview²⁶ responds that we need a Machiavellian Prince in order to realize this dream, these dangers become very clear indeed. In this respect, I fully agree with Slavoj Zizek's criticism of *Empire*, that the danger of the "multitude in power necessarily actualizes itself in the guise of an authoritarian leader."²⁷

Fully recognizing the Spinozist "striving to persist" which is indeed the main drive for migration, I would like to argue that in order to make this Spinozist concept more concrete, it might be more useful to look for creativity and love at the micropolitical level as it is expressed in accented films. In an interview in 1990, Deleuze's response to Negri's question of how minorities can become empowered, he referred to the creativity of the minority. Contrary to Hardt and Negri notion, Deleuze immediately relates this to art:

Art is resistance: it resists death, slavery, infamy, shame. But a people can't worry about art. How is a people created, through what terrible suffering? When a people's created, it's through resources, but in a way that links up

²³ Hardt and Negri. *Empire*, p. 186.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 66.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 66.

²⁶ The Dutch broadcasting network VPRO broadcast this interview, entitled "Vogelvrij," on Sunday 7 May 2001, in a series that focused on the new world (DNW, De Nieuwe Wereld).

²⁷ Slavoj Zizek, *Organs Without Bodies: On Deleuze and Consequences*. London and New York: Routledge, 2003, p. 198.

with something in art... Utopia isn't the right concept: it's more a question of a "fabulation" in which a people and art both share.²⁸

Looking at the accented films discussed in this chapter, we can understand how these films can be seen as acts of "fabulation" that create new subjects, call for "a people" that deals with all the micropolitical lines that permeate life. Might this not be a better option instead of proclaiming a party program with all its dangers of lines of flights turning into segmental dogma's (the "prince" that rules in the name of the "new barbarian")? These films are truly creative acts that show how love can be found on all of the aforementioned micropolitical lines. Most clearly, this seems to be the case in *MILLE ET UN JOUR*. A note before the film actually starts states: "In December 2001 two people who wished to marry were barred from this ordinary act by the French police. For the authorities it became an issue of love." And the film demonstrates that love can become a molar issue (the authorities want to make sure Ilhem is neither being forced into marriage, nor marrying to provide her husband with a residence permit). The film does not say that this is not why they are marrying, but demonstrates the many layers of signification that surround this marriage that comprises molar aggregates of western law; Arab tradition and custom; molecular movements of affects (Ilhem's choice because of her physical attraction to Tarek, and her love and respect for her family) and lines of flight (Tarek does, after all, need a residence permit) that are all genuine. The wedding ceremony is a performative event that effectively changes the real-life situations of Ilhem and Tarek. The filming of these events is yet another speech act with creative and performative power.

As Deleuze argues, political cinema today is a cinema that produces "speech-acts" in which the film character and the filmmaker constantly cross the boundaries between private business and politics. It produces collective utterances that are "neither impersonal myths nor purely personal fictions."²⁹ Hamid Naficy says something similar when he argues that accented films are a performance of identity, which is a constitutive act that exceeds the individual identity of the filmmaker. *BOUJAD, DES VACANCES* and *MILLE ET UN JOUR* are performative speech acts that demonstrate that the "new barbarians" of today are not simply producing lines of flight. By filming the family, they are very political in that they are creating fabulations that are enactments of Spinozist love, without any of the utopian connotations. As Genevieve Lloyd explains:

²⁸ Deleuze, *Negotiations*, p. 174.

²⁹ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*. London: The Athlone Press, 1989, p. 222.

[The] interweaving of imaginings and affects does not stop at our own bodily borders. We strive to affirm, not only concerning ourselves, but also concerning those we love — those whose existence gives us joy — whatever we imagine to affect them with joy; and to “exclude the existence” of what will affect them with sadness. This concern for others is for Spinoza not an altruism, which would make sense to contrast with any egotistic concern for ourselves. Spinoza sees it as following from the nature of imagination that, if we imagine someone like us to be affected with some affect, we will necessarily be affected with a like affect.³⁰

The accented films I have discussed in this chapter show in various ways how the family still affects us, and even more so, how the family is also needed in migration situations in order to find a new and necessarily hybrid place, in which values and traditions are constantly negotiated. The family appears to have indeed become a snake-like undulating force that might be stronger than ever before, precisely because it is influenced by movements of migration. Accented films are part of the growing “collective utterances” and creative acts that call for a new people, even though they do not create the revolutions that Hardt and Negri call for in their manifesto. Moreover, they demonstrate that there is a constant movement between migrants and settled people, both in the new countries and in their home countries, and the people they leave behind. Hakim in *BOUJAD* feels a responsibility for and attachment to the family he leaves behind; the Kabouche family in *DES VACANCES* brings new perspectives to the community back home in Algeria (a perspective emphasized by the men on the terrace); Ilhem in *MILLE ET UN JOURS* shows how homeland traditions and customs in the new country can be combined into a new cultural practice. Moreover, the filmmakers of this film enter into dialogue with their “characters” and are thus confronted with their own Western customs, like bureaucracy and preconceived notions of gender divisions in Arab culture.

The dialogic spirit in these films is a necessary part of the love and creativity of the exilic subject. In a wonderful collection on migration and nationalism, *The Freedom of the Migrant*, Vilem Flusser also refers to the creativity of the migrant. He recognizes the suffering that is part of the migration experience, but he argues that the creativity of the migrant is due to a dialogue that develops and that “consists of an exchange between the information that he brought with him and the ocean waves of information that wash him in exile.”³¹ Rather than simply escaping, it is a matter of dealing with responsibilities and affects for others left behind (including family). As Flusser argues,

³⁰ Genevieve Lloyd, *Spinoza and the Ethics*. London and New York: Routledge, 1996, p. 76.

³¹ Villem Flusser, *The Freedom of the Migrant: Objections to Nationalism*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003, p. 86.

the migrant becomes free not when he denies his lost *heimat* but rather when comes to terms with it and hold it in his memory.³² Furthermore, not only the migrant but also the settled inhabitants are transformed creatively: "Exile, no matter the form, is the incubator of creativity in the service of the new."³³ This is done in a dialogic spirit that is not always smooth, but can be polemical and confront many obstacles. As I hope to have demonstrated, transnational accented films are important examples of the kind of creative power that, in dealing with all of the micropolitical lines, present "speech acts" and fabulations of new and intercultural subjects. This may help, very modestly and almost imperceptibly, to creatively renew both migrants and settlers. And this is more like a revolutionary emergence of all kinds of subjects than merely some proclamation of the revolution of the new barbarian.

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³² Ibid., p. 6.

³³ Ibid., p. 87.

Filmography

BOUJAD, A NEST IN THE HEAT (Bullet Proof Film, Morocco/Canada: 1992-1995) directed by Hakim Belabbes.

DES VACANCES MALGRE TOUT (Institut National de l'Audiovisuel, Algeria/France; 2000) directed by Malek Bensmail.

MILLE ET UN JOURS. (Cinema Suitcase, the Netherlands/Tunisia/France: 2003) directed by Mieke Bal, Zen Marie, Thomas Sykora, Gary Ward, and Michelle Williams.