

**WestminsterResearch**

<http://www.westminster.ac.uk/westminsterresearch>

**A Hand that Holds a Machete: Race and the Representation of the  
Displaced in Jacques Audiard's Dheepan  
Koksal, O. and Rappas-Celik, I.A.**

This is an accepted manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Third Text, 33 (2), pp. 256-267.

The final definitive version is available online:

<https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2019.1590067>

© 2019 Taylor & Francis

---

The WestminsterResearch online digital archive at the University of Westminster aims to make the research output of the University available to a wider audience. Copyright and Moral Rights remain with the authors and/or copyright owners.

---

Whilst further distribution of specific materials from within this archive is forbidden, you may freely distribute the URL of WestminsterResearch: (<http://westminsterresearch.wmin.ac.uk/>).

In case of abuse or copyright appearing without permission e-mail [repository@westminster.ac.uk](mailto:repository@westminster.ac.uk)

Özlem Köksal  
University of Westminster  
[O.Koksal@westminster.ac.uk](mailto:O.Koksal@westminster.ac.uk)  
+44 777 4514 497

Ipek A. Çelik Rappas  
Koç University, CSSH  
Rumelifeneri Yolu, Sariyer  
34450 Istanbul/ Turkey  
ipekcelik@ku.edu.tr  
+90 212 3381 117

# A Hand that Holds a Machete: Race and Representation of the Displaced in Jacques Audiard's *Dheepan*

Özlem Köksal and Ipek A. Çelik Rappas<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

Jacques Audiard's *Dheepan*, a story of Sri Lankan refugees who seek asylum in France, won the prestigious Palme d'Or at Cannes Film Festival in 2015. The jury, led by Coen Brothers declared that their decision was 'swift' since 'this was a film about which everyone had a high level of excitement and enthusiasm,'<sup>2</sup> suggesting

---

<sup>1</sup> The authors have contributed equally to this article and author names are listed in alphabetical order.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/may/24/jacques-audiard-dheepan-cannes-europe-migrant-workers>

the film's strong public appeal due to its timely topic. The critics, however, were thorn. While some claimed that it was 'not the most convincing of [Audiard's] filmography,'<sup>3</sup> and that 'it is not his best work,'<sup>4</sup> others praised its 'intelligent and sympathetic interest in other human beings,'<sup>5</sup> and applauded its 'strong social and ethical agenda' that takes its spectators into 'the souls of social outsiders, the chronically unrepresented.'<sup>6</sup> In fact, the film is often praised based on the its politics. Even a year after its release, reviews were recommending the film for the political and social insights it provides into migration in Europe. Writing for *New York Times*, for instance, A. O Scott was arguing that with 'the threat of terrorism and the humanitarian challenge of migration from Africa, Asia and the Middle East have precipitated something of a European identity crisis, Mr. Audiard's film has acquired an almost prophetic aura.'<sup>7</sup>

In the film, former Tamil soldier Dheepan meets Yalini, a young woman trying to escape the civil war, and Illayaal, a twelve-year-old orphan at a refugee camp in Sri Lanka. They form a fake family in order to improve the chances for the approval of their asylum application. After the brief opening sequence in Sri Lanka the film traces characters' lives in a banlieue in the outskirts of Paris, apparently abandoned by the police and ruled by gangs almost exclusively made of ethnic minorities. The film depicts Dheepan as a character who, despite the odds, does everything in his power to adapt to his new environment and improve it. He learns French, works assiduously as a janitor in the banlieue cleaning and repairing the crumbling

---

<sup>3</sup> All translations from French are ours. [https://www.lemonde.fr/festival-de-cannes/article/2015/05/24/cannes-dheepan-sort-vainqueur-d-une-competition-eprouvante\\_4639663\\_766360.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/festival-de-cannes/article/2015/05/24/cannes-dheepan-sort-vainqueur-d-une-competition-eprouvante_4639663_766360.html)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/apr/07/dheepan-review-jacques-audiard-palme-d-or>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.filmcomment.com/blog/film-week-dheepan/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/06/movies/review-dheepan-about-sri-lankan-refugees-looks-like-a-prophecy.html>

buildings, tries to keep his fake family intact and integrated by finding Yalini a job and supporting Illayaal's education. He even goes through his traumas in the darkness of a cellar without disrupting his surroundings.

However, events take a darker turn towards the end of the film, when Yalini becomes trapped inside a building caught in a gang fight and Dheepan explodes and reacts against the growing spiral of violence around him. The image of Dheepan –a newly immigrated non-white man suddenly able to kill without blinking– is a cliché that should appear out of place in a film that seeks to create an understanding of the harsh experiences of the displaced. Audiard explains,

... what interested me was this – we see migrants as people who have no faces and no names, no identity, no unconscious, no dreams. And what happens to all the violence they've been through? I wanted to give them a name, a face, a shape – and give them a violence of their own.<sup>8</sup>

In Audiard's terms, this final scene in the banlieue gives Dheepan 'a violence of his own,' that is, makes violence that he went through visible. In order to convincingly pursue a refugee's 'own violence,' unlike an average protagonist of an action film, Dheepan emerges with a machete. Where did Dheepan find this machete with which he attacks his surroundings and kills gang members? Would it not be easier for him to acquire a gun considering the equally absurd abundance of guns in this banlieue Audiard imagined? The machete appearance in the banlieue brings the concept of a jungle into the margins of a French city, further stigmatizing French banlieues and their residents always already associated with violence and

---

<sup>8</sup> In Jonathan Romney, 'Jacques Audiard: "I wanted to give migrants a name, a shape... a violence of their own"', *The Guardian*, 3 April 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/apr/03/jacques-audiard-interview-dheepan-prophet-rust-done-director>, accessed 14 January 2016

‘burden[ing] the underprivileged with the stigma of lawlessness’ by equating civil war in the Global South to gang violence in the margins of Global North.<sup>9</sup>

Critics almost unanimously criticized the explosive ending of the film describing it as a ‘rather overblown action sequence.’<sup>10</sup> According to Romney, the director does not remotely prepares its audience for this moment: ‘it’s as if Audiard has jettisoned 20 pages of script to cut to the climax.’<sup>11</sup> Yet, no review noted the strange and utterly misplaced presence of a machete in Dheepan’s hands. Starting from the question of the undisputed presence of a machete in a refugee’s hand, this article explores the norms, spaces, positions and conditions of visibility for non-white refugees and migrants as well as white non-refugee characters in *Dheepan*. Through exploring this recent film that received praise for its humane approach to refugees, we aim to demonstrate number of recurring elements that are often determined by imaginations of race in European film productions that represent the displaced: white Europeans remain as figures of order, authority, norm and agency constructed against non-white refugee and migrant characters who are associated with states of exception and crisis. While rendering racism invisible, the film accomplishes a racialization of refugees through locking these populations within a certain visibility and agency limited to structural and physical violence, a frame that excludes white characters.

Here, Richard Dyer and Sara Ahmed’s work on the representation of whiteness is useful in order to explain the visibility of race and invisibility of racism in the film.

Dyer points out that one of the most crucial developments regarding white identity is

---

<sup>9</sup> Salmon, ‘Why Dheepan’s Take on Immigration Isn’t Helpful’, op cit.

<sup>10</sup> Bradshaw, Peter, “A Crime Drama Packed with Epiphanic Grandeur”, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/apr/07/dheepan-review-jacques-audiard-palme-d-or>. Accessed 24 August 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Romney, Jonathan, “Film of the Week: *Dheepan*”, *Film Comment*, 5 May 2016, <https://www.filmcomment.com/blog/film-week-dheepan/>, accessed 24 August 2018.

‘the attainment of a position of disinterest –abstraction, distance, separation, objectivity –which creates a public sphere that is the mark of civilisation [...] It provides the philosophical underpinning of the conception of white people as everything and nothing.’<sup>12</sup> Whiteness marks itself as racially invisible and hence forming the norm that regulates bodies/the society with the appearance of no vested racial interest. This assumed neutral position inevitably leads to a position of authority. It is not only the powerful position occupied by whites but the invisibility of it (its privileges disguised as norms) that makes deconstruction difficult but necessary for Dyer. Sara Ahmed similarly explains that ‘whiteness as a category of experience that disappears as a category through experience, and [that] this disappearance makes whiteness “worldly”’.<sup>13</sup> Both Dyer and Ahmed refer to whiteness as not necessarily skin colour but as an invisible yet privileged social position and space assumed through that skin colour. As Ahmed points out, spaces acquire the ‘skin’ of the bodies that inhabit them. What is important to note here is that it is not just bodies that are orientated. Spaces also take shape by being orientated around some bodies, more than others.<sup>14</sup> Hence, to notice whiteness is to notice specificities of that experience: what appears ‘normal’/invisible because the characters are white, what appears ‘normal’/invisible because the characters are non-white, as well as how whiteness is situated in relation to non-whiteness and vice versa are important questions to explore.

In the scene of violence described above and in number of other scenes throughout *Dheepan*, whiteness remains the invisible norm (non-violence), while non-whiteness of the displaced is visibly and unquestionably locked into a position

---

<sup>12</sup> Richard Dyer, *White: Essays on Race and Culture*, Routledge, New York, 1997, p 38-39

<sup>13</sup> Sara Ahmed, ‘A Phenomenology of Whiteness’, *Feminist Theory*, vol 8, no 2, 2007, p 150

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, p 157

of inevitable violence, (a hand that holds a machete) and spaces on the margins (the jungle, the refugee camp, the banlieue/ the margins of the city, the darkness of a cellar). Through a close analysis of the representation of the body, the space, the objects and the position of the figures of authority and displacement in *Dheepan*, this paper aims to deconstruct the invisibility of whiteness as a norm and the frames of visibility for refugees and migrants who remain outside this norm. Another kind of representation is only achievable by identifying the problems of the one in circulation. Hence, both the hand that holds and does not hold a machete needs to be made strange and visible.

## Representation of Refugees and Migrants in European Cinema

As the scale of refugee crisis is ever increasing due to the on-going war in Syria—reaching a record number of 67.75 millions of displaced people around the globe in 2016<sup>15</sup>—migrants, refugees and minorities of migrant origin are more than ever associated with crisis and catastrophe in the European media, as victims of human trafficking, suspects of terrorism, or asylum seekers who escaped war-thorn countries (Çelik 2015).<sup>16</sup> For these populations, categories of victim and threat become porous and are often used interchangeably. As November 2015 terror attacks in Paris and the discovery of a Syrian passport on one of the attackers have shown, the discourse on Syrian refugees shifted dramatically from victims of human trafficking or applicants of asylum deserving humanitarian aid to potential terrorists. Similarly, the discussions around March 2016 Brussels bombings, and the arrest of

---

<sup>15</sup> The figure is taken from UN Refugee Agency, see <http://www.unhcr.org/uk/statistical-yearbooks.html>, accessed 15 July 2017

<sup>16</sup> Ipek A. Çelik. *In Permanent Crisis: Ethnicity in Contemporary European Media and Cinema*. Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2015.

perpetrators in Molenbeek neighbourhood, has perpetuated the discussions on banlieues or parts of the city associated with ethnic and racial minorities as hotbeds of social crisis in need of policies to aid its residents or spaces of potential threat that may harbour jihadists. The news items take injury as the basis of political identity of ethnic and racial Others, giving them roles either as perpetrators of, or sufferers from, violence. Their ontology is reduced to 'the wound' that creates a foreclosure of identity to the 'eternal repetition of its pain,'<sup>17</sup> or the wound that they could potentially inflict on others. In both cases, they are racialised as embodiments of crisis and violence.

According to Alana Lentin and Gavan Titley race and racism is rarely discussed in political debates in Europe, and Europe is unable to 'openly engage with race, its roots in modern European political thought, and its pernicious and persistent consequences for individual lives.'<sup>18</sup> Content and discourse analysis of scholarship on sociology of European migration finds that race<sup>19</sup> and racism are rarely issues of debate.<sup>20</sup> Questions of race, racism and racialization of migration regimes are also surprisingly neglected in discussions on ethnicity in Europe. In an article about *Dirty Pretty Things* Sarah Gibson suggests that,

Thatcher defined Britishness against the racialised body of the immigrant in Britain...the body of the asylum seeker or refugee becomes the (un)marked body of strange(r)ness in

---

<sup>17</sup> Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1995, p 76

<sup>18</sup> Alana Lentin and Gavan Titley, *The Crises of Multiculturalism: Racism in a Neoliberal Age*, Zed Books, London, 2011, p 68

<sup>19</sup> El-Tayeb, F. *European Others. Queering Ethnicity in Postnational Europe*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011.

<sup>20</sup> Alana Lentin, 'Postracial Silences: The Othering of Race in Europe', in Wulf D. Hund and Alana Lentin, ed, *Racism and Sociology*, LIT Verlag, Berlin, 2014, pp 69-104



current debates circulating around Britishness. This move from the ‘black’ immigrant to the figure of the asylum seeker mirrors the movement from a racism predicated upon biological difference to a ‘meta-racism’ predicated upon cultural difference, to the current form of ‘xeno-racism’ or ‘asylophobia.’<sup>21</sup>

Gibson describes the body of the asylum seeker as ‘(un)marked body of strange(r)ness.’<sup>22</sup> The use of parenthesis suggests that the asylum seeker or refugee is racialized in multiple ways, by the position and the space he/she occupies along with his/ her body. Such (un)marking can be seen in several, otherwise well-meaning, contemporary films dealing with the sufferings of the displaced non-whites on their way to or in Europe. These films ‘mark’ the body of the displaced through assigning it to a particular position and space within Europe and limiting their existence.

As Yosefa Loshitzsky (2010) points out many European film productions of the 1990s and the 2000s—such as *La promesse* (*The Promise*, Dardenne Brothers, 1996), *Lilya 4-Ever* (Moodysson, 2002), *Dirty Pretty Things* (Frears, 2002) and later *Welcome* (Loiret, 2009), *Biutiful* (Iñárritu, 2010), *Terraferma* (Criales, 2011), and *La fille inconnue* (*The Unknown Girl*, Dardenne Brothers, 2016)—focus either on dangerous and arduous journeys to Europe or racism and economic exploitation experienced in Europe.<sup>23</sup> These films have been screened in prestigious film

---

<sup>21</sup> Sarah Gibson, ‘Border Politics and Hospitable Spaces in Stephen Frears’s *Dirty Pretty Things*’, *Third Text*, vol 20, no 6, 2006, p 697

<sup>22</sup> This is perhaps most visible in Donald Trump’s executive order to ban Muslims to temporarily enter the United States of America, as well as the rising anti-immigration rhetoric in Europe, now with very visible outcomes such as Brexit.

<sup>23</sup> Yosefa Loshitzsky, *Screening Strangers: Migration and Diaspora in Contemporary European Cinema*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2010. These topics could also be merged together as in the example of *Mediterranea* (Carpignano, 2015), a film that follows two migrants from Burkina Faso during their arduous journey through Algeria, portraying the economic exploitation and racism they face in Italy. What is different from other films is that *Mediterranea* makes an effort to show

festivals and respond to the backdrop of increasing humanitarian crisis concerning people seeking a new life or refuge in Europe. They are, however, inevitably products of the manner of representation that associates the non-white displaced with positions and spaces of violence and crisis. In many of these narratives, the migrants have no identity outside of being migrants, the space in which they inhabit is always borrowed, and therefore it cannot be imagined to be shaped by them. Their representation is limited to that one aspect of their identity: being a migrant seeking refuge in Europe.

*Terraferma*, for instance, a film that received sponsorship by the United Nations Refugee Council and was selected to represent Italy for the Foreign Film category at the 2011 Academy Awards, takes place in the island of Linosa, and shows a fisherman family first saving and then hosting an unnamed pregnant single mother and her child from an unnamed African country. *Terraferma* ironically marks the difference between Italian tourists and (solely African) refugees by the contrast between the former entertaining themselves with loud music in a cruising boat and the latter desperately waiting to be saved in a silent immobile boat. This irony, however, loses value through constant repetition. While Italians have romantic boat tours at night, faceless, dark, and threatening multitudes of refugees rush swimming towards these boats threatening to inundate them. The refugee guest hiding at the main characters' home appear grateful despite a cold welcome, always standing in a bent position, hidden in darkness, shot in narrow and claustrophobic camera angles, and tell narratives of sexual violence she suffered through her arduous journey. Her Italian hosts in the foreground, on the other hand, go through dilemmas about aiding

---

migrant activism against racism. The representation of his activism too has problems though as it is seen as a violent outburst rather than an organised movement.

her and her family as the active decision makers. The film shows refugees as innocent sufferers in a state of passivity.

In Dardenne Brothers' latest film *La fille inconnue*, nominated to Palme d'Or at Cannes, the titular unknown girl, who is a non-white clandestine migrant sex worker, does not even have a voice or, until the end of the film, a name. Throughout the film she only appears alive in a surveillance camera image, seen as frantically running away from an unseen source of violence. In fear, 'the unknown girl' rings the bell of a medical facility. Jenny, the white doctor who owns the clinic refuses to open the door as it is after her working hours. The migrant is murdered and Jenny realizes that if she had opened the door she could have prevented the murder. To relieve her conscience of this guilt she turns into a detective searching for the identity and murderer of this 'unknown girl.' As opposed to *La Promesse*, another Dardenne brothers' film that involves the death of a clandestine migrant, in *La fille inconnue* the victim and her family are marginal to the narrative. While the title and the object of search is the non-white clandestine migrant, the character central to the film, whose movements and emotions the camera tracks, is a white medical doctor/detective, the bearer of guilt, the (double) figure of authority who sets out to give back the migrant her name/ humanity.

*La fille inconnue* is not the only film in which the focus is on the sentiments and dilemmas of the white main characters who bear the guilt of refugee deaths rather than on the thoughts and desires of non-white refugees for who often stay in darkness, remain voicelessness and often die by suffocation. In Damjan Kozole's *Spare Parts* (2003), a film that explores the lives of human traffickers, one of the most memorable scenes is when three refugees are forced into the darkness of a car's trunk, where they suffocate. In Alejandro González Iñárritu's *Beautiful* (2010)

undocumented Chinese workers at a sweatshop in Barcelona die in a windowless room from carbon monoxide poisoning caused by the cheap heater that the white protagonist purchased.

One of the first European films with refugee main characters, Michael Winterbottom's *In This World* (2002), also relies on the trope of suffocation. The film, which won the Golden Bear at Berlin Film Festival along with BAFTA award, starts at Shamshatoo refugee camp in Pakistan, chronicling the journey of two Afghan refugees. *In This World*, begins with a voiceover explaining the history of the camp and the condition of Afghan refugees providing detailed statistics, then quickly moves on to tracing the journey of two refugees, transitioning from a documentary to a narrative film that traces the story of two refugees among the thousands. Through the film Jamal and his cousin Enayat are followed closely in their journey through Iran, Turkey and Italy, crossing borders at night, hiding in dark cellars and trunks. In the end Enayat dies of suffocation in a container while Jamal goes to London to work as a dishwasher in the darkness of a small kitchen.

'Dark' bodies' association with darkness does not only connote clandestine. Richard Dyer argues that, light and darkness participate in the production of cultural knowledge, particular in photography and film, by operating within these two poles: 'there are the opaque non-white subject and the pellucid white subject, but in between the technology permits the reproduction of whiteness as a differentiated and hierarchized structure' (Dyer, 130). The 'opaque non-white' body, achieved predominantly by a specific use of light, is reproducing the assumption how white race became the 'pure race' and non-white become 'seen as degenerative, falling away from the true nature of the human race' (Dyer, 24). Hence, knowing these cultural codes, the visual language of Western art, it is often expected for darker skin

colors to appear even darker, disappear into the darkness and have their mysterious, unknown qualities elevated. Dyer notes that with perspective, bourgeois, Western, white world begins to move towards ‘an emphasis on seeing as the epistemic sense *par excellence*’ (103). Inevitably, equating seeing with knowledge is also equating it with power (104) and ‘such a stress on sight poses a problem in relation to that which cannot be seen’ (104).

All the films mentioned above, just like *Dheepan*, make reference to and undo the invisibility of violence that refugees and migrants go through. It needs to be said that our aim is not to devalue attempts of representing hardships of being displaced, escaping war, chasing a better life in a foreign land. Nor is it a question of whether or not to represent the violation of human rights and indignity people suffer and escape from. The question we are posing here concerns the space, the point of view, and the style in which these stories are told. This is necessary in order to better understand and expose the mechanisms in which the image and position of whiteness work, ‘even when the text itself is not trying to show it to you, doesn’t even know that it is there to be shown’.<sup>24</sup>

## *Dheepan*, Bodies, Objects and Spaces of the Displaced and the Non-Displaced

*Dheepan* predominantly consists of non-white characters, played by non-white actors. How then, it might be asked, is it possible to talk about whiteness as the invisible force shaping the perspective we have on the characters in this film? How is it possible to argue for the whiteness of a text when majority of the characters are

---

<sup>24</sup> Dyer, *White*, op cit, p 14

non-white? Sara Ahmed points out that whiteness is ‘not simply a matter of how many bodies are ‘in’. Rather, what is repeated is a very style of embodiment, a way of inhabiting space, which claims space by the accumulation of gestures of ‘sinking’ into that space.’<sup>25</sup> Therefore, shifting the perspective from numbers to embodiment, objects and space, the question we will be exploring is that of positioning, i.e. how displaced and non-displaced bodies are positioned, and what an expected experience for a displaced and non-displaced person is.

Early in the film, Dheepan is first shown in the streets of Paris at night. In this sequence a distant light slowly becomes Dheepan himself, wearing the gadget, neon headband, he is trying to sell to Parisians who are out socializing in cafés and restaurants. The image is poetic as it simultaneously ‘sees’ a human being while showing his invisibility to others as a human being. The sequence unequivocally places Dheepan into number of contexts: his humanity, the displaced nature of his body and the fine line he has to walk between visibility and invisibility. After this image, the title of the film appears, soon to be followed by a police chase. What is interesting in this scene and through the rest of the film is that the police are completely invisible. In this particular street scene, their invisibility makes them more powerful as they chase the illegal migrants who sell cheap toys and gadgets on the street. The scene also reminds us of the moments in which migrants become visible to authorities. However, it also reproduces the dilemma by seeing Dheepan in and through situations of violence and crisis.

Although the police are invisible, the spectator is briefly introduced to officers occupying other state institutions and representing authority that Dheepan and his

---

<sup>25</sup> Ahmed, ‘A Phenomenology of Whiteness,’ op cit, p 159

family interact with, at the immigration and the public school system. As Dyer suggests, part of the power of whiteness comes from assuming and occupying an invisible state while embodying, representing and maintaining its position of norm through established ideas about that norm. Most white characters in *Dheepan* are adjacent to the story, and the film does not develop these characters, yet they are in the background as authorities while a context of general crisis associated with Dheepan, his family and the predominantly non-white population of the banlieue unfolds in the foreground.<sup>26</sup> The marginal white characters in Dheepan are schoolteachers and immigration officers associated with integration into the system in which there seems to be no space for racial and ethnic minorities. Therefore, even though they are not sufficiently developed, most of the white characters represent the French state apparatus and are equated with 'the norm', with non-crisis.

How is this background 'norm' visually enforced? Early in the film Dheepan is shown in a room with an immigration officer who is assessing his case. With the help of an interpreter Dheepan tells a story of being a journalist in Sri Lanka known for his work to support peace but had to flee, fearing prosecution by the government. The interpreter, who seems to be better at claiming the space they are occupying, changes the story. He explains Dheepan to tell the officer that he has been caught and tortured by the government. Even this more gruesome story meets a disinterested response by the officer: 'OK, very good!' The scene gives us a glimpse of the certain boxes Dheepan has to tick in order to stay in France, that there is a certain expected performance of refuge-ness, that of passive victimhood rather than that of activism.

---

<sup>26</sup> While it is true that one of the major characters and perpetrators of crisis in the banlieue is the gang leader Brahim, yet another character with authority played by a white actor, he is marked as a minority through his Arabic name.

While a critique of the French bureaucratic apparatus is hinted in the verbal exchange, visually the director creates an unequal relation between the characters. In scenes which refugee characters interact with authorities —this one and the dialogue with the schoolteacher in which Illayaal describes how her school was burned down by the government which suggests a savage third world state put in relation to the relatively seamlessly functioning French state—the preferred method of narration is shot-reverse shot. This method places the refugees and the French state officers in separate visual realms, in different time frames, different frames of mind, and different spaces. Separate frames may highlight the forced isolation of the displaced, bringing his/her displacement to the fore, yet it also forces on him/her an additional isolation done by the camera's gaze. To place Dheepan and his family in separate frames, situates them outside of the norm, from which the rest, those who are not within their reach, seems to be operating. Framing imposed by (white) state institutions match the framing of the camera.

When framing Dheepan and his family interacting with each other, Audiard's use of space depicts the balance and the shift of balance within that space, creating a communal space/ frame that puts them together, paying attention to their growing intimacy. Audiard shows remarkable sensibility when depicting Dheepan, Illayaal and Yalini interacting with each other and with other non-whites in warm and sometimes colourful social contexts, as in the picnic scene where Sri Lankan community meets. Anchored white bodies and their safe positions within state institutions are, however, framed separately from the vulnerability of the displaced body. It is possible to argue that, since the film is representing displaced bodies, it inevitably exposes feelings of not being at home and not being accepted. Yet, the problem is about what home/ France means in this film. In *Dheepan* home/France is



either a white space of bureaucracy detached from the refugee's daily life and requires integration, or a non-white minority space of gang violence that needs to be confronted with constant struggle for survival.

Faced with this schizophrenic 'home,' Dheepan is portrayed as a character whose only desire, it seems, is to settle in France, integrate and survive, with no other dream or desire for his future. This also applies to his wife Yalini, although in her case the desire is to settle in England. Beyond that, we do not know much about them, except for the history of violence they escaped from. The characters, in this sense, have no agency except having 'a violence of their own.' Instances that Dheepan shows agency are when he decides to cease being a Tamil fighter and when he saves Yalini from gang fight. The agency he shows is the one through rejecting or embracing violence, the film seems to assert, albeit making sure to show this is a result of traumatic memories triggered and the refugee's body taking up residence in these memories in a survival mode.

In the scene where Dheepan saves Yalini from a gang fight his weapon of choice is machete, the use of which is not random. In fact its appearance echoes a certain way of imagining non-white violence, particularly civil wars in the Global South. For European audiences machete recalls tribal violence, especially present in discussions on the brutality of Rwandan Genocide. In his analysis of the media representations of Rwandan Genocide Tendai Chari notes that,

'Primitive' weapons such as 'machete', 'clubs', 'axes', 'stones', 'spears', 'hatchets', 'hoes', and 'bows and arrows' are repeatedly listed in the *New York Times* in order to buttresses the image of backwardness and irrationality of the conflict.<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> Tendai Chari, 'Representation or Misrepresentation? *The New York Times*'s Framing of the 1994 Rwanda Genocide', *African Identities*, vol 8, no 4, 2010, p 339

According to Chari, another problem ingrained in the repeated lists of ‘tribal’ and ‘primitive’ weapons in relation to Rwandan Genocide is the invisibility it instigates around the Western contribution to violence and ‘such discourse also ignores the fact that in the previous decades the Rwandan government had been a recipient of sophisticated weapons from countries like France, Belgium and apartheid South Africa.’<sup>28</sup> Hence, a machete, an agricultural instrument, in the hands of a French places Dheepan in a backward, non-white, primitive, non-Western position, marking his unbelonging in France.

As well as the presence of the machete, the absence of security forces, and the uninhibited use of guns in the main shooting location, in a banlieue recall lawlessness, lack of order, crisis and a space outside civilization within France. Sylvie Tissot describes how as of the 1990s ‘a new lexical regime’ appeared associating social problems with banlieues described as ‘quartiers difficiles’ or ‘quartiers sensibles.’<sup>29</sup> These spatial categories are used to talk about social problems such as poverty that are invisibly associated with non-white populations in France. Tissot’s research on discourse in French media shows that in articles about banlieues racism is rendered unspoken and invisible as it is transposed into an urban social problem limited to certain zones that are also equated with the presence of minorities framed as communities who create problems rather than those who face problems. The use of banlieues became ‘a euphemism to designate populations defined by ethnic background’, and this spatial language obscures what is essentially

---

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p 339

<sup>29</sup> Sylvie Tissot, ‘*Banlieues* as a Social Problem: Changing Discourse on Space, Class, and Race in France, 1985-1995’ in David Hornsby, ed, *Language and Social Structure in Urban France*, Legenda/Routledge, New York, 2013, p 111

a discussion on race.<sup>30</sup> Hence, discourse on banlieues as crisis zones both racialises poverty and territorializes implied racial categories.

In *Dheepan* the main characters travel into the *banlieue*, ironically named Le Pré (the field), in the night. The darkness and the shabbiness of the train they use foreshadow the negative experience that they will soon live through in their new home. After the train journey they take a long walk towards the banlieue depicted as a detached area literally placed in the fields suggesting lack of proper public transportation to access this underprivileged zone. Once the main characters arrive Le Pré, the camera shoots apartment buildings from behind trees, shooting angles and images reminding of earlier scenes in Sri Lanka, forming a visual link between the refugees place of origin in the Global South with the margins of the city in France.

## Conditions of Production and Reception

The depiction of Le Pré, *Dheepan*'s imaginary banlieue, contrasts the peaceful, ethnically diverse La Coudraie, Poissy where the film was shot. In total 101 residents were involved with *Dheepan*'s shooting, working in jobs ranging from being extras to helping with the casting and décor.<sup>31</sup> One of the residents proudly states that even the director stayed in the banlieue during the shooting while another resident who was an extra in the film explains: 'I thought this would be a Mad Max-like action film! There hasn't been a single gunshot in this neighbourhood since 20 years.'<sup>32</sup> In her article in *Les Inrocktibles* about the production of the film Fanny

---

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, p 112

<sup>31</sup> Fanny Marlier, 'Comment Audiard a transformé une cité paisible en zone de guerre pour "Dheepan"', *Les Inrocktibles*, 28 August 2015, <http://www.lesinrocks.com/2015/08/28/actualite/comment-audiard-a-transforme-une-cite-paisible-en-zone-de-guerre-pour-dheepan-11770001/>, accessed 2 September 2016

<sup>32</sup> In Ibid.

Marlier points out the irony of how ‘Audiard transformed a peaceful *cit * into a war zone for *Dheepan*’ and how residents and the mayor of the banlieue were disturbed by the misrepresentation of their neighbourhood as being a crisis zone, an image that reproduces a stereotype.<sup>33</sup>

Besides exploring the representation of characters and spaces in the text, analysing the conditions of production and reception could give a wider sense of the invisible positions of whiteness and spaces of authority that surrounds the film. The press conference at the festival of Cannes visibly and aurally established the ownership and the right to comment on the film. At the press conference the non-French cast whose speeches are translated through an onstage translator are relatively silent in contrast to the French director and screenwriter. While the director has an immediate rapport with the audience, the cast has intermediaries. The first question Audiard was asked during the press conference was about the reason behind the violence that Dheepan and his family are faced with after having left behind a violent conflict in Sri Lanka. Audiard maintains that he ‘didn’t want to make a documentary on the civil war in Sri Lanka, or a documentary on the banlieue, but to view these events and situations as a form of wallpaper that is part of the set without you actually having to describe it’.<sup>34</sup> He, then, adds that *Dheepan* is a love story and a work of fiction. This declaration creates an eerie image, since later we hear that part of the film was based on the main actor (on stage with Audiard) Jesuthasan Anthonythasan’s experiences of the Sri Lankan civil war. In some interviews such as this one, Audiard skilfully ignores the political nature of the topic

---

<sup>33</sup> Ibid

<sup>34</sup> ‘Press Conference: Cannes Film Festival’, 21 May 2015, see at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-d5DZU7tUz8>, accessed 12 July 2016.

he chose to deal with. In others, such as in an interview with *Financial Times*,<sup>35</sup> Audiard states the opposite, ‘The refugees are here, so why will they not be our heroes?’ While the statement reiterates the invisible and unattainable gap between ‘us’ and the refugees, it does accept the film’s social relevance as a response to refugee crisis, for which the critics praise the film. A review that appeared in *Le Figaro* tells that, ‘*Dheepan*, Jacques Audiard’s last film was in the theatres when the emotional tsunami was triggered by Aylan Kurdi’s image was still fresh. The drama of migrants became a unique reality: the last Palme d’Or of the Cannes festival highlights it in a glaring way.’<sup>36</sup> The director’s comment rejects the specificities of the Sri Lankan context that appear in the film, *Le Figaro* review associates *Dheepan* with the tragedy faced by a Syrian migrant. Therefore, critical reception ends up collapsing Sri Lanka with Syria and gives the sense of an overall singular non-Western violence that the refugees and migrants strive to escape.

According to Kaleem Aftab’s review for *The Independent*, on the other hand, *Dheepan* is more political than its director likes to imagine,

The decision from the Cannes film festival jury jointly presided over by the Coen Brothers to award the unfancied outsider the top prize was met with boos. Cameron Bailey, the black Artistic Director of the Toronto Film Festival, suggested in a tweet that the colour of the protagonist might have been a factor in the failure of many critics to recognise the brilliance of the film. He [Bailey] wrote: ‘*Dheepan* hit me hardest at #Cannes but it left others cold. Partly a question of how and where we identify at the movies.’<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> Danny Leigh, ‘Interview: Jacques Audiard’, *Financial Times*, 1 April 2016, <https://www.ft.com/content/f72973ea-f657-11e5-96db-fc683b5e52db>, accessed 26 June 2017.

<sup>36</sup> Alexandre Devecchio, ‘*Dheepan*: Audiard, la France et la crise des migrants’, *Le Figaro*, 15 September 2015, <http://www.lefigaro.fr/vox/societe/2015/09/15/31003-20150915ARTFIG00255--dheepan-audiard-la-france-et-la-crise-des-migrants.php>, accessed 14 June 2016

<sup>37</sup> Kaleem Aftab, ‘*Dheepan*, Film Review: Palme d’Or Prize Goes to Radical and Astonishing Film That Turns Conventional Thinking About Immigrants on Its Head’, *The Independent*, 24 May 2015, accessed 14 June 2016.

These few sentences are good examples of the rhetorical problem surrounding the film's reception. The artistic director of Toronto Film Festival, Cameron Bailey's racial identity is irrelevant, other than lending him credibility compared to a white critic. But also, there is an assumption that Bailey is speaking for non-whites, unlike Coen brothers, who are mentioned in the same paragraph, with no reference to their whiteness. The framing of the review shows how whiteness assumes its authority with its invisibility, being the assumed norm. When no reference is made to race, it is safe to assume that the person in question is white. Although Aftab points out that white audiences tend not to associate themselves with non-white protagonists, the rhetoric reproduces what it attempts to make visible: the assumed authority of whiteness. As Dyer writes, 'the sense of whites as non-raced is most evident in the absence of reference to whiteness in the habitual speech and writing of white people in the West'.<sup>38</sup>

In both *Figaro* and *Independent* reviews the director takes/or is given the role of a humanitarian activist out to represent ethnic and racial Other's underrepresented stories and give the faceless crowds a face. Aftab writes that the film 'turns conventional thinking about immigrants on its head, and takes a faceless immigrant coming from a war barely covered in the media and turns him into a Travis Bickle-type anti-hero.'<sup>39</sup>

To compare Dheepan's character to Travis Bickle is a stretch as Bickle claims a responsibility to change the 'immoral' system to 'moral' defined within his own understanding. Dheepan, as opposed to Bickle, never displays the same kind of assumed authority over his surroundings. The conventional thinking—shaped by the

---

<sup>38</sup> Dyer, *White*, op cit, p 2.

<sup>39</sup> Kaleem Aftab, 'Dheepan, Film Review: Palme d'Or Prize Goes to Radical and Astonishing Film That Turns Conventional Thinking About Immigrants on Its Head', *The Independent*, 24 May 2015, accessed 14 June 2016.

representation of immigrants and refugees everyday on media as bodies drowning, dying, escaping, illegally crossing borders, as bodies with no real background, no real face and emotions—inevitably has an impact on the main character's representation in the film and the film's reception. Unless the mechanisms of the initial 'taking away' is analysed, and acknowledged, 'giving face' will remain as a kind act, a gift, or an assumption of moral high ground. As anthropologist Laura María Agustín insists in her work on migrant sex workers in Europe, 'the victim identity imposed on so many [migrants] in the name of helping them makes helpers themselves disturbingly important figures'.<sup>40</sup>

## Conclusion

In films such as *Dheepan*, *Terraferma* and *The Unknown Girl* the non-white migrant and refugees seem to be defined by the sole desire of reaching to and surviving in Europe. Both on the way towards their destination and in Europe they are displayed in spaces of darkness, vulnerability, and crisis, while white European characters and directors become humanitarian activist and authority figures. In some cases, the displaced characters are silent (*Terraferma*, *La fille inconnue*), in others they speak out, act and react against the structural or physical violence that surrounds them (*Dheepan*, *Welcome*, *In This World*). Yet, despite their rebellion they almost always remain outside and separate from positions of authority and comfort, residing in marginal spaces within the city, in the dark corners of a room, in the kitchens of restaurants, imprisoned in refugee centres, bodily situated in positions that distinguish them from the European and often in narratives that refuses the idea of a refugee with an agency outside violent acts. The representation of refugees and

---

<sup>40</sup> Laura María Agustín, *Sex at the Margins: Migration, Labour Markets and the Rescue Industry*, Zed Books, London, 2007, 8.

migrants in European cinema often reproduces the existing rhetoric even when their aim is to highlight the existing crisis. In these films crisis is produced and performed by the displaced body, and not necessarily as a result of its rejection. 'Whiteness is an orientation that puts certain things within reach' which in turn, turns race into a question of 'what is within reach, what is available to perceive and to do "things" with'.<sup>41</sup> *Dheepan* is not only limited in its representation with regards to things that are within the title character's reach but also in how he is perceived. There is a cap on the way the film imagines what can happen to Dheepan, and the cap is directly related to the question of race. The possibility of Dheepan occupying a different zone, outside the zone of crisis, seems to be perceived as a dream that can only be attained outside of France. In the final scene in London, Dheepan and his family are pictured in a social gathering in their middle class suburban home, a life 'normalized' further through the existence of a few white characters in the scene. The white-infused lighting of the scene however suggests that this is only an impossible dream. The tough reality is the violent finale in the banlieue where Dheepan appears with a machete that appeared out of nowhere, likely to be licensed by his 'tribal' body.

The scene with machete gives him the only agency he is imagined to claim. Within the overwhelming circulation of images of violence and crisis can cinema imagine alternative lives for refugees and migrants? There is a possibility of another kind of image for the refugee/ migrant, one that we would like to briefly look at by way of concluding the discussion. Pedro Costa's docudrama *Juventude Em Marcha* (*Colossal Youth*, 2006) has a migrant, the Cape Verdean Ventura, as its main character living in the outskirts of Lisbon. The film shows Ventura moving between

---

<sup>41</sup> Ahmed, 'A Phenomenology of Whiteness', op cit, p 154



the slum area and housing projects all day having long conversations with his friends and family. In Costa's film Ventura has agency and is unapologetic about it. In a scene where a social worker shows him free housing offered by the government, Ventura appears unimpressed even though the house looks decent. He tells the social worker that he demands more space. The scene is devised to show that the gratitude cannot be reserved only for migrants and refugees. The film also includes a brief scene with Ventura holding a machete, which, similar to the scene in *Dheepan*, also appears out of nowhere. It is unclear where the machete came from or why Ventura suddenly appears with it in his hands. The scene and the machete, particularly because it is not used for any purpose other than reminding the audience of the frequency of such racialised image, appear out of place. Yet, in that awkwardness, Costa manages to make the link between 'savage' and 'migrant' visible and uncomfortable. Ventura appearing with a machete in *Juventude Em Marcha* makes the gaze of the spectator visible and strange simultaneously, turning the moment into an allegorical moment. We end this article with a hope for similarly allegorical film moments, for the visibility of refugees and migrants as fictional characters with desires and identities other than those fixated on wounds and injuries, a visibility that allows refugees room outside a frame of violence and crisis.