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Zsolt Györi

You Are What Your Borders Are: Hospitality and Fortress Europe in *Last Resort* and *The Citizen*

Introduction: Fortress Europe and the lost case of hospitality¹

International migration is a prime example of the kind of polarising contemporary social phenomena that create dramatic "us versus them" situations, undermine universal solidarity, and separate people into opposing groups with walls and razor-wire fences between them. Migration reveals the sharp dividing lines cutting through 21st century humanity: the lines separating us from them, the settled from the migrant, the privileged from the poor, the protected from the vulnerable, the legal citizens from those without papers or rights (see Várnagy and Kalmár 2021 in the present volume). The physical and symbolic borders between the two groups, which are the key elements of visual representations, further strengthen the sense of painful inequality and injustice involved. When we look at such situations, we often discover an allegorical picture of our deeply divided 21st century humanity, with groups of radically different opportunities facing each other. No wonder that international migration, especially since the 2015 European migration crisis, has become a hot topic for all sorts of cultural discourses: politics, philosophy, journalism, social sciences (Berghahn and Sternberg 2010) and created "new challenges for European cinema too, a crisis of cinematic representation" (Kalmár 2020, 150).

In the past twenty years, migrant cinema has become a canonical art cinema genre, yet not an unambiguous one. Its popularity is without doubt linked to the European migrant crisis (since 2015), testing both EU immigration and immigrant policies, raising many questions about the design and effects of regulations regarding admissions and exclusion. One of the central topics is concerned with the role of states in deciding which refugees to welcome and whom to exclude, which is thus tied up with questions of discrimination and inequality. This is a debate running deep in European history, intimately linked to the emergence of the modern concept of states and is even reflected in the etymology of hospitality. The Latin root of hospitality is *hospes*, meaning *guest* or *host*, while hostility has a very similar root, *hostis*,

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meaning *stranger* or *enemy*. The former is associated with practices of membership, the latter with those of exclusion and so was for the ancient Greeks who used a rich vocabulary to signify foreigners of different status with *xenos* referring to guest, refugee, or guest-friend entitled to hospitality, *metoikos*, the foreigner resident of the city who possessed some rights of citizenship, and the *barbaros* used to denote the uncivilized, suspicious and threatening type of foreigner who was best kept outside the city walls.

The etymological forking that produces hospitality and hostility as alternative, yet often complementary attitudes towards foreigners is all the more important since, as Gideon Baker remarks, already in ancient Greece hospitality was “no longer the private concern of elites, the public gift of hospitality became a gift made by the city” (Baker 2011, 25). The common practices of the land, and later, the creation of policies regarding immigration limited the scope of hospitality as individual matter and increased state responsibilities of handling foreigners. If liberalism defined the role of the state in advancing equality and general welfare, in a post-liberal era, membership becomes more limited and, as William James Booth contends, “there are no doubt powerful forces arrayed in many polities that seek to keep the exclusionary barriers high and reinvigorate a stronger sense of the “we” who stand within those boundaries” (263). One of the transnational polities erecting exclusionary barriers is Europe itself, captured by the succinct expression Fortress Europe. It marks the failure of the cosmopolitan-utopian ideal according to which it is the humanity of one person and the other that constitutes “we”.

The contours of Fortress Europe are the starkest when we think about how the establishment, implementation, evaluation and necessary revision of immigration policies turn into a political agenda; how the success or failure of these have come to determine government popularity, party preferences, and electoral participation. The way political elites handle refugees and asylum seekers is indicative of their moral and ideological composition and, as Alex Bach asserts, “tells us something essential about the nature of power itself.” (2) This power, more precisely biopower, is nothing new in the Old Continent, where immigration policies is just a fresh addition to the diverse technologies of governing and administratively controlling inequalities. Bearing in mind dark historical lessons in anti-semitism and interethnic conflicts, it should come as no surprise that detention facilities and processing centres for refugees often call into mind images of concentration camps.

In case of the recent European migrant crisis, the impossibility to welcome everyone and the introduction of criteria of “fairness” to decide who can stay and who will be deported marked, for liberal minded people, the failure of the egalitarian foundation of humanity. Resulting from the endorsement of stronger criteria of membership than ever before and the foregrounding of a sense of Europeanness founded on shared history, customs, and way of thinking, the concept of Fortress Europe today serves as a battle ground between supporters of liberalism and those who seek to protect the national framework of polity and claim to defend the cultural particular-

ity of Europe. Fortress Europe certainly did not emerge in the wake of the European migrant crisis, since the protection of EU borders has for long been the topic in negotiations between national and transnational governments. However the debates have become more heated resembling a war rather than a sensible discussion, placing the concept of Fortress Europe on the battle ground between advocates of inclusive and asylum-providing practices (qualities of liberal statecraft) and proponents of the case-by-case approach to granting asylum, but also more social control and limited tolerance for cultural differences (qualities of post-liberal, or illiberal statecraft). Fortress Europe today is not just a symbol of immigration control but of sectarian politics, of a fully-fledged war between value systems and of opposing perceptions of justice/injustice, and equality/inequality.

Cinema against Fortress Europe

It is one area of the richly layered symbolism of Fortress Europe that interests me here. My concern is not the otherwise crucial area of the relationship between hospitality, hostility and the control mechanisms central to modern statecraft, but the manner in which immigration stimulates the crafting of social and individual identity. This issue in past years was richly reflected in European art cinema, in films that pitted the politics of hostility against the ethics of hospitality exercised by the ordinary citizen. Examples like *Last Resort* (Pawel Pawlikowski, 2000), *Terraferma* (Emanuele Crialesi, 2011), *Le Havre* (Aki Kaurismaki, 2011), *The Citizen* (Vranik Roland, 2016), *The Other Side of Hope* (Aki Kaurismaki, 2017) and *Styx* (2018) share a strong conviction that unlike governmental bodies, individuals and communities continue to embrace the liberal ideal of unconditional hospitality. With different films in mind, Isolina Ballesteros asserts that “tolerance has to be cultivated within the family’s structure as a first step to achieving a broader communal and supranational acceptance of Otherness” (169–170). The individual and grassroots cultivation of tolerance is all the more symptomatic of the fissure within liberal values, since in many countries private intervention and aid offered to clandestine immigrants is regarded as illegal activities by authorities. Such criminalization is not only present but emphatic in the above films as they talk about personal acts of offering hospitality in spite of state sanctions. Based on these films, liberal values and the responsibility for universal human rights is best advocated through disobedient citizenship, that is, citizenship disobeying practices of hostility legitimated in the name of order, security and sovereignty.

In *Terraferma* a family from the small island of Liosa near Sicily earning a modest living as fishermen and taking their share of the local hospitality industry in the summer months encounter refugees from North Africa first at sea and later on the beach. Already at the early stages of the story, the family, as Ellay Taylor asserts, is shown to be “torn between the law of the sea, which compels fisherman to save

anyone in peril on the ocean, and the laws of the land, which forbid their rescue". Although hesitant at first, they soon decide to hide a pregnant Ethiopian woman and his young son despite potential retribution from the authorities and the male hero eventually helps them reach mainland Italy. Set in Helsinki, Finland, *The Others Side of Hope* features the unexpected friendship of Khaled, a refugee from war-torn Aleppo, Syria and Wikström, a laconic Finnish restaurant owner of likely Swedish origins who risks his good reputation and savings to find Khaled's sister and help the siblings reunite. During his endless interviews with efficient but highly impersonal immigration officers, Khaled learns how to act in the role of the refugee which Peter Bradshaw sums up as follows: "happiness, cheerfulness, laughter itself – these are commodities that must be carefully handled for an asylum-seeker. Too little and officialdom won't like you, too much and your plight will not seem sufficiently sad, damaging your "deserving poor" status." Khaled fails to impress the bureaucrats of Fortress Europe with his performance and is scheduled for deportation, yet he will be saved by ordinary citizens who do not judge immigrants based on their officially required performance (which, in addition, dehumanize them) but their personal, human character. The German *Styx* is a heartfelt moral thriller located on the endless waters of the Atlantic off the coast of Mauritania where the paths of a severely damaged refugee boat and a well-equipped sailing yacht navigated by a German woman accidentally cross. Rike, who as a paramedic practices *caritas* by profession, is torn by her drive to help and the repeated radio messages of authorities urging her to keep away from the humanitarian crisis unfolding in front of her eyes. Eventually, as Manohla Dargis asserts, the "story of radical, deeply privileged individualism gives way to a potent, messy and sometimes uncomfortable parable about what human beings owe one another," and disobeying official procedures, Rilke acts according to the common ethical sense. Despite a shared thematic concern what sets *Last Resort* and *The Citizen* apart from the above films is their respective romantic subplots between the foreigner and the host that allow for a more nuanced characterisation of protagonists and the inequalities they suffer at the hands of official immigration policies. The present paper offers a detailed analysis on how the respective films portray individual acts of responsibility and hospitality vis-à-vis official policies and practices of hostility towards immigrants. But before moving onto the analysis itself, I offer a brief overview of immigration into the represented countries.

Immigration controls and national specificities

While there have been considerable immigration to Western Europe and North America since the late 19th century, Hungary has rarely been the target country of mass immigration. At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries some 1.3 million agrarian workers immigrated mainly to the US (Illés 220), later followed by people leaving the country for political reasons after the rise of right wing nationalism, the world

war and the 1956. Strangely, immigration to Hungary mainly included Hungarians who after the Trianon Peace Treaties became national minorities in neighbouring countries. Consequently, as Sándor Illés contends, in the 1920s "taking care of refugees, for the simple reason that these were Hungarians, differed from "traditional" forms of hospitality" (221), a trend that continued in the latter part of the century. New arrivals almost exclusively consisted of culturally and linguistically homogeneous groups; they were considered Hungarians relocating to the geographically curtailed motherland. In those rare cases when foreign nationalities immigrated to Hungary, like Greek citizens after 1949 or East Germans in 1989, and refugees from former Yugoslavia after 1991, they either returned home after political normalization (as with the Greeks) or used Hungary as a transit country to reach Western European destinations (as in the two latter cases). In the postcommunist period, the 2001 Status Law and the so called Hungarian Card issued under this law granted certain benefits to Hungarians with a permanent residence in neighbouring countries. Changes made to the Hungarian Citizenship Law in 2011 made it easier for descendants of Hungarian citizens to apply for citizenship. Largely to these historical factors, until recently Hungary has seen an influx of culturally integrated immigrants from neighbouring countries, that is, people who understand national obligations, morality, and values distinctive of Hungarian identity, making it easier for governments to adopt unconditional hospitality and offer immigrants full membership.

Immigration to Britain in the past century was a very different issue. Following the demise of the Empire, there was a sharp rise in immigrants from Third World countries, as the 1948 British Nationality Act allowed Commonwealth citizens unrestricted rights of entry into Britain to remedy serious labour shortage. Despite being declared equal by law, non-white immigrants soon began to test the limits of hospitality and debates over the social threat they posed became the topic of daily political debates and strengthened the radical right. Consecutive legislation – the Commonwealth Immigrants Acts of 1962 and 1968, the Immigration Act of 1971 and the British Nationality Act 1981 – put increasing controls on immigration and signalled a cross-party consensus over the need to create racial thresholds for both those who have settled and for those who were planning to settle in the country. As Roxanne Lynn Doty notes, "[i]deas of "one's own kind" and dangers associated with too much dilution by outsiders easily shaded into fears that the presence of "others" posed a threat to the British way of life, to the very identity of the British people" (Doty 47). In the mind of many, xenophobia became a natural fear of strangers, leading to the racial coding of British identity as not only acceptable but desirable. As a result of the above mentioned acts, increasingly illiberal and racial criteria were set up for entries into the country with the legal authorization for guest workers being the work permit (subject to constant revision and renewal). Not long after the white/non-white division challenged the equal treatment of asylum-seekers by immigration control, Eastern-European "others", labourers from the post-Soviet countries, were subjected to official xenophobia at borders for their presumed cultural and social threat to British identity.

Even such a brief overview reveals considerable differences in the two countries' historical experience with immigrants and explains dissimilarities in the cinematic representation of hospitality and hostility towards foreigners. Whereas both films criticize Fortress Europe, the name of all those legal, cultural, social and economic mechanisms that produce inequality, their approach is unique. *Last Resort* was made in the wake of the Asylum and Immigration Bill of 1999, a policy of forced dispersal, which, as Doty claims, "institutionalized a practice already being followed by many London boroughs of dispersing asylum-seekers to southern coastal towns and to the north. ... Areas with unfilled housing were designated "reception zones"" (55). The result of these policies, Doty concludes, "has been increased racism and xenophobia in areas where asylum-seekers have been dispersed to" (55-56). It is against this hostile legal environment that Pawlikowski tells the story of visitor-host relationship. I will argue that the ordinary citizen's ability to exercise hospitality in *Last Resort* increases with her willingness to question official views on immigrants and the humanistic-cosmopolitan inclination to regard those inside and outside the gates of Fortress Europe as equals. *The Citizen*, made in the aftermath of the recent immigration crises, in the highly hostile political atmosphere of Hungary in the 2010s, concentrates on the administrative management of inequality and how local value systems and national policy agendas may impose limits on unconditional hospitality.

Last Resort and The Citizen

The two films feature refugee protagonists at very different stages of the asylum seeking process. In terms of plot, *Last Resort* is about a Russian woman, Tanya, who arrives to Britain with her 10-year-old son Artiom, in hope of a marriage. Yet it is important to note that the sentimental heroine does not seek a marriage of convenience but has deep affection for a British man whom she recently met and fell in love with. However, Tanya's real background story is not simply that of an Eastern European woman waiting for the British fiancé, who in fact never turns up at the airport, but of her having been betrayed by the ruthlessness of post-Soviet predatory capitalism where illustrators of children's books are in low demand. Hers is a story of having been made redundant, jettisoned, and psychologically wasted by her country's social and economic conditions, a personal account of post-Soviet precarity. With her native country in a full blown crisis of social values and inequalities skyrocketing, she dreams of a home offering emotional and financial stability. Her strong determination to achieve these turns Tanya into a refugee seeking political asylum at Stansted from where they are transported to Margate (called Stonehaven in the film) famous for its theme park called Dreamland.

There is nothing haven-like in the Margate for the refugees, a place that used to be a popular seaside resort offering various ephemeral carnivalesque impulses, a place

of escape from the mundane everyday. The location presented in the film no longer benefits from working-class consumerism but is spatialised as the underbelly Britain of limited career opportunities and "becomes the symbol of postcommunism in Britain, a Britain that in no way adheres to the Cold War mindset of a prosperous and affluent country with a secured place in history" (Kristensen 50). The glorious past of this once burgeoning town with a developed hospitality industry, captured by Lindsay Anderson's free cinema documentary *O Dreamland* (1956), is only remembered by the sign "Dreamland welcomes you" which, according to Yosefa Loshitzky, is "a parody of the inscription at the base of the Statue of Liberty, the entry point to America and the mythic symbol of immigration" (751). Stonehaven is a place abundant in vacant housing, thus fits the guidelines fixed by the dispersal policy. Nevertheless it also resembles traditional representations of refugee camps: the area is marked off from the outside world by barbed wire fence, while patrol dogs and surveillance cameras track every move of the occupants. People worn out by endless waiting, little social interaction and occasional violence are mirrored by the post-apocalyptic imagery of abandoned beaches, littered streets, and run-down buildings. The resort which was once a place of hospitality paradoxically appears as the opposite, a space of hostility and exploitation. The film's male protagonist, the working-class ex-convict Alfie, makes more money by selling telephone cards and tobacco to refugees than operating a games arcade and working as a bingo caller. Others adopt more predatory strategies and recruit young refugee women for cyber pornography. The non-citizen status of a refugee woman makes them easily exploited by the illegal sex industry serving citizens of Fortress Hungry for some exotic foreign flesh.

Alfie's romantic attraction to Tanya is that of a gallant knight eager to take the "damsel in distress" back to his fortress, and possibly marry her too. But would this be a marriage of equals? The point I wish to make is that Tanya appears as someone who is in desperate need of a patronizing strong male partner and would probably always be the vulnerable party, someone to be taken care of. Her girlish look accentuates her infantile nature. Thus there is a certain colonial fantasy surrounding the relationship of Tanya and Alfie, that of the masculine, rational metropole, or Fortress Europe for that matter, coming to the rescue of the illogical and chaotic female Other. Nevertheless, the man's unconditional hospitality leaves Tanya some space for self-reflection and transformation.

If there is a single image that captures Tanya's original, naïve mind-frame, it would be the wall-size poster of a tropical seaside sunset in the Stonehaven apartment they occupy (see: images 1, 2); a fantasy-vision of a dreamland which nevertheless has begun to peel off and so reveals itself as an illusion. It is the graphic externalization of her psychosocial state, an allegory of her primal fantasy of a normal family and a caring Western husband, a dream to escape reality. Later in the film the poster will be painted over and one of Tanya's original paintings hung up. The transformation of the wall is symptomatic of Archie's attempts to transform the run-down

highrise apartment into a home, yet the more Tanya's fantasy becomes a reality the less compelling it seems. The shot of her painting, framed by Archie, tipping to one side expresses this psychic disequilibrium. She feels undeserving for Archie's acts of unconditional hospitality as these were offered for a selfish person with deceptive fantasies. Realising that the answer to her crisis is not Archie, British citizenship or Western living standards but the willingness to confront a false self-image constructed through perpetual escape, she decides to return to Russia. To be worthy of unconditional hospitality offered by the host, she must first practice self-care and learn how not to repress but embrace and handle her traumas and identity crisis. In her words: "I have to go back and start my life" (see: images 3, 4).

The tolerance and understanding Archie shows towards Tanya's frailty and alterity questions the very logic underpinning the Fortress Europe attitude. Breaking many rules, he wrecks both the studio and the face of the cyber-porn producer and later helps Tanya and Artion escape from the camp on a boat. In their adventure they both become outcasts and share an identity that comes before national designations such as English or Russian, an identity unstable and without assurances yet not insular and indifferent towards the other. Although their romantic intimacy remains unrealized, their ways part, and every moment of their relationship is filled with ambiguity, this is an ambiguity that leaves insiders and outsiders equal.

If hospitality forces Tanya on the path of self-investigation that results in the termination of her quest for asylum, Wilson, the protagonist of Roland Vranik's *The Citizen*, learns about hospitality at the last stage of obtaining citizenship. Wilson is from Africa, from civil war torn Guinea-Bissau where he lost his family and has been living legally in Hungary for many years. He works as a security guard and is preparing to take a naturalization exam that he had already failed on many occasions. The dark-skinned protagonist wants to integrate and rise from the status of the resident alien into that of the legal citizen. He takes private lessons from a Hungarian lady of his age, when unexpectedly Shirin, a pregnant Iranian woman, knocks at his door looking for shelter. After a few seconds of hesitancy, he lets her into the flat, the spatial symbol of his determination to settle in the country. Wilson's decision to welcome an uninvited guest into the flat he himself only rents is allegorical of his legal status.² He makes his intermediary existence open for someone fully peripheralised, who is both outside the law and pursued by law enforcement. Wilson is Shirin's "last resort" in more than one sense of the word: he offers a safe house to the woman without legal documents and allows her to give birth to her baby there. He does not expect Shirin to live according to his rules as a homeowner probably would, yet does everything to create an intimate atmosphere that he protects fiercely. Later, as Mari and Wilson become romantically involved, the married woman moves into the flat but due to the lack of privacy different conflicts emerge between the three

² In ancient Greece, the *metoikos* was a resident alien who did not have citizen rights and who paid a tax for the right to live there.

of them. Mari reports Shirin and her baby to the immigration office who are put into detention scheduled for deportation. Despite her deep feelings for Mari, Wilson sends her away and decides to move to Austria after receiving formal notification about the result of the citizenship application. The film ends on an ambiguous note, since viewers never learn if he was rejected or granted citizenship (see: images 5, 6).

At the outset, Wilson regards the legal form of citizenship and identification with the cultural heritage of the host country as self-fulfilment. This is the proper path set forth by today's EU immigration policies that are increasingly shaped by the fear of losing control over borders, a fear overcome by setting down symbolic thresholds asylum seekers must pass. In Hungary, as elsewhere in the continent, the citizenship test is an important stage of the naturalization process, and aims to guarantee the success of the assimilation. The test is a symbolic document, a transcript of Hungarian cultural identity and heritage. It turns the protagonist into a student, more so since the test largely covers areas of history, political history, citizenship studies, literature, arts and music, the same topics secondary school students are tested on during the maturity exam at the end of their compulsory education in Hungary. The citizenship test seems to measure one's level of maturity, but one might ask, maturity in what? It standardizes maturity and in doing so introduces the category of "substandard identity", another means of endorsing inequality discursively. In the top left image the coat of arms of Hungary and the flag of the European Union serve both as a visual-compositional frame and a legal framework for the exam committee performing the task of selection. The adjacent frame shows Wilson being judged, shamed and rejected at the hands of Fortress Europe. Another point I want to raise concerns identity that can be measured and whose worth is determined by its translatability into a transcript of exclusivity. Defined as such, cultural Hungarianness is protected by several thresholds; it is a fortified identity that might seem alien even to its beholder, since normal citizens' everyday experience hardly fits normative definitions. Whom it serves best is a type of state thriving on people's sense of insecurity, an illiberal state setting up boundaries to separate those who are "in" from those who are "out", and in doing so crafting its own image as a protector of the people.

Fortress Europe works in mysterious ways depriving the migrant identity of a sense of achievement. Wilson, for example, is awarded the employee of the year award, sending out the politically correct message that even a migrant can be honoured, that thresholds have disappeared and universal equality is around the corner. Making someone a model migrant, the mascot of tolerance is not hospitality but a strategy to show off superfluous solidarity. The spatial logic of this scene suggests that there is little free space to navigate, that without patrons he would not be able to achieve much. Turning Wilson into the poster boy at a self-congratulating ritual is an ironic commentary of dishonest colour-blindness. We see a very similar composition at the immigration office when he reacts aggressively after being called an "African" and has to be held down by Mari and the security guards. After having proven his maturity in different situations, he is still identified by the colour of his

skin. Here immigration policies fail their own logic and become unthinking, irrational and immature. And yet, for an outside observer it is the immigrant who is made to be seem violent, irrational, uncivilized and immature: the barbarian at the wall (see: images 7, 8).

The domain of governmentality defending people's rights to Fortress Europe and a legal immigrant defending the right of an illegal immigrant to hospitality is the basic conflict of Vranik's film. The former gives immense powers to authorities and allows them to act in a concerted manner, the latter results in a growth of personality and the gradual evaporation of the desire to find asylum and legal status at any cost. Wilson makes a double sacrifice: he terminates his journey of seeking citizenship in its very last stage and, at the same time, breaks off with Mari, who loves the man but, as Wilson realizes, loves the fortress even more and driven by a desire for privacy hands Shirin and her baby over to the immigration officers. Mari's actions are certainly explained by her emotional bonding to the man, but also the historical trajectories of immigration to Hungary and related notions of hospitality overviewed a few pages earlier. With reference to these, Mari might rightfully feel to offer unconditional hospitality to Wilson in her desire to integrate him in her life and make him one of us. She chooses the acculturated, assimilable immigrant over the threatening alterity of Shirin. Yet Wilson's membership in the community is more unstable than Mari would expect, he resembles what Booth calls the stranger citizen who "is nevertheless remote, because he remains a potential wanderer who can leave these bonds as we who are constituted by them (or think ourselves be) never could." (264) Wilson's remoteness is rendered visible only after he accepts the role of the host and understands that hospitality is a daily responsibility, an ordinary gesture of humanity. In an ambiguous manner, he *declines citizenship* in Fortress Europe and embarks on a nomadic journey, this time, possibly, as an illegal immigrant *at his most naturalized state*, that is, in the heightened state of feeling one with humanity.

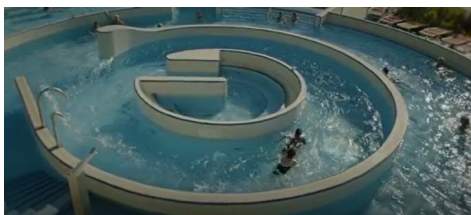
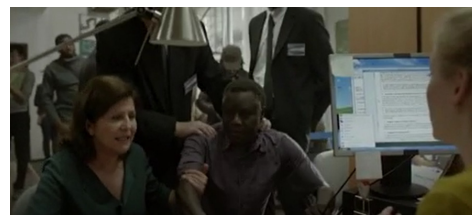
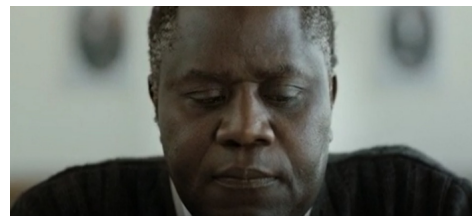
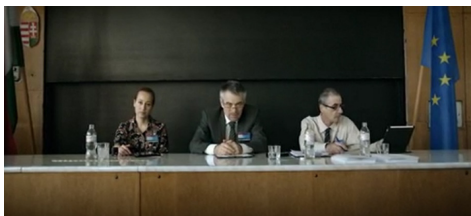
Conclusion

While most migrant cinema depicts Fortress Europe through visual metaphors of the inside–outside binary, such as the spatial dichotomies of upbeat downtown and the run-down outskirts areas, men in uniform trying to handle hordes of people, or oftentimes as corpses that look like waste washed up on the shores of Europe, the films discussed here capture the migrant experience as constant forking and circular movement. An example of forking is how Wilson is torn between being a visitor and a host one at the same time. An image from *The Citizen* showing a round pool at a holiday resort (see: image 9), where Mari and Wilson escape for a few days, captures well the circular movements immigrants are subjected to, to be that the back and forth movement of Tanya (Russia–Britain–Russia), the pointless wanderings of

characters in the premises of the detention camp, or Wilson's frequent visits to various offices and examination centres. In these cases the migrant experience is not defined by being a radical outsider caught behind barbed wire or as a starving refugee on a boat on the Mediterranean, but rather as being caught in this endless movement in the labyrinth laid across various levels of bureaucracy, looking for meaning that – as host we often forget – is itself fluid and ambiguous.

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Non-Human Precarity: Wasted Human-Canine Kinships in Two Contemporary Documentaries

“We are being wiped off the earth, not the face of the earth, the face we lost long ago, the arse of the earth, il culo. We are their mistake. ... Mistakes don’t surrender as enemies do. There’s no such thing as a defeated mistake. Mistakes either exist or they don’t, and if they do, they have to be covered over. We are their mistake”

(John Berger: King: A Street Story)

“Can we think of precarity “beyond” the human?” asked Judith Butler at a virtual roundtable in 2011 (171). Although in the past two decades animal studies has radically reshaped the humanities in that it exposed and, if not eradicated, at least replaced anthropocentrism with more-creature conscious perspectives, treating the human as the single subject of discussions on precarity and its representations is still naturalised. Non-human beings are ostensibly “incapable of experiencing precarity *as such*, as a subjective and not just objective condition of vulnerability” (Shukin 115). As long as animals and other non-human beings cannot give (human) voice to their experiences, one will never know for sure how they are subjectively affected by the accelerated economic, social, technological and environmental changes of the 21st century. Yet to not even contemplate the question entails that human precarity is a standalone phenomenon, unrelated to other creatures’ shifting states of well-being and affliction. As Nicole Shukin puts it, “to allow “the human” to go unquestioned as the assumed subject of precarity is to enable a misrecognition of the life forms that are historically, materially, socially, economically, affectively and (bio)politically intricately with that subject” (116). And, even worse, to deny the intricate interrelationships between human and non-human states of vulnerability is to comply with those power mechanisms, those apathetic, hierarchizing, exclusory machinations of neoliberal capitalism that make lives precarious in the first place. Here I pick up on the issue raised by Butler and try to think of precarity “beyond the human” in order to challenge the anthropocentrism of the dominant precarity discourse. My opening argument is that the global spread of neoliberal capitalism and the crisis situations it culminates into make not only