8 *Eastern Boys* (2013)

Hospitality, trauma, kinship, and the state

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The phrase ‘Eastern Boys’ may easily conjure up an undifferentiated mass of orientalised, racialised, and sexualised young men of Eastern European, North African, or Middle Eastern descent. However, the narration and cinematography of Robin Campillo’s *Eastern Boys* (2013, France) takes care to bestow a qualified individuality on one Eastern young man in particular, starting from the opening scenes in which protagonist Daniel Arthuis seeks out the singular object of his desire – his name is Marek – from a gang of petty thieves and undocumented sex workers soliciting clients at the Gare du Nord in Paris. This individualising trajectory culminates at the end of the film, when Daniel arranges to adopt Marek as his legal son under his real name of Rouslan Guerasiev, offering him a new home, a family, and French citizenship in one go. In this chapter, I want to unpack the conditions and foreclosures that inform the apparent happy ending of Marek/Rouslan’s individualisation, adoption, and naturalisation. What constellation of migrancy, desire, ethnicity, hospitality, domesticity, and governmentality enables the transition of Rouslan from undocumented sex worker to son and citizen? What are the costs and damages of that outcome? How are the bonds of desire and kinship distributed and redistributed in this film?

In a 1981 interview titled ‘Friendship as a Way of Life’, Michel Foucault characterised homosexuality as ‘a historic occasion to reopen affective and relational virtualities’ (Foucault 1998a: 138). Not so much because of its intrinsic qualities but rather because of its sociohistorically ‘slant-wise’ position’, he claimed, homosexuality would facilitate ‘polymorphic, varied, and individually modulated relationships’ (Foucault 1998a: 139). Those relationships tend to the development of new forms of ‘friendship’, which may improvise on established conventions of romance, kinship, age, marriage, and class (Foucault 1998a: 136).¹ In a different interview, Foucault questioned, ‘Why shouldn’t I adopt a friend who’s ten years younger than I am? And even if he’s ten years older?’ (Foucault 1998b: 158).² In Foucault’s argument, the socially experimental aspect of homosexuality is historically circumscribed, hence contingent: ‘a historic occasion’. Therefore, one cannot take for granted that what may have been imaginable in 1981 is still possible in the same way or to the same extent at other historical moments. In this

vein, I propose to take Campillo's exquisite and enigmatic film as a concretisation as well as a speculative update of Foucault's 1981 argument: what reinvention of sexual relationality does this particular narrative deem possible in 2013? The year is especially resonant in this respect as 2013 is when both marriage and adoption were legalised in France for same-sex couples. So, is Daniel's adoption of Rouslan still indicative of a queer opening up of the social fabric – or of its closure by inclusion or co-optation?

Something else that has arguably changed since Foucault's argument is the bearing of migration on the body politic at large. Although migrant communities are routinely taken as axiomatically patriarchal and homophobic, Martin F. Manalansan IV argues that non-normative sexuality is, in fact, a crucial factor for processes of migration (Manalansan IV 2006: 225). Moreover, the queer desires and practices of migrants do not necessarily fully assimilate to the Western, modern, bio-political, and identity-based form of sexuality that Foucault so famously analysed in volume one of *The History of Sexuality* (1976) (Manalansan IV 2006: 230). Instead, globalisation and migration facilitate 'emergent hybrid forms . . . involved in syncretic processes that create alternative sexual politics, cultures, and identities', Manalansan IV concludes (Manalansan IV 2006: 230). In that sense, migration potentially adds to the 'historic occasion' of creating new social forms of relationality, expanding the opportunity to open up the social fabric. Together, Foucault and Manalansan IV allow for a combined perspective in which migrants are 'queered' and (native) queers are 'migrated', in the sense of relocated in a changed and changing global context. As it may bear on the peculiar form of 'friendship' that develops between Daniel and Rouslan in the movie, involving sexuality as well as kinship, I want to situate *Eastern Boys* on this expanded and reshuffled map of identification and affiliation.

As a cinematic experience, *Eastern Boys* offers a striking combination of excess and economy. A generic shapeshifter, the film moves from home-invasion thriller to love story to action flick, with Daniel heroically saving Rouslan from the gang that keeps him captive. In addition, the relationship between the two main characters unexpectedly shifts from the transactional to the romantic to the familial. Throughout the story, polarities and reversals of position abound: client/sex worker, host/guest, hostage/hostage-taker, victim/criminal, native/migrant, citizen/undocumented, middle-class/underclass, hero/victim, father/son. And yet, this extravagant story of so many shifts and turns remains set within a narrowly circumscribed environment of just four Parisian locations: the Gare du Nord; Daniel's stylish, suburban, high-rise apartment; the cheap city-limits hotel hosting Rouslan and other migrants; and the courthouse where the adoption case is adjudicated. This may suggest that the film's generic and narrative excesses conceal a more binding and limited spatio-social economy.³ At the same time, what I consider the critical event in the film – the startling shift in the relationship between Daniel and Rouslan from romantic to familial, from desire to kinship – occurs in response to events that happened at an altogether

different place and time: Rouslan's past in war-torn Chechnya. Daniel's adoption of Rouslan does not follow from the steady augmentation of his desire, love, or friendship *in situ*, but from a transformative interruption of suffering from elsewhere. How does the film manage this psychic interpenetration of global contexts? And why does the revelation of his lover's war trauma precisely coincide with the weaning of Daniel's desire and his assumption of paternal responsibility?

Hospitality

At the Gare du Nord, Daniel arranges with Marek to meet at his house the next day. However, a younger boy of fourteen shows up instead, threatening consequences (in France, the legal age of consent is fifteen). A shocked Daniel remains impassive as more members of the gang file into his apartment, appraise the place as if they were prospective buyers, and start drinking and dancing. In what seems a deliberate elaboration of what Mireille Rosello has described as the 'metaphor' of hospitality, which casts the relationship between native and migrant in terms of host and guest, the movie temporarily entertains the xenophobic and paranoid fantasy of the 'guests taking over the house' (see Rosello 2001).⁴ Fittingly, this 'chapter' or part of the film is preceded by a caption that reads, 'Cette fête dont je suis l'otage' (This party of which I'm the hostage). As Boss, the leader of the gang, reminds Daniel forcefully: 'You came to us, you invited us at the station'. In time, Daniel astonishingly yields to his new position as a guest in his own house; his role

Figure 8.1 Marek/Rouslan (Kirill Emelyanov) at the Gare du Nord in *Eastern Boys* (2013)

Source: *Eastern Boys* (2013), directed by Robin Campillo © Les Films de Pierre, and Luminor Films (2014).

rapidly shifts from 'host' to 'hostage' to 'guest' in the course of the scene. Boss puts a party hat on Daniel's head, he accepts the offer of a drink from his own liquor, and joins the dancing men. Meanwhile, the gang expeditiously transports his furniture, fitness equipment, and artworks to a van waiting outside. At some point, the real Marek joins the party. They exchange glances.

The next day, Marek returns to the vandalised apartment on his own, offering sex. In the affair between the two men that follows, it seems at times that Marek may want more than just sex. However, Daniel repeatedly insists on the transactional nature of their encounters, formalising the exchange of money. Their fucking nonetheless slowly turns more tender, more reciprocal, and scenes showing the two men brushing their teeth together and eating dinner in front of the television emphasise an increasing domesticity. In a love scene that forms both the high- and the end-point of their developing romance, Daniel tells Marek, 'You are beautiful, so beautiful. Has anyone told you that? You're very beautiful'. Marek giggles helplessly and happily.⁵ As soon as Marek starts to share more of his background, however, Daniel's infatuation seems aborted. Rouslan tells him he is not Russian nor Moldavian, but Ukrainian. He used to live in Chechnya with his parents and his sister as war broke out there. One day, he continues, his father didn't return from work, never to be seen again. The flooding river deposited bodies in the city. His mother was killed by a bomb hitting the family house. His real name, he tells Daniel, is Rouslan (the difference may be significant: Marek is Roman and Christian, Rouslan is Turkic in origin).⁶ When Daniel's response seems at first impassive, possibly incredulous, Rouslan concludes, 'My name, you don't care. My family, you don't care. The bombs, the war, you don't care.' When he then initiates sex, Daniel declines for the first time. As Rouslan insists, Daniel responds, 'You're such a kid'.

In the morning, Daniel watches Rouslan leave from his balcony, Rouslan waving back at him boyishly from the street before he steps out of the shot. The scene that follows is remarkable for its tension between momentousness and ordinariness: everything and nothing much seem to be happening at the same time. From his apartment's balcony, Daniel is shown responding in quick succession to a random series of perceptions: loud noises down in the street that sound like gunshots (but that may well be fireworks or a car backfiring); two young boys running in the street (they may just be playing); and three planes flying in the sky in formation. That last image is repeated two more times. What seems to be happening is that Rouslan's trauma belatedly catches up with Daniel. As a result, everyday sights and sounds become charged with meaning and affect. Daniel can be seen to quasi-cinematographically 'edit' innocuous, unrelated perceptions into an evocative sequence that pictures a city under siege, transporting the Chechnya of Rouslan's past to the streets of Paris today. In that way, Daniel takes to heart a small part of Rouslan's past. The experience definitively transforms their relationship. That evening, Daniel makes up a bed for Rouslan in his home office and informs him they will not be having sex anymore.

Moreover, he will no longer pay for his services; from now on, Rouslan will receive pocket money instead.

Family romance

The film presents the change in Daniel and Rouslan's relationship as self-explanatory, warranting no further motivation or reflection. The timing of events, however, suggests a meaningful correlation between Rouslan's revelation of his past, Daniel's subsequent reimagining of it, and his recasting of their relationship in terms of kinship, setting up the adoption that is to follow. Later, the movie makes explicit that the adoption is a considered preference, not a legal necessity. In the court scene on the adoption at the end of the movie, the prosecutor, suspecting foul play for the benefit of Rouslan's citizenship, casts doubt on their relationship. 'Their initial encounter and their living arrangements do not allow us to establish a filial bond,' he alleges. However, their lawyer retorts, '[i]f . . . the relationship were of a sexual nature, my clients would have simply opted for a civil union' (apparently, the 2013 legalisation of same-sex marriage has not yet been factored in the script). Hence, Daniel could possibly have chosen to continue their romantic relationship while still being able to secure Rouslan's naturalisation. On the one hand, Daniel is now able to acknowledge and respond to his lover's past; on the other, this engagement takes on a definitive paternal form, which aborts their burgeoning relationship. But why would the one necessarily go together with the other?

To try formulating a possible explanation, I first want to focus on how Daniel's remarkable vision from his balcony facilitates, if not enacts, his empathic response to Rouslan's war memories. This vision can be helpfully analysed, I propose, as a special case of what Marianne Hirsch calls 'postmemory'. In 'The Generation of Postmemory', Hirsch reflects on the fact that people sometimes appear to 'remember' and 'embody' other people's traumatic memories. Vicarious memories of this kind are produced by 'imaginative investment, projection, and creation', Hirsch writes (Hirsch 2008: 107). In a typical scenario, (grand)children take on the memories of their (grand)parents as their own (Hirsch 2008: 110).⁷ However, Hirsch also points at the larger cultural function of kinship as a resource, 'idiom', or 'lingua franca' which allows for sympathetic remembrance beyond the family (Hirsch 2008: 115). In other words, the forms and affects of family life may be called upon precisely to enable people to relate to suffering from outside their immediate social, national, and historical contexts. Hirsch characterises such attempts to 're-embody' painful memories from culturally or historically different contexts as active 'postmemorial work' (Hirsch 2008: 111). In this regard, then, a sense of kinship may be the *effect* rather than the origin of shared trauma.

Daniel initially seemed unresponsive to Rouslan's history. Immediately after his postmemorial vision of a city at war, however, he opens up. Postmemories

usually transmit from older to younger generations within the same family; here, however, an older, French, and middle-class citizen takes on the trauma of an unrelated, undocumented, and younger migrant. In that sense, Daniel embodies a commemorative empathy that transgresses familial, social, and national borders. The ethical and affective vehicle that facilitates Daniel's newfound attitude is the idiom of kinship; the acknowledgement of Rouslan's past coincides with Daniel's assumption of the role of caregiver or step-father. However, this form of queer kinship is not the precondition but the result of the sharing of a historical burden. Rouslan's displaced pain can find a new home in his refashioned relationship with Daniel.

Nonetheless, in her argument on postmemory and kinship, Hirsch also takes care to indicate its negative aspects: 'does not locating trauma in the space of the family individualise it too much? Does it not risk occluding a public horizontal context and responsibility?' (Hirsch 2008: 115). Indeed, Daniel's adoption of Rouslan effectively 'privatises' care, bracketing public and collective responsibility. Furthermore, while Hirsch suggests that the (vertical, hierarchical, generational) idiom of family can facilitate shared memories amongst generational contemporaries – extending from filiation to affiliation – here the exact reverse happens: the couple moves from potentially equitable lovers or friends to step-father and son, reinstating hierarchies of position and age⁸ (Hirsch 2008: 114–15). The congenial egalitarianism of the shared TV dinners seems left behind as Rouslan becomes, to all intents and purposes, a kid again. In this regard, it is telling that Daniel visually associates Rouslan with the much younger boys playing in the street in his postmemorial vision. Why is Daniel apparently unable to relate to Rouslan's past while their relationship remains or becomes one of equitable lovers, friends, or even step-brothers?

A second possible explanation for the shift in Daniel and Rouslan's relationship is more ideologically cumbersome. Daniel may be happy to enjoy the sexual availability of 'Eastern boys' in Paris – but only on the condition that the circumstances that have brought them there remain understated or opaque. Rouslan's past may bring up 'too much information', too much history, for Daniel to maintain his sexual desire. As director Robin Campillo suggests in an interview, 'I think if clients knew prostitutes' stories, it wouldn't be so easy for them to engage with them. . . . [L]ots of people who do prostitute [themselves], especially in Paris, do it because they are poor' (Campillo 2015). Especially at the beginning of the affair, Daniel insists on the transactional nature of their encounters; at the same time, he may not wish to acknowledge the precise conditions that bring undocumented migrants to sex work.

In this respect, Ross Chambers has written astutely on Roland Barthes's engagement with 'Eastern Boys' as detailed in the author's autobiographical writings collected in *Incidents* (1987). Chambers's reading focuses on the continuities and contrasts between two texts in the volume (see Chambers 1999). Set in Morocco, 'Incidents' features Barthes enjoying the (shall we say)

generous sexuality of young Moroccan men while the reality of prostitution is downplayed; meanwhile, the reason why Barthes works in Morocco as a French teacher remains unremarked upon. Another text, titled 'Nights in Paris' ('Soirées de Paris'), portrays Barthes's generally unhappy love life at home in the capital, with one particular night rudely interrupted by an ageing Moroccan ex-hustler, who is promptly dismissed. In this text, the context of sex work is highlighted while the reason why Paris hosts sex workers from the Maghreb remains unmentioned. Taking the two pieces together, Chambers argues that they demonstrate two sides of the 'forgetting' of the larger (post)colonial framework, which brings Barthes to Morocco and a Moroccan hustler to Paris (Chambers 1999: 255). The theme of commodification that is stressed in the Parisian context – in contrast to the supposedly more innocent exchanges in an exoticised Morocco – Chambers regards as a 'displaced figure for the incidence of colonialism in sexual relations' (Chambers 1999: 255).

In 'Nights in Paris', the urban everyday can only become so overly familiar, so dreary, to Barthes, Chambers continues, because of the maintenance of a historical and contextual closure, which represses the awareness 'that there is a context other than the present one' (Chambers 1999: 269). Similarly, the singular or one-sided gay identity that is suited to that constrained reality is 'the product of a limitation that excludes our potential to be other' (Chambers 1999: 269). Ironically, this contextual and subjective foreclosure prevents a genuine connection between Barthes and the Maghrebian men who were the preferred objects of his desire. A 'certain connectedness' might have been grounded on the simultaneity or entanglement of sexual and (post)colonial subject-positions, Chambers concludes (Chambers 1999: 268). When the historical conditions and causes that bring people together in the same place remain bracketed, real friendship would seem elusive.

Hirsch's argument on postmemory helped us to appreciate the positive aspect of the paternal shift in Daniel's relationship to Rouslan. But Chambers' analysis forces us to acknowledge a negative side as well: Daniel's new paternal and desexualised role helps prevent him from coming to terms with the inscription of global or (neo)colonial inequality in the desires of French gay men for Eastern boys. Early in the film, it seemed that Daniel was pretty much done with his established position and lifestyle. Either experimentally or self-destructively, he yielded to the gang as they partied in his apartment and robbed him blind. When Rouslan re-established contact, however, it was Daniel who kept insisting on formalising their affair as commodity exchange – the 'displaced figure' of colonialism in gay sexuality according to Chambers – thereby reasserting hierarchies of citizenship and class. As their relationship nonetheless developed into a more reciprocal romance, the introduction of Rouslan's horrific past becomes the occasion for Daniel to re-formalise his engagement in paternal, if not paternalistic, terms.

Indeed, the new form of their relationship can be seen to perversely restate the formalised hierarchy of their prior relationship as client and sex worker, with payment for services now making way for pocket money.

However, with sexuality taken out of the equation, this form of ‘friendship’ is no longer determined or even informed by the homosexual positionality that Foucault described as ‘slant-wise’: at odds, queer. The adoption is not so much an improvisation that is enforced by a minoritarian or marginal existence. Rather, the adoption is something Daniel can ‘afford’, a right he can claim and bestow, as a middle-class French citizen. And while this particular section of the film is titled ‘Ce qu’on fabrique ensemble’ (What we make together), Rouslan’s agency appears minimal or moot. Remember, it was Rouslan who reinitiated contact with Daniel after the gang’s scam, and he initially objected vehemently to Daniel’s breaking off of their sexual relationship. At this point in the story, however, he quietly seems to go along with the adoption. It remains unclear whether he does so by choice, opportunity, or necessity.

Happy ending

What happens next? To start the adoption procedure, Rouslan will need his passport, which Boss keeps in a locker at their hotel on the outskirts of Paris. The hotel houses not just the Eastern European gang, but also various migrant families from Asian and African countries. As Rouslan plots to get his passport, we are introduced to Boss’s family: his wife or girlfriend and their baby; Rouslan is summarily called upon to help bottle-feeding the child. Thus, it turns out that the film includes not one but two queer families, both situated at the intersection of homosexuality and migration. Next to Daniel and Rouslan, there is Boss with his girlfriend and child, who are supported by an extended homosocial family of hustlers and petty criminals. Certainly, Boss is pretty mean and violent. Nevertheless, the gang members roughly share the same age and social position, and, crucially, have in common the same vulnerability as undocumented migrants. In contrast, Daniel and Rouslan are set to form a naturalised middle-class, single-parent, nuclear family.

Rouslan is overheard while talking to Daniel on his phone, and caught as he tries to access the hotel locker for his passport. Boss remarks on his expensive jacket, his new iPhone, and the apartment key in his pocket: ‘You think you are better than us?’. A roughed-up Rouslan is left bound and gagged in a storeroom. As Daniel can no longer reach Rouslan by phone, he calls on the hotel. When he gives Rouslan’s name at the reception and adds that he belongs to a group of Eastern European men, the manager specifies, ‘In that case we don’t get the names. We only know the number of people we have. . . . Social Services run those rooms. Those people aren’t hotel guests’. Daniel gets a room in the hotel as a proper guest, overhears Rouslan keening from the storeroom, and finds a way to set him free and get him to his room.

Then, to facilitate their escape from the hotel and the gang, Daniel calls in the police: ‘things are degenerating . . . some undocumented migrants. . . . [Y]ou have to get here fast’. When the police arrive, they start rounding up

Figure 8.2 The police raid in the hotel in *Eastern Boys* (2013)

Source: *Eastern Boys* (2013), directed by Robin Campillo © Les Films de Pierre, and Luminor Films (2014).

everyone in the hotel: the gang, families, children. Taking advantage of the commotion, Daniel makes his escape from the hotel carrying a feeble Rouslan over his shoulders; the scene very much looks like a deliberate citation of a classic Hollywood damsel-in-distress scenario. The scene is spectacular in its contradictions. Of course, one cannot but root for Daniel's success, for the plot to succeed, for a happy ending to be secured. At the same time, Daniel's 'heroism' is shown to be conditional on his knowing deployment of racist speech – 'things are degenerating' – and the state violence it predictably unleashes against the migrants. Moreover, he is 'saving' the man who used to be his lover and who is to become his son through a generic cliché that emphasises Rouslan's utter dependence and helplessness.

Boss manages to escape as well in the general upheaval and makes his way to Daniel's apartment. When he gets inside using the key he has taken from Rouslan's jacket, he finds the place empty: Daniel and Rouslan have moved out. He bursts out crying. Apparently, the formation of the 'proper' queer family requires the destruction of the 'improper' one – not to mention all the other families that were staying in the hotel.

When the court hearing on the adoption concludes, the lawyer assures Daniel and Rouslan that their case is straightforward and that the court is likely to rule in their favour. As Daniel and Rouslan leave the hall of the courthouse, the camera declines to follow them and stays behind. With the film's two protagonists momentarily out of frame, we start noticing the

Figure 8.3 Boss (Daniil Vorobyov) alone in the empty apartment in *Eastern Boys* (2013)

Source: *Eastern Boys* (2013), directed by Robin Campillo © Les Films de Pierre, and Luminor Films (2014).

other people that are present in the hall: walking, standing, sitting, and talking; other lawyers, other cases, other issues. Just a moment before, they were extras merely establishing the realism of the setting; now, they become relevant in their own right. After a while, the camera slowly moves to the glass wall of the courthouse, and Daniel and Rouslan step back into shot on the street outside, walking into the distance and leaving the camera behind.

The scene amounts to a remarkably precise and understated ‘happy ending’. I want to argue that it does two things. First, it highlights the tension between the story’s main characters and the larger, impersonal, and collective issues at stake. Justice, the ending seems to imply, exceeds this particular case and this particular story. Each of the extras in the court’s hallway might have been a main character of this or another narrative. Second, the ending emphasises the power of a governmental institution – the court – over individual characters. We watch Daniel and Rouslan receding into the distance outside, starting their new life as a family, through an impersonal gaze that issues from within the courthouse. In that sense, their new existence is literally, visually, framed from within – hence conditional on – the court’s discretion.

In these two ways, the ending of *Eastern Boys* reiterates the film’s brilliant opening scenes. In a visual style that is reminiscent of surveillance cameras, the opening scenes patiently show what at first seem arbitrary people and goings-on at the Gare du Nord. It takes a while for the main characters to emerge from their surroundings and the larger crowd of people that share

it, and for the scene to focus on Daniel's slow approach of Rouslan. Once it does become clear what is happening, one realises one has seen both men before without really noticing them. In this sense, the opening scenes similarly stress the tension between a collective grouping of people assembled in public space and the two characters that are individualised in, and by, the narrative. Furthermore, the surveillance-style imagery once again indicates the power of the state. From start to finish, then, the relationship between the two men is framed in visual instances of governmental authority.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have proposed to take *Eastern Boys* as a response to Foucault's 1981 argument that homosexuality offers a historical opportunity to reinvent social forms of relationality. I hope to have shown that the film rises to that occasion with exceptional intelligence, sensitivity, and honesty. The movie responds most programmatically to Foucault's invitation in the section called 'What we make together'. The heading suggests a joint relational creativity at some remove from societal constraints. In this part of the film, the relationship between a sex worker and a client, an undocumented migrant and a middle-class citizen, slowly develops into something else. We don't find out, however, what new form of friendship Daniel and Rouslan may have come up with together. For, when Rouslan shares details of his horrific past with his lover, the revelation doesn't lead to an increased intimacy between the two men but a change of course in the relationship. Daniel stops being Rouslan's lover and instead becomes his step-father, redistributing the balance and agency between the two men. As a result, the man who survived war in Chechnya, the loss of his family, undocumented existence in France, and the vicissitudes of gang life, becomes a minor again, a child with an allowance. In the last part of the film, the knowing, half-ironic deployment of the generic codes of the Hollywood action movie makes explicit and exacerbates this shift in the relationship: Daniel becomes an improbable action hero who saves Rouslan, now a pathetic victim, from the gang that has laboured to keep him alive in Paris. Crucially, the film takes care to point out the grim sacrifices that its ambiguous happy ending demands: Boss crying helplessly in the empty department, the families panicking as they are rounded up by the police following Daniel's ruse.

The opening and closing scenes sharpen the film's criticism vis-à-vis its own narrative of, let's say, 'How Daniel saved Rouslan'. Those scenes similarly emphasise the relationships of the main characters to larger groups of people, to public space, and to governmental agency. At the Gare du Nord and the courthouse, the characters are embedded in the public spaces that they share with other people, and that are controlled by the state. The anonymous groups of people in both places remind us of the collective scale of undocumented existence, which the story only includes through Rouslan's character. Obviously, Daniel's singular desire, quasi-heroic rescue, and

Figure 8.4 Daniel (Olivier Rabourdin) and Marek/Rouslan (Kirill Emelyanov) leaving the courthouse in *Eastern Boys* (2013)

Source: *Eastern Boys* (2013), directed by Robin Campillo © Les Films de Pierre, and Luminor Films (2014).

elective kinship do little to address the problem at large. Furthermore, the public spaces of the train station and the courthouse contrastingly indicate how the story not only individualises but also privatises the solution. Rouslan's deliverance depends on Daniel's charity; the adoption and naturalisation amount to personal favour. In this way, the resolution that the story offers remains restricted to a private hospitality, not the recourse of public responsibilities or shared rights. Finally, the governmental powers at stake suggest that Daniel enacts a magnanimity that is strictly speaking not his, but on lease from the state. It's not so much Daniel who 'saves' Rouslan, but rather a lawyer and a judge. A normative middle-class citizen, Daniel is afforded a largesse that may be his to bestow, but that may not be available to everyone in the same way or to the same extent. In these three ways, then, the film qualifies its own storyline of Daniel's deliverance of his lover/step-son.

The beginning and ending of the film also suggest a more general critique of narrativity. The emergence of characters from an anonymous group of people (who become supporting characters or extras) and a binding constellation of circumstances (which becomes a setting) set us up to identify and to empathise; however, this individualising focus simultaneously limits our ability to see the bigger picture. In that respect, narrative may limit our ability to recognise the spatiotemporal, global, neocolonial continuities between the film's Parisian locations, Chechnya, and the countries of origin of the

other migrants in the hotel. Ultimately, I'd like to suggest, this insight may lead to a re-appraisal of the uncomfortable plural of the film's title – *Eastern Boys* – which may so easily be read as a generalising and generic label (as I certainly have). However, *Eastern Boys* makes clear that the plural in the title can only be ambivalently and partially remedied by the kind of individualising, romantic narrative that the film relays. That story the movie reveals as a violent privatisation: reductive and sentimental shorthand for an issue that demands acknowledgement precisely in its collective form. Indeed, at the ending of the film, as we watch Daniel and Rouslan walk off into the distance and the credits begin to roll, we might imagine Boss back already at the Gare du Nord, the leader of a new gang of Eastern boys soliciting clients and setting up scams.

Notes

- 1 According to Mark Kingston, Foucault's remarks on homosexuality and friendship suggest a middle way between social and individual transformation, 'between the Enlightenment projects of large-scale social reform and an individualistic aesthetics of existence' (Kingston 2009: 17). Tom Roach draws on Foucault to propose an understanding of friendship as shared estrangement that resists forms of biopolitical normalisation, including that of gay marriage (Roach 2012).
- 2 In an interview, Campillo comments on Foucault's remarks: 'A thing that the French philosopher Michel Foucault said also inspired me. At the end of the 1970s, there were no partnerships or marriages between gays. At the time, most gay men of Foucault's age had younger lovers. And a lot of times, it was not just a question of age but also of socioeconomic difference. The older guy might have been a little wealthy, while the younger one was not. So Foucault suggested that gay men could adopt their lovers – that way, they could have the inheritance' (Campillo 2015).
- 3 See Williams 2013 (in particular 22–27) for a helpful discussion of French cinema's engagement with place as index of origin, identity, race, and ethnicity; Paris as icon of modernity; the tensions between Paris as capital and the *banlieue* inhabited primarily by immigrants and their descendants; and the emergence of Maghrebi-French films since the 1980s.
- 4 Rosello argues that hospitality, which she claims might not be the only, the most obvious, or even the most illuminating way of conceptualising the relationship between a country and its immigrants, is a multifaceted 'metaphor that has forgotten that it is a metaphor' (Rosello 2001: 3). The main disadvantage of the metaphor is that it 'blurs the distinction between a discourse of rights and a discourse of generosity, the language of social contracts and the language of excess and gift-giving' (Rosello 2001: 9).
- 5 An exquisitely saturated still from this scene, focusing on Rouslan's vulpine face and smile, is part of the publicity package for the movie. In that regard, *Eastern Boys* can be seen to enact the 'aesthetic work' of what Kaja Silverman, drawing on Lacan, conceptualises as heteropathic identification or idealisation, conferring the 'gift of love' on socially marginalised subjects (Silverman 1996: 2).
- 6 The film raises the possibility of Rouslan being Muslim without confirming it. Turkic in origin, 'Rouslan' is a common Russian name: he may belong to the Tatar minority of Crimea, Ukrainian territory until the recent Russian annexation; and Chechnya is majority Islamic. In only one scene does some aspect of cultural

difference seem at stake. When Daniel grabs Rouslan during dinner, the latter objects: 'Not now. We're eating now. Don't touch. It's not right'.

- 7 For a critique of this, see Ernst van Alphen, who argues that the term assumes too much of a continuity between actual survivors and their descendents, while the latter generation faces precisely a radical break in historical continuity and intelligibility. 'The term postmemory risks', van Alphen writes, 'becoming unwittingly symptomatic of the desire of the generation of survivors' children to connect to the past of their parents, a desire that remains frustrated' (van Alphen 2006: 488).
- 8 For an account of the interplay between filiation and affiliation, drawing on Edward Said's use of the terms and Jacques Derrida's 'politics of friendship', with Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1879) as the main example, see Aydemir 2011.