



The Cinema of Irregular Migration and the Question of Space: France, Italy and Spain¹

Verena Berger, Wien & Daniel Winkler, Innsbruck

In the last decades many artists, writers and filmmakers have dealt with Europe's frontiers as well as with its security and migration politics. Similar to the USA where border crossing and border reality lived daily by migrants is a recurrent artistic theme, the subject of (irregular) migration² also has become particularly interesting in Europe, especially within the domain of filmmaking. An increasing number of cinematic representations deal with the question of the appropriation of space by and the visibility of migrants without 'legal' status. In spite of living without any legal rights, their existence is nevertheless determined by a vital human need for recognition in order to change their status from illegality to legality, hence also from invisibility to visibility. Although irregular migrants are 'visible' by being present in TV news, media and sometimes spectacular, publicity-mongering reports, as well as by being identifiable as foreigners according to the 'politics of recognition', they nevertheless lack social recognition as they are turned into the socially and institutionally 'unseen' and excluded (Taylor 1994: 25).

As film itself is a visual art dominated by the power of moving images, we argue that filmmakers are aiming at the representation of the socially 'unseen' but mobile irregular migrants in order to address the issue of their presence in Europe and make their fictionalized stories accessible to the public. This can be seen in the marginalisation and illegal work in a factory like that shown in Montxo Armendáriz's *LAS CARTAS DE ALOU* (1990), the life of irregulars in peripheral urban areas in Rabah Ameur-Zaïmèche's *WESH, WESH, QU'EST-CE QUI CE PASSE?* (2002) or hiding from authority in rural areas. Spanish and Italian filmmakers, as well as some French (migrant) filmmakers, concentrate on the daily life of 'socially and institutionally unseen' irregular migrants in order to visualise their presence in

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² Since they have less stigmatizing and more neutral connotations, we use the terms 'irregular' and 'undocumented' instead of 'illegal' migration.

‘Fortress Europe’. As this term is strongly linked to the concept of ‘territory’ and the ‘geopolitical discourse [of] the division of space into ‘our’ place and ‘their’ place’ (Dalby 1991: 274), the cinematic representation of unauthorized migrants is also connected to the locations with which they are predominantly associated: marginal and peripheral sectors of rural and urban areas or less regulated zones of cities where irregular migrants can disappear in crowds or hide out in buildings in order to avoid being discovered.

On the basis of seven selected fiction films that have the topic of irregular migration in France, Italy and Spain as a central question, our emphasis is placed especially on film productions dealing with undocumented migrants from the Maghreb, Sub-Saharan African countries and Eastern Europe: Abdellatif Kechiche’s *FAUTE À VOLTAIRE* (2000), Rabah Ameur-Zaimèche’s *WESH, WESH, QU’EST-CE QUI CE PASSE?* (2002), Michele Placido’s *PUMMARÓ* (1989), Marco Tullio Giordana’s *QUANDO SEI NATO NON PUOI PIÙ NASCONDERTI* (2005), Montxo Armendáriz’s *LAS CARTAS DE ALOU* (1990), Imanol Uribe’s *BWANA* (1996) and Llorenç Soler’s *SAÏD* (1998). The corpus addresses the special issue of filmic representations of irregular migrants in ‘social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power’ (Pratt 1997: 63).

In order to account for the different filmic treatment of the visual representations of space in these films, the contrast drawn by David Clarke between what he calls the ‘visuality’ and ‘hapticality’ of the film medium is relevant. As maintained by Clarke, ‘visuality’ refers to the capacity of film to depict space as it is experienced by the itinerant, mobile body (Clarke 1997: 8-9). Thus, for an analysis of filmic representation of irregular migrants in spatial categories as well as their ideological attributes, five categories will be predominantly considered: *Non-lieux* as transitory ‘public spaces’, ‘public spaces’ of economic sustenance, ‘private spaces’ of intimacy, ‘beautiful places’ as an inversion of classical tourist images and the Mediterranean Sea as a rather absent zone of contact and conflict.

Seven Motion Pictures from France, Italy and Spain

Films on the subject of irregular migration in contemporary French cinema follow the traditions of migrant cinema: as well as movies dealing with migration within Europe, the corpus of early *Beur* and *Banlieue* filmmaking which marked the blossoming of the post-colonial ethnicities in French cinema took up the subject. Since the 1960ies (e. g. Ali Ghalem) respectively 80ies (e. g. Mehdi Charef, Francis Girod) filmmaker focus on the life of the ‘second generation’ in France, but also on (re)migration between France and its former colonies in Northern (and Sub-Saharan) Africa (Tarr 2005: 27-31).

Relating to our corpus *FAUTE À VOLTAIRE* is Kechiche’s first film, focusing on Jallel, a young Tunisian man who is trying to establish a ‘regular’ life in order to get a visa as a political refugee by pretending to be an Algerian. The space of action is mainly reduced to popular districts of Paris like Barbès and Belleville where he gets in contact with Arab commu-

nities and begins a relationship with Nassera. The end of the film shows a rather disillusioned protagonist who will be deported from France by airplane. *WESH, WESH*, by contrast, is an example of a more marginal debut film production, illustrating the issue of irregular migrants in the context of suburban Paris (Seine-Saint-Denis). Unlike Kechiche's film, it is shot in an amateur-style with non-professional actors and members of Ameur-Zaïmèche's family. Kamel, the protagonist played by the director of the film, is expelled from France for two years after having been in prison because of his irregularity. Nevertheless, he returns to Paris and tries to start a new life.

Migration from Northern and Sub-Saharan Africa, but also from Eastern Europe and Latin America, has been given increasing attention in Spanish film productions, but only since the early 1990s. In contrast to French cinema, however, these films have not been shot by directors with a migrant background. With the exception of some documentary filmmakers (as the Egyptian Basel Ramsis and the Argentinean Ana Torres), Spanish migrant cinema is made by established filmmakers like Armendáriz, Uribe and Soler. The films of these three artists are prototypical for the recent Spanish *cinéma engagé*: they depict irregular migration in rural and urban environments, but at the same time many directors also develop intertwined love stories, being therefore typical of a mix of genres within the new social cinema (Santaolalla 2005: 136).

The Senegalese main character of Armendáriz' letter-film *LAS CARTAS DE ALOU* enters Spain 'illegally' by boat. Once in Spain, Alou tries his luck as a seasonal farm hand at vegetable plantations in Almeria, with street trade in Madrid and fruit harvesting in Segria, a village in Catalonia where he establishes a relationship with Carmen before being deported after a police control. Llorenç Soler's docudrama *SAÍD* is set in the urban milieu of Barcelona. The young Moroccan Saíd settles in the socially marginalized *RAVAL* quarter where he comes into contact with racist prejudices and legal impediments affecting irregular migrants. Like the main character of *LAS CARTAS DE ALOU*, Saíd falls in love with a local girl, Ana, who will help the foreigners to denounce xenophobe attacks by skinheads, leading to the death of Saíd's friend Ahmed. Imanol Uribe's film *BWANA* portrays the encounter between a stereotypical Spanish family spending a day at the seaside and the Black African Ombasi who is stranded upon the beach after an accident that has left his traveling companion Yambo dead. When a group of three skinheads arrives, the situation escalates: the scared Spaniards drive away, leaving the African threatened and chased by the racists through the sand-dunes.

Similarly, Italian movies dealing with irregular migration are (with the exception of Rachid Benhadj) mostly made by filmmakers without a transnational background. However, the total number of films that primarily treat irregular migration as a central theme is in the 1990ies lower than in Spanish cinema (Wood 2003: 99-103). One of the first movies focusing on the subject is Michele Placido's *PUMMARÓ* (1989), addressing the search of the protagonist Kwaku for his brother. Giobbe migrated before him from Ghana to Southern Italy

in order to earn money for his brother's studies. Between Southern Italy, Rome and Verona Kwaku follows the travel route of his brother and must face several different forms of exploitation and marginalisation. Finally he arrives in Frankfurt and is confronted with the death of Giobbe. Furthermore, the depicted context of migration differs from that of France and Spain in so far that Italian films focus predominantly on the immigrants from Eastern Europe and often in a more marginal way (Wood 2003: 101-105). A recent example is *QUANDO SEI NATO*, which outlines the travels of the young Radu and Alina from Romania to Apulia in the style of melodrama. The protagonists are received by a fairly well-off family living in Brescia before they escape to Milan and are faced with an insecure future.

Non-Lieux as Transitory Spaces

Firstly, the public spaces described by Michel de Certeau as transnational spaces created by the act of border crossing and regarded as 'transitory spaces' (de Certeau 1988: 97) must be considered. Marc Augé calls these locations *Non-Lieux* and defines them not only as transitory spaces but also as 'urban concentrations, transfers of population, installations of accelerated circulation of people and goods (expressways, airports), the means of transport themselves, shopping centres or the camps of prolonged transit where the refugees of planet are parked' (Augé 1992: 48).

As migrant cinema usually uses journeys and journeying as key features, it is therefore not surprising that most filmmakers focus on harbours, train stations, airports or transfer ports when opening or closing their films. In this sense, they intertwine themes of home and travel, placement and displacement as well as the necessity of a physical occupation of space. Thus when irregular migrants are turned into protagonists, the cinematographic use of *Non-Lieux* is usually a metaphor for their social status of placelessness: they no longer belong anywhere. In this sense, the filmic *Non-Lieux* contributes to unmask the reality of their social status as a lack of rights.

Liminal border spaces like harbours, train stations or airports as fixed transitory spaces not only represent the longing to escape from the living conditions in the country of origin, but also the possibility of a new life in Europe: as in many other films dealing with the issue of irregular migration, the first sequences of *LAS CARTAS DE ALOU* and *QUANDO SEI NATO* show the main characters arriving with other migrants under cover of darkness on the coasts of Spain and Italy. *LAS CARTAS DE ALOU* closes with a depiction of Alou trying to undertake another trip with a small boat in order to re-enter Europe after his deportation. The claustrophobic connotation of border crossing is lightened by the illusion of change and the insistence of the main character that he will be able to overcome this placelessness. In contrast, in *QUANDO SEI NATO* the sea does not appear again in the film after the landing of the boat. At the end of the film, Alina and Radu leave Brescia for Milan, having sto-

len some valuables from their hosts. The last static images focus on a street crossing and a bus station in a peripheral area of the city.

Most French, Italian and Spanish films dealing with irregular migration in metropolitan areas concentrate on locations like bus or underground stations, airports, boats, squares, tunnels or parks. Arrests by the police in a railway station, detentions in police stations and deportations by ship or airplane due to the irregular status of migrants are typical filmic examples that evoke the implicit danger of *Non-Lieux* as transitory public spaces (LAS CARTAS DE ALOU, FAUTE À VOLTAIRE). As these transitory spaces do not offer a long-term solution, they are usually used by filmmakers to highlight the migrants trying to pursue their irregular means of earning like the protagonists in LAS CARTAS DE ALOU or FAUTE À VOLTAIRE doing illegal street trading.

Being the sites of the struggle to survive these areas also stand for the danger and fear of being discovered as an irregular migrant that has to maintain the invisibility in order to not be arrested and deported, but needs to be seen in order to survive: for the Moroccan main characters in Soler's film SAÏD as well as in Placido's PUMMARÓ the streets of Barcelona and Verona turn into zones where they are chased by police or by racist groups whose aggressive attacks definitively leave both physical and psychological scars. *Non-Lieux* turn into cross-over points where clandestinity in the sense of sociological invisibility interferes with the filmic visualisation of the tension that represent transitory spaces. They become thus a symbol for the instable and unprotected existence of the protagonists.

Economic Sustenance and Private Intimacy

Besides *Non-lieux* as transitory spaces, the selected films also focus on irregular migrants' work and living spaces. While these are areas that provide migrants with a certain privacy and therefore stability, at the same time they primarily represent precariousness, illicit work and short-time housing, being situated on the edge of society as well as linked to a marginal existence and secrecy. The filmic representations of irregular migrants in rural areas usually portray the protagonists as living in mass accommodations such as tent camps, in disused plants or even cemetery tomb walls. Films like PUMMARÓ and LAS CARTAS DE ALOU are typical as they emphasise the extreme antagonism due to their presence in rural areas: while urbanity rather facilitates the maintenance of invisibility due to its anonymous character, rurality implicates an augmentation of the vulnerability of the body in space and therefore a stronger regulation of the migrant's life. They turn out to be more visible in their irregular situation and their need of invisibility gets even more exploited.

Due to the tendency to filmic realism, many filmmakers of migrant cinema visualise their protagonists having the chance to get both a job and accommodation in rural areas – like Kwaku in *Pummaró* working on a vegetable plantation in Southern Italy. At the same time undocumented migrants get deeply involved in patriarchal structures, which unscrupulously exploit their need to hide away and therefore also dominate their private lives. The escape

from these in the case of Kwaku stands for the augmentation of social insecurity and sometimes even persecution by plantation owners and mafia networks. As already pointed out above, social experiences like these are also often combined with a plot addressing the issue of the isolation of the migrants in village communities and racially motivated conflicts (Berger 2007).

In the cities the protagonists are able to find refuge with fellow migrants, acquaintances or family members – although only for short periods of time. Among their places of residence one finds abandoned buildings waiting to be demolished (QUANDO SEI NATO, LAS CARTAS DE ALOU) or run-down subsidized low-rent housing (WESH, WESH; SAÍD) serving as accommodation. The few female migrant protagonists represented in the films are repeatedly connected with prostitution, which is rarely the case in films set in rural contexts (Berger 2006). An example would be the underage Alina who lives in a dilapidated factory on the outskirts of Milan and is forced into prostitution by her alleged brother Radu in QUANDO SEI NATO.

WESH, WESH is an exception as it shows a closed and stable milieu in which the main character is well known and can count on different forms of solidarity. The rather run-down environment of the housing in *Cité Les Bosquets* is set in the context of everyday life (Tarr 2005: 179-181). Instead of the image of the *Banlieue* either as a space of trouble or as a space of creativity and youth culture, the characters of the film spend their time doing very ordinary activities: the opening sequence of the film focuses on the geometrical character of the city – the buildings and the tree-lined walks. These images are contrasted with close-ups of the protagonist Kamel returning ‘home’ from Algeria by hitchhiking. The film further shows the rather slow everyday life of Kamel’s family, deals with the issue of the injustice of the fate of the *sans-papiers*, but also uses classical topics of *Banlieue* cinema (ruined buildings covered in graffiti, obscure atmosphere, young people smoking hashish).

Images of migrants in rural areas also differ from those urban settings because metropolises like Paris, Madrid, Barcelona, or Milan offer more spatial options. In contrast to rural settings, finding a job in cities is generally not connected to accommodation, but relies on acquaintances, ethnic community networks and other informal and semi-formal modes of communication. The protagonists often peddle jewellery, operate sewing machines or sell flowers and groceries like Jallel in FAUTE À VOLTAIRE or Alou in LAS CARTAS DE ALOU. However, working situations as well as social contacts in general are less stable. This is even the case for migrants who have the luck to meet a solitary family like Alina and Radu or those who fall in love with a local like the protagonists in PUMMARÓ and SAÍD. The couples stay together for a certain period and find some temporary stability until the irregular migrants have to move on, either because the relationship fails or because they are discovered by state agents as irregular.

This happens in *FAUTE À VOLTAIRE* where the protagonist wants to marry Nassera, whom he met in a Tunisian café, to legalize his stay in France. Like many male and female characters, which are often permanently on the flight from the police, in the end also Jallel is persecuted by the police and arrested fleeing from a subway tunnel into the open urban space. The filmic representations of undocumented migrants in urbanity stress the labyrinthine character of cities and metropolises. The spaces of economic sustenance and intimacy of undocumented migrants therefore are depicted as apparently more protected in urbanity as it promises the possibility of a secure escape back to invisibility. Therefore, the clandestine migrants in urban space are visualised as less subjected to patriarchal control and individual despotism, but under the influence of state institutions to a greater extent. Although they also often fail to regain their necessary invisibility, the filmic representations of irregular migrants in rural areas emphasise their physical exposure by the frequent use of panoramas which underline the limitation of a hideaway.

‘Beautiful places’ in flux

In many migration films one encounters locations that traditionally carry positive and sometimes even poetic connotations linked to tourism, but acquire new, different meanings in the context of migration: migrants can only remain briefly on boulevards in city centres or at touristic old harbours irregularly or as long as it is dark. Coasts and beaches are, similarly, striking examples of such ‘beautiful places’ (as in Emanuele Crialesse’s successful film *RESPIRO*, 2002, shot on the island of Lampedusa).

In films about irregular migration the seaside often marks the arrival in Europe, losing its conventional connotation as an area of pleasure and beauty and turning into a dramatically and existentially loaded place. In *BWANA*, a Spanish middle-class family is spending a day in the inhospitable landscape of Cabo Gato on the coast of Almeria, one of ‘Europe’s’ frontiers with Africa. At the beach the taxi-driver Antonio, his wife Dori and their two children discover the black African Ombasi mourning his friend Yambo who did not survive the journey. The narrative tension of *BWANA* is not only structured by the xenophobe attitude of the Spaniards towards the migrant protagonist, but the beach also turns into an enchanted place of romance between Dori and Ombasi: for the Spanish woman the Black body represents the attractive and exotic other’. His African origins conflate with the filmic setting in the middle of the wilderness of the sand dunes and the body as an object of desire (Santaolalla 2003: 157). In contrast to this romantic vision, the beaches of Andalusia become Yambo’s grave after crossing the Mediterranean in a tiny boat. For Ombasi himself they turn into a trap at the end of the film, as he is hunted by skinheads while the Spanish family is able to flee.

In Soler’s film *SAÍD* ‘beautiful places’ are represented by urban areas like the Gothic Quarter of Barcelona as a dangerous place for the undocumented protagonist and his friends. Migrants are hunted by police and violent racist youth gangs in the squares and streets of

Barcelona where the Moroccan musician Hussein gets seriously hurt. While Saïd's girlfriend Ana visits Hussein lying in a coma in the intensive care unit of *Hospital del Mar*, a worried Saïd waits outside on the sea promenade, where families are enjoying the restaurants and shores of the Mediterranean city. After a supper in a restaurant in the tiny streets of the Old Town, the lovers are detained by police officers in civilian clothes demanding Saïd's documents.

The lively area of the *Plaza Real*, a main square of Barcelona that represents one of the city's tourist attractions due to its architecture and bars, turns into a trap for the irregular Moroccan migrant. Saïd gets arrested and ends up in a centre for irregular refugees in danger of imminent deportation. Thus the Mediterranean coasts as natural attractions of the seaside as well as the old city centres as emblematic touristic sites are presented from a shifted perspective: simultaneously as idyllic places of pleasure and leisure time and as locations of the darker sides of irregular migrants and their constant struggle for life. On the other hand, both rural and urban 'beautiful places' also embody a 'world in danger of being lost' as well as a 'site of memory' that is 'revered as an 'ancestral homeland'... to be defended at all costs' (Smith 1999: 151). The cinematic usage of these settings therefore not only evokes concepts like 'beauty', but also 'threat' and fear of the untamed and the unknown.

The absence of the Mediterranean Sea

Although the Mediterranean Sea is often used to introduce the action or to close a film, the *Mare Nostrum* itself is strikingly absent as space of action. Only a few films make the passage over the sea a visible issue, depicting the Mediterranean as a space which is connecting continents. One example would be André Téchiné's *LOIN* (2001), a French-Spanish co-production telling the story of Serge, a lorry driver exporting cloth to Tangier and importing clothes to France. Besides his profession, he is also involved in drug trafficking and the transit of irregular migrants. Undoubtedly, the dominant continental mapping of Europe can be seen in the context of the minor role of the Mediterranean as a cultural and economic frame of reference in general – besides tourism: In the last decades, Southern harbours have lost their role as a transcontinental point of economic attraction for the European market. The placement of irregular migrants in a continental European and not in a larger context thus shows the political-ideological and economic significance of the term of 'Fortress Europe'.

Most of the films focussing on the Mediterranean do not leave the European shores but focus on the sea only marginally, often from the European countryside. The Mediterranean Sea is frequently depicted in the context of a boat landing at the very beginning of the films and then reduced to a distant space of nostalgia and homesickness, which the migrants focus on in situations of isolation and desperation, e. g. in *LAS CARTAS DE ALOU* or *BWANA*.

In this sense, the Mediterranean is seen as a borderline separating Europe from the other shores of the Mediterranean; the irregular migrants are thus constructed as *im*-migrants

who enter the 'Fortress Europe' by the sea. While a lot of French films are entirely set in central France (FAUTE À VOLTAIRE; WESH, WESH), illustrating questions of centralism and colonialism more than the hegemonic mapping of Europe and the Mediterranean (Winkler 2007b: 9-60), Italian and Spanish films often are characterized by a storyline that ends either with a deportation scene at a seaport or with an existence of unlawfulness and illegality in European harbour cities.

In Giordana's film QUANDO SEI NATO the Mediterranean turns into a sphere of action only when Alina and Radu travel from Romania to Italy. The hardly functioning boat is shown on the high sea and also as the place of rescue of Sandro, the son of the family that later on hosts Alina and Radu. Sandro, who fell off his father's sailing boat, thus also lands with the group of boat people on the coast of Southern Italy. Nevertheless, Giordana does not focus on the 'other': the 'other' shores, the coasts of Greece and Albania are not shown and Southern Italy is only the place of landing. The rest of the film is located in mostly urban settings of Northern Italy: Alina and Radu live with a family in Brescia and from there they try to get to Milan (Winkler 2007a: 250-4). The Mediterranean is reduced to a passage in the sense of a transitional place, the Italian South to the status of the national 'other' within Italy (Wood 2003: 97-99).

Movies focusing on the topic of irregular migration, whether they follow an aesthetic of art cinema or melodrama, meticulously reveal the human impact of what has become a constant influx of irregular migration that economic globalization is carrying beyond the border areas of Europe. The analysed movies mostly underline the marginalisation of migrants and their difficulties of surviving in European host countries without being 'legal' by stressing the reduced possibilities of appropriation of space. In rural settings the protagonists have an easier access to stable forms of employment and accommodation, but are confronted with strong forms of social control and ethnic marginalisation. Within the urban settings the cinema of irregular migration tends to concentrate on the ambiguity and hierarchy between the city centre and the fringes of European metropolises (e. g. QUANDO SEI NATO, SAÍD).

Only a few filmmakers focus on the suburbs as an independent space of its own as Ameur-Zäïmèche does in WESH, WESH. In general the corpus has to be classified as *cinéma engagé*: it deals with undocumented migrants in order to visualise the social component of marginalisation, filmmakers refer to spaces and places which are unknown by film-going publics or not consciously identified as territories where the visibility of European citizens contrasts with the (intended or forced) invisibility of irregular migrants. Depicting the run-down living conditions in the outskirts of villages and cities, but also in the middle of metropolises aims for a raising awareness of a contemporary and human struggle right in the middle (and marges) of European Community.

Über die Autoren

Verena Berger teaches Spanish and Latin American Cinema at the University of Vienna, Austria. She is the author of *Theater und Sprache: Das katalanische Theater zwischen Diktatur und Demokratie* (1998) and co-editor of *Montreal-Toronto. Stadtkultur und Migration in Literatur, Film und Musik* (2007), *Escenarios plurimediales: Cine y teatro en España en el umbral del siglo XXI* (2009) and *Polyglot Cinema. Migration and Transcultural Narration in France, Italy, Portugal and Spain* (2010). She is also co-editor of the book series *Beiträge zur europäischen Theater-, Film- und Medienwissenschaft* (<http://www.lit-verlag.de/reihe/betm>). Currently she is preparing a post-doctoral thesis on transnational cinema. <http://homepage.univie.ac.at/verena.berger/>

Daniel Winkler teaches French and Italian Cinema at the University of Innsbruck, Austria. He is the author of *Transit Marseille. Filmgeschichte einer Mittelmeermetropole* (2007) and co-editor of *Montreal-Toronto. Stadtkultur und Migration in Literatur, Film und Musik* (2007), *Apropos Canada / À propos du Canada. Fünf Jahre Graduiertentagungen der Kanada-Studien* (2009) and *Nuovo Cinema Italia. Der italienische Film meldet sich zurück* (2010). He is also co-editor of the book series *Beiträge zur europäischen Theater-, Film- und Medienwissenschaft* (<http://www.lit-verlag.de/reihe/betm>). Currently he is preparing a post-doctoral thesis on Italian theatre and (together with Sabine Schrader) a volume on *Italian Migration and Transatlantic Cinema* (2012). <http://www.uibk.ac.at/romanistik/personal/winkler/>

Filme

BWANA (Spanien 1996, Imanol Uribe)

FAUTE À VOLTAIRE (VOLTAIRE IST SCHULD, Frankreich 2000, Abdellatif Kechiche)

LAS CARTAS DE ALOU (BRIEFE VON ALOU, Spanien 1990, Montxo Armendáriz)

PUMMARÓ (1989, Michele Placido)

QUANDO SEI NATO NON PUOI PIÙ NASCONDERTI (Italien/Frankreich/Großbritannien 2005, Marco Tullio Giordana)

SAÍD (Spanien 1998, Llorenç Soler).

WESH, WESH, QU'EST-CE QUI CE PASSE? (WESH WESH, WAS GEHT HIER AB?, Frankreich 2002, Rabah Ameur-Zaïmèche)

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