

Book Review: In Permanent Crisis. Ethnicity in Contemporary European Media and Cinema by Ipek A. Celik

In In Permanent Crisis: Ethnicity in Contemporary European Media and Cinema, Ipek A. Celik examines the depiction of refugees, migrants and racialised 'Otherness' in contemporary European media and cinema, arguing that victimhood is still the primary lens through which such figures are given visibility. While noting a body of contemporary films that may challenge this tendency, Isolina Ballesteros nonetheless praises the book as an outstanding scholarly contribution to the field of immigration cinema studies.

In Permanent Crisis. Ethnicity in Contemporary European Media and Cinema. Ipek A. Celik. University of Michigan Press. 2015.

Find this book: 

Recent waves of immigration from the Global South and East to the European Union have brought with them two simultaneous phenomena: populist, anti-immigration political agendas that reflect a Eurocentric anxiety over the instability of national identities within Europe; and a proliferation of films, visual media and artistic projects as well as published sociological and theoretical studies that document and denounce this social reality. Ipek A. Celik's book, *In Permanent Crisis: Ethnicity in Contemporary European Media and Cinema*, excels within this corpus, particularly with regards to the construction and representation of ethnic and racial 'Otherness' through the distinct perspective of film.

In Permanent Crisis establishes a productive dialogue with major philosophical, sociological and media debates on immigration, as well as theoretical articulations of those discussions in film studies. It provides a comprehensive and engaging mapping of the socio-political context surrounding the four films Celik analyses, as well as extensive reference to reviews and media coverage, interviews with directors and preceding academic studies.

The book's main argument is that refugees, migrants and minorities of migrant origin are generally depicted in media and cinema, particularly in the 2000s, in relation to emergency and catastrophic situations and reduced to the binary schema of being either the victims or perpetrators of violence. In the introduction, Celik rightly exposes the ways in which traditional media unequivocally assigns these subjects to 'a temporality of underdevelopment, stagnation, and cultural fixity', perceives them 'as the primary subjects or objects of the catastrophic present' and denies them their own voice. The premise of 'the stigmatized temporality' of racial Otherness, and its reproduction solely in terms of fear or pity in media discourses, is indeed particularly relevant in the aftermath of recent terrorist attacks carried out in Europe.

In the subsequent chapters, Celik shows how the four films — Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men* (2006), Michael Haneke's *Hidden* (2005), Constantinos Giannaris's *Hostage* (2005) and Fatih Akin's *Head-On* (2004) — react to the ways in which the mass media has represented the socio-political events that involved their protagonists. Celik brilliantly analyses the complicated means by which these *auteurs* use and bend film genre conventions — namely, dystopian science fiction, psychological thriller, documentary drama and melodrama — to exploit the affective potential of media events, providing a more sensorial experience of spectatorship.

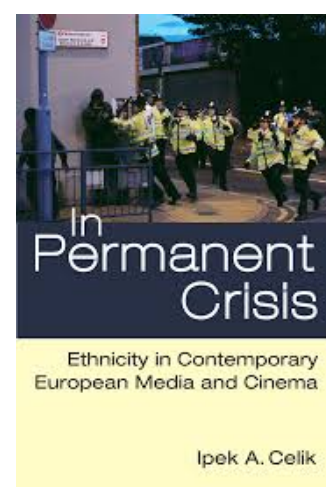




Image Credit: Refugees at the bridge connecting Braunau, Austria, with Simbach, Germany, 24 October 2015 ([Christian Michelides Wikipedia Public Domain](#))

Celik establishes the strength of *Children of Men* in the way it highlights background historical context through reference to documents and artistic renditions of some of the most important crises and emergencies of the present and recent past. She also notes how it captures anxieties currently felt in continental Europe (public security, declining birth-rates, multi-ethnic redefinitions of the European identity and the perceived 'invasion' of refugees who exploit welfare states) via the aesthetics of science fiction and disaster genres as well as the use of the mobile long take. And yet, Celik argues, the film is compromised by its spectacular nature and the way it turns figures of Otherness into epitomes of global suffering. Moreover, its political agenda is limited insofar as it proposes political action only on the basis of humanitarian help grounded in compassion and solidarity.

Celik's study of Haneke's *Hidden* is equally sophisticated in its analysis of the film's use of the conventions of the psychological thriller to explore colonial guilt and responsibility as well as anxieties about the potentially vengeful ex-colonial Other in contemporary France, and of its formal appropriation of the surveillance video. Celik critiques the film for not developing sufficiently the character of the Other (Majid, an Algerian) and the episode that constitutes the subtext of the story (the 1961 Paris massacre by police of Algerians in a pro-independence peaceful demonstration). She argues that Majid's 'voicelessness' and spectacular suicide ('unexplained passive-aggressive death'; 'self-centred flagellation') undermine the power of *Hidden*'s historicity, and claims that in the film 'the desires of minority Others are directly linked to their injury and are not independent from the person who caused this injury'.

But I suspect that Haneke's intention is precisely to show that the breach in French society depends on the inability of Algerians and other ex-colonial subjects to free themselves from the status of victimhood, and of white French subjects to escape the fear of revenge of those victimised segments of society. If it is indeed true that *Children of Men* and *Hidden* leave ethnic and racial Others 'voiceless', it is also a fact that these two films — as well as many other immigration films made by white European filmmakers — are not intended to be about the Others, but rather about how white Europeans deal with their uncomfortable presence in society and with their own sense of guilt, either by continuous denial or self-congratulatory humanitarian effort and heroism.

The originality of Celik's study of *Hostage* (based on the real hijacking of a bus in Greece by an Albanian migrant in May 1999) resides in her interpretation of the protagonist as an Albanian tragic hero, and of Greek tragedy as an appropriate genre to frame the violent act without preconceived judgement about the character. Celik provides detailed documentation of the political context as well as insightful analysis of the combination of documentary and dramatic narrative as well as the camera work that director Giannaris uses to give the protagonist's perspective and counteract the sensationalist media coverage of the episode. Her reading lucidly exposes the conflictive relations between democratic Greece and post-communist Albania. Although Celik argues that 'the Albanian gaze is central' and that Giannaris makes visible the systematic violence against Albanian migrants, she concludes, in line with her previous analyses, that the film winds up resorting to the same sensationalism that it otherwise denounces, reducing the agency of the racial Other to 'the realm of self-destruction'.

Celik introduces her analysis of *Head-On* by documenting the well-studied 'paradigm of victimology' that defines the history of media and cultural representations of Turkish-German and Muslim minorities in Germany. Celik interprets Akin's melodrama as a dynamic alternative to social realist aesthetics by highlighting how the emotional registers, affective excess and multisensory perceptions of ethnicity act to attract the spectator and challenge conventional perceptions of victims and villains. Celik's analysis stands out in its emphasis on the sensorial experience that the film provides for the audience, and the lucid interpretations of the 'sound bridges' used to connect scenes as well as the symbolic meaning of the wall in the original German title (*Gegen die Wand*, or *Against the Wall*). Consistent with her preceding line of argumentation, Celik also concludes that in Akin's film 'the driving force behind the construction of agency is yet again acts of self-victimization'.

In the epilogue Celik reiterates this essential premise: despite their efforts to point to the limits and flaws of media representation of refugees, migrants and minorities, the politically progressive films included in the book still set victimhood as the framework through which their minority characters are rendered visible. This argument is solidly substantiated in Celik's rich analyses of the films, but it is also fair to note that there is a large number of immigration films (mainly comedies or tragi-comedies) made in the 2000s that offer alternative frameworks and diverse protagonists who fight the categories of threat or victim and do not live just in a 'permanent state of crisis' (including *Anita and Me* (Huseyin, 2002); *Nina's Heavenly Delights* (Parmar, 2006); *Retorno a Hansala* (Gutiérrez, 2008); *Eden à l'Ouest* (Costa-Gavras, 2009); and *Almanya—Welcommen in Deutschland* (Şamdereli, 2011), among others). *In Permanent Crisis* is nonetheless an outstanding scholarly contribution to the field of immigration cinema studies. Celik rigorously documents and interprets the tendency to victimise or silence the Other (outside the genre of the comedy), and suggests the urgent need to provide alternatives to this visual representation both in media and film.

Isolina Ballesteros is Full Professor at the Department of Modern Languages and Comparative Literature and the Film Studies Program of Baruch College, and the Graduate Center of CUNY. She is the author of three books: *Escritura femenina y discurso autobiográfico en la nueva novela española* (1994), *Cine (Ins)urgente: textos filmicos y contextos culturales de la España postfranquista* (2001) and *Immigration Cinema in the New Europe* (2015). She is currently working on a book titled *Migration, Visual Art and Activism*.

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.