15 Integration, perforce?

(De)queering, (de)abjectifying, and victimising the migrant and minority figure in contemporary European cinema

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What is it that recent genre films – particularly a few titles coming from Northern Europe – addressing at the same time queerness and foreignness (and, as I would like to argue, obliquely reflecting on the status of migrants in the twenty-first-century European Union) have to teach us about what feeling and looking at may become in what we hope may at some point turn into a post-neoliberal, but not posthuman, age? I am thinking of *Border/Gräns* (2018, Sweden, dir. Ali Abbasi), *Gutland* (2017, Luxembourg, dir. Govinda Van Maele), *Thelma* (2017, Norway, dir. Joachim Trier), and *Queen of Hearts/Dronningen* (2019, Denmark, dir. May el-Toukhy). These features, however flawed from some perspectives, have addressed the question of minority status, be it ethnic, socioeconomic, or sexual, in thought-provoking and productive ways. While none of them addresses the migrant (as political refugees fleeing war) crisis per se, they certainly all tackle issues corollary with the topic of migration and minorities: queerness, adoption, seasonal work, and the strictures of a professed ‘multicultural’ society. In effect, the allegories these films lay out allow us to engage with them as dealing with the status of any individual or group confronted with an environment trying to repress or normalise these ‘intruders’, often out of fear or xenophobia and Islamophobia. They could also all very well fit into the discussion proposed by Thomas Elsaesser around the abject subject in film: all protagonists are, not unlike migrants or homeless people (or both), treated as abjects, i.e., individuals who are not so much victims as beings with an ill-defined legal status (see Elsaesser 2018).

The four titles also compose a cogent corpus insofar as they reflect a spectrum of attitudes that has characterised the response of populations and the media to the migrant and refugee crisis: ranging from a mix of caution and hospitality (offering a modicum of help, openness, agency, and hope to the newcomers, all the while refusing to grant them full national status, mostly on economic rationale grounds), a ‘reasonable’ discourse from the centre (‘Europe cannot possibly grant asylum to all refugees’), to a deliberate policy of containment and/or assimilation that resists cultural mix as though it were some form of geopolitical threat, addressed in all manners of negatively connoted imagery (ranging from invasion to disease). In any case, the

multi-kulti model (a German, but by extension European, social-democrat concept) – all of a sudden hailed a failure by the media around 2016–17 – has become a problem in the European imaginary, as the given *gesellschaften* (societies), for all their efforts and gesturing at egalitarianism, are lacking a deeper *gemeinschaft* (community). It is thus around the forming – often contrived and sometimes fatal – of the artificial former, to the detriment of the authentic latter, that the drama of the four films I propose to look at becomes crystallised and is robustly denounced by their makers. Since these films may be unfamiliar to an Anglo-American readership, I shall first summarise their plots all the while conducting my analysis.

The director of the Swedish *Border*, Ali Abbasi, has a deep involvement with the question of migration, since he was born in Iran and only later came to study in Sweden and Denmark, where he shot several films. *Border* is based on a story by John Ajvide Lindqvist, who had also penned the script for *Let the Right One In/Låt den rätte komma in* (2008, Sweden, dir. Tomas Alfredson), which shares with *Border* the idea whereby queer people are in the eyes of society hypersensitive monsters, but monsters nonetheless. Abbasi, however, seems more interested in the monstrous side of regular humans: his protagonist, Tina, is a highly sensitive, empathic, and resilient individual. While the film establishes her looks as striking, as she stands in the border control zone of her local airport and literally ‘sniffs’ the fear of incoming passengers carrying prohibited items (Figure 15.1), what we feel immediately is a sense of sympathy for her. Her colleagues treat her with respect, if distance, as though they feared somehow her preternatural skills, or, more likely, her less than canonic beauty. The attitude of discreet fear her

Figure 15.1 Tina (Eva Melander), a model Swedish customs worker, despite her foreign origins and semi-bject status in *Border* (2018)

Source: *Border/Gräns* (2018), directed by Ali Abbasi © META Films, Black Spark Film & TV, Kärnfilm, and Universal Home Pictures Entertainment (USA) (2019)

co-workers display immediately trigger a form of curiosity in the viewer for Tina, who stands at a border (literally and metaphorically) between abject and subject status: her looks set her apart from the others, but she does have a job, a status, and fulfils a clear role in society – yet one that is by definition liminal and unpleasant. When a disgruntled traveler calls her ‘hideous cunt’ after she has singled him out and found bottles of booze in his bag (a common practice among youth in Nordic countries where liquor is heavily taxed), we can tell that Tina is not only accustomed to such a slur – she has learned to display patient indifference to it. Under her apparently impassive, vaguely Down-syndrome face hides a deep world of thoughts and sensations, however, as rich as the wilderness out there. The latter is promptly revealed: after work, Tina returns to the woods, where she shares a home, with some trailer-trash lothario, Roland – a dog trainer and social pariah like Tina, but, unlike her, not exactly a decent and upstanding citizen. Tina shares an uneasy relationship with Roland, part room-mate, part lover (it is quite obvious that he has sex with her to justify his presence in her home). Tina does not enjoy their intimacy, clearly divining it as fake. In this curious game of deception, it seems that it is she who shows Roland mercy, even as he seems to think he is doing her a favour by ingratiating her. Tina finds much more intimacy with the wild animals she meets in the woods, where she walks naked, revealing her hirsute body. From her looks and the ease with which she interacts with the wilderness, the viewer must assume that Tina is no ordinary human being – even as, from underneath her dour demeanour, she masters the codes of human sociality and communication, and reveals herself to be a caring and dedicated daughter to her father, now in a retirement home.

A few days later, Tina intercepts a corporate-type at the customs, carrying a well-concealed memory card containing child pornography footage. This opens a subplot of the film in which Tina assists the police in dismantling the pornography ring, highlighting the implicit racism of Swedish people all the while showing the immanent monstrosity of human beings. At the same time, Tina meets someone like her, Vore. Where Tina has fully assumed the uses of Swedish society (she has a full-time job, drives a hatchback car, lives in a modest but well-furnished home that she owns), Vore is a drifter, whose antisocial behaviour betrays his foreignness and full-on abject status. When she meets Vore for the second time at border control, Tina asks that he be pulled over for a full body search. The inspection reveals no undeclared illicit goods, but rather that Vore, despite his burly looks and deep voice, lacks male genitalia. All the while helping the police uncover the child pornography ring, Tina develops a romance with Vore. In the process, she discovers that they are both trolls, abducted at birth from their parents and mutilated – their tails severed – to resemble humans. In a graphic love scene in the woods, we see Tina’s strange, Mandragora-root like penis grow out of her like an oversized clitoris, penetrating Vore’s vagina. Unbeknownst to her, she has impregnated Vore (who otherwise gives birth to non-viable, little

imp-like creatures). The film ends with a dark twist: Tina finds out that Vore was part of the child pornography ring, abducting human children that were later subjected to unspeakable treatments. Tina, still in her in-between state of subject/abject, helps the police apprehend Vore, but he manages to escape. Some months later, Tina receives their baby in the mail: her perfectly healthy troll child with an uncertain promise of a fairer upbringing. Somehow a promise emerges from this dialectics of abject and semi-abjectified subject of another ethnicity and rule of law.

The reader may feel mystified by the summary of *Border's* plot. It sounds almost like some dark comedy, a tasteless fantasy melodrama, or a very mediocre horror film. Indeed the film is something else altogether – a rather clever allegory, doubled with a study in affect, since for the viewer to discover the suturing powers of identification, empathising with and embracing Tina wholeheartedly, only to feel what it must be to be not only a non-self-cognisant queer person but also a troll (!), is no mean feat. Not least in the scenes involving Tina and Vore frolicking in nature, the film bypasses the usual audiovisual modes of sight and hearing, highlighting textures – touch, taste, and smell – with a clear goal of making the viewer into a more aware and open subject. While the film deals rather unambiguously with queer rights through the mechanism of a semi- or full-on abjectifying of difference ('the other') by any given system, it also more subtly deconstructs stereotypes about migrants, only to better use them against the viewer. While 'prim and proper' Swedish citizens are shown flaunting the law (be it mildly – the young man smuggling in alcohol; or severely – the businessman carrying child pornography material), Vore is at first stigmatised not for any apparent wrongdoing, but for his striking looks and his lack of socialisation skills (by Swedish norms, that is, as when he is shown devouring a whole plate of smoked salmon from the ferry boat's buffet to another passenger's shock and disgust). That he later appears to have collaborated with humans as an act of revenge against children of man is both revolting and yet justified in a way: Vore is at one and the same time the more abject and less resilient of the two. He even becomes a textbook example of the abject according to Elsaesser's terms, that is, a being 'beyond victimhood, because she or he has no claims to make, which means that the abject commands a particular kind of freedom that probes the limits of both freedom and the law' (Elsaesser 2018: 140). All the while, he is more aware of his condition than Tina, and so he reproduces the models of torture and mutilation that were inflicted upon him when he was taken away from his parents both as a pathological replay of earlier trauma (a victim state) and an embracing of the power of being abject (which bypasses the victim state). The implication, here, of course, is that trolls as native populations were almost entirely exterminated by humans, and that whoever remained was socially mutilated into a strange, painful hybrid of innate/genetic behaviours versus learned sociality, which may turn either into hyperadaptability (turning the handicap into a weapon, as it were, as is the case of Tina) or antisociality/delinquency – a pattern well

recognised among children of immigrants in the Western world. Here, the notion of queering the migrant central to this volume is deconstructed in a rich and productive way: while queerness and sexual non-normativity are not celebrated but probed and identified with in order to question standards of normalcy, the migrant/social minority status is explored in its many facets, showing the inevitable entropy that may be generated by displacement, allegorised here in terms of mutilation, the trolls' severed tails a metonym for their severed familial ties and ethnic roots.

(De)queering the migrant

The protagonist of *Gutland*, Jens, is an outlier, if not a marginal: allegedly a drifter driven from Germany to neighbouring Luxembourg to undertake seasonal work, he soon reveals himself to be a heist runaway, laying low until things back home blow over. He seduces the local belle, Lucy, and soon becomes a favourite of the town. When the police comes looking for a man on the run following a bank robbery in Germany, the villagers cover up for Jens (this attitude will come as a surprise to anyone familiar with Luxembourg, a culture marked by congeniality, perhaps, but also by a dissonance to be found in a most law-abiding small nation, home to massive amounts of tax evasions from all over Europe). A sense of menace pervades the film, however, as Jens can feel that something is off between him and some of the villagers, even as the benevolent *pater familias* Jos treats him like a worthy element and almost as kin. At one point, Jens is lured into the field and nearly killed by a combine harvester, but it is never clear whether the men of the village are actually after him or not. Jens starts a quest of his own in the village, investigating the traces of another man who would appear to have seduced and molested all the women of the township. Jens is about to come to some realisation, only to be cut short by the arrival of his fellow heisters, come to claim their share of the loot – and, likely, to do away with him. In an unexpected turn of events, Jens is rescued by the villagers, who kill the German men and bury their corpses in the forest. Only later, as his investigation continues and becomes more murky, does Jens discover that he has been chosen by the community to ‘replace’ the local womanising and violent brute, who seemingly was also eliminated by the collectivity (Jens finds his body – strangely resembling his – floating in a milk tank). At the same time, Jens appears to undergo a psychotic meltdown wherein his perspective becomes blurred and then is erased like some blank slate. At the end of the film, freed from his past, Jens has become entirely his erstwhile Luxembourgish avatar: a member of the local brass band proudly donning the band's military-like uniform, he may have wholly vanished under the garment of his imposed self, yet become a member of a community beyond any suspicion, its darker secrets hiding down beneath. This act of extreme ‘integration’ and dequeering in a social sense (decriminalising perhaps, deindividuating to be sure) is an act of violence equal if not worse to the one perpetrated on the body of

the protagonist of *Border*, but with very different social implications. Both *Border* and *Gutland* use the genre film as an allegory for queerness and normativity, but also for the treatment bestowed on migrant populations: Tina was adopted at birth from another race, another nation. She is a semi-abject agent, a lesser citizen, even as she is preternaturally sensitive and supremely qualified to do her job. She has filled a niche in this society, without any promise of upward or social mobility. All the while, however discreetly, her fellow citizens keep on reminding her of her otherness, generating a psychosexual and social space in which she is practically isolated and alone, her relationship with her human adoptive father a paltry version of familial bonds (although benevolent, he always concealed her past from her). And her romance with the criminal, full-on abject Vore is struck with the seal of social prohibition. In the end, Tina manages to reconcile these contradictions, but what fate awaits her and Vore's child remains an open question. The open ending seems to suggest that the infant will have to grow hidden if it is to survive unscathed. One thing is certain: if the child remains an abject in the eyes of society in the film, in the viewer's eyes the simultaneous process of embracing queerness and deabjectifying the protagonist is complete. As a result, the edifying denunciation of social hypocrisy performed by the film is doubled with a grim account of a social system (Nordic social democracy) that must necessarily abjectify some of its components.¹

Gutland presents us with another case: Jens does not differ in any substantial way from the town's population. He speaks a very similar language, and the town's folk all know German. His status as abject is contingent on social standing and can be resolved: thus, he is subject to the phagocyte of the larger collective. But in the process, Jens seems to lose far more than he gains: as a relative abject, Jens is neither saint nor victim. He enjoys a fair amount of freedom in his trailer at the periphery of the town, as the film well establishes. The real abjection (the 'meta-abjection' we might say, or the abjection of the viewer towards the character with whom they identify for as long as he is in his state of marginality or mild abjection) occurs when Jens is integrated and subjected to integration, perforce – some form of lobotomy, with effects on the spectator not unlike that of seeing a lobotomised McMurphy in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975, USA, dir. Miloš Forman). Here again, the critique of social integration (becoming one with the social body to the detriment of one's foreign identity) is doubled by a more subtle critique, that of the dialectics generated by the intruder. Whereas in, say, the films of Michael Haneke or Lars von Trier the intruder dismantles and disturbs the established social order (sometimes with apocalyptic consequences), here he is absorbed and digested. This 'digestion' could serve interestingly as an allegory of the ways in which globalisation has operated in Europe, particularly on smaller nations with large neighbours. In the case of Luxembourg, this could be seen as an expression of how the country has endeavoured to retain its linguistic and cultural identity while being pitted between Germany and France, and also how the new global

banking agreements have threatened to annihilate Luxembourg's economic backbone: a banking centre for North-West Europe and haven for small-time tax evaders from neighbouring countries. Jens, then, would evoke at once the felon who naively thinks he can stash his loot in Luxembourg, lay low, and disappear unbeknownst to the locals, as well as a symbol of the new electronic banking rules that have turned the banking secret into a thing of the past.

Witches

Norway's *Thelma* tells a story of witchcraft in the modern era: Thelma is a young woman about to go to college who discovers her suppressed homosexuality. This 'unspeakable' trait is doubled by a dark secret, of which the young woman has no direct awareness either, as it dates back to her childhood and has also been repressed: she has spent her childhood and adolescence in a secluded fanatic Christian household, with her father Trond and her disabled mother Unni. When the time comes to go to college in Oslo, Thelma understandably has a hard time socialising and quickly develops epileptic seizures. Shortly thereafter Thelma realises that she is indeed attracted to another young woman, Anja, and the onset of her homosexual love gives rise to psychokinetic powers of great magnitude, to the point that it enables Thelma to cause people to be teleported or even dematerialised permanently (Figure 15.2). It is thus that she causes Anja to vanish by sheer mental force. Shocked and confused by Anja's disappearance (of which she does not know she is the cause), Thelma returns home. There, her memories resurface, including those of her long-forgotten baby brother.

Figure 15.2 Anja (Kaya Wilkins) and Thelma (Eili Harboe) in *Thelma* (2017): a forbidden or dreaded love-affair

Source: *Thelma* (2017), directed by Joachim Trier © Motlys, Film i Väst, Snowglobe Films, Filmpool Nord, B-Reel, Le Pacte, and Thunderbird Releasing (2018).

It turns out that Thelma, feeling neglected as a child in favour of her male sibling, also made him disappear, dematerialising the noisy toddler from his bath and making him reappear under the ice of a nearby frozen lake. In the melodramatic turn of events that ensue, her father finds the child and hesitates to shoot Thelma before eventually recanting. Instead, Trond opts for the route of a strict radical Christian education, to repress and possibly eradicate Thelma's 'aberrant' gift. In essence, Trond performs an action of glossing over or covering up for what he regards as Thelma's abjection (Barbara Creed's 'monstrous-feminine', in short – see Creed 1993), thereby also denying her true power and agency, and de facto turning her into a victim of patriarchy. In the meantime, Thelma's traumatised mother Unni jumps off a bridge, not dying but suffering permanent disability – a victim more than an abject. It is thus in a household with an asymmetrical parental structure that Thelma is raised and her proclivities contained. Having returned home, now a young adult discovering her full potential, embracing her abject status ('the witch') and recanting her position as a victim, Thelma confronts her parents about her past. Realising that it is time to tell her the truth, her parents explain to her that Thelma can make her deep wishes come true, an ability inherited from her grandmother, who in turn caused the disappearance of her husband and was kept heavily medicated in a mental institution – again by Trond. Sensing that his intentions are now similar towards her, Thelma causes her father to self-combust. At the same time, she realises that she can cure the ill and resurrect the dead: she revives a dead bird, cures her mother, and makes Anja reappear. Now in control of her power, Thelma resumes a normal life in Oslo, enjoying an unbridled and guilt-free relationship with Anja. In a subtly dark open ending, however, it remains unclear as to whether she has also used her powers to make Anja fall in love with her. The film's politics may be those of the abject fully shedding their previous status of victim and ushering in a new era of postabject agency, beyond the corpse of patriarchy, the European welfare system, and social democracy.

Finally, *Queen of Hearts* tells the story of Anne, an affluent and competent middle-aged lawyer who specialises in defending victims of sexual violence. She lives in Denmark with her husband Peter and their twin daughters.² One day, Peter tells Anne that his seventeen-year-old son from an earlier marriage, Gustav, will come from Sweden to live with them. At first hardly thrilled, Anne quickly discovers that she is irrepressibly attracted to her stepson. She rapidly enters into the illicit affair, raping Gustav in his bedroom one night. At first the rape leads to an idyll, Anne showering her husband's son with presents and attentions. But very quickly, as friends and neighbours start to notice Gustav's strange behaviour around her, Anne realises the madness of the situation and becomes afraid of what consequences it may hold, not least in view of her lucrative and powerful position as a lawyer defending victims of abuse similar to the one she has just been enacting on her stepson. Unable however to assume responsibility for her actions, Anne alienates Gustav from Peter, to the point of having him send his son away. The young

man, unable in turn to cope with the unfairness of the situation, silenced in his desperate attempts to be heard and for the truth to come out, drifts away, his family bonds severed, and is found dead in the wintry forest – a form of suicide, no doubt. While Peter probably knows the truth, he is in denial over the cause of his son's death, as both he and Anne are hell-bent on maintaining decorum, saving face, and preserving their home and their young daughters. Anne, who is fully cognisant of the fact that she has committed the irreparable, is left to attend Gustav's funeral and come to terms and live with the tragic consequences of her acts.

While *Thelma* normalises homosexuality and the 'demonic' powers of the protagonist, pitting them, in its manifest critique of patriarchy associated with manipulation and obscurantism, against the far more regulatory and sometimes monstrous nature of organised religion, *Queen of Hearts* serves as a cautionary tale against power. Scripted and directed by a woman, the latter refuses to present Anne as a manipulative, cold-hearted psychopath, but it does condemn the phallic woman she has become who reproduces the patterns of power and those of society at large – silencing and abjectifying the alien/foreign body which it at first feasts upon (the exoticising and instrumentalising gesture of sexually molesting a young, defenceless, but also able and attractive, body). Both films interrogate the fear, in patriarchal society, of powerful, independent women – and the desire of patriarchy to control their power and independence, or to legitimise its fear thereof. Both, too, demonstrate the inevitable mechanisms of regulation, repression, and

Figure 15.3 Anne (Trine Dyrholm) and Gustav (Gustav Lindh) in *Queen of Hearts* (2019): a forbidden love-affair

Source: *Queen of Hearts/Dronningen* (2019), directed by May el-Toukhy © Nordisk Film, and Breaking Glass Pictures (USA) (2019).

resurgence associated with and against the power these women wield. The way *Thelma's* no doubt disruptive, powerful gift generates fear and must be contained is a direct evocation of a community's effort to contain and regulate (or eliminate) the alien. Anne's position of power is critiqued and shown as a double-edged weapon: her engagement with victims of abuse, and the way she, as a lawyer, encourages a twisting of truth during testimonies in court, ironically turn against her. She becomes what she attempts over and over again to thwart, and she destroys those she is meant to defend, before lying and concealing the truth as she had done before in court 'for the right cause'. The films thus interrogate the duplicity of power and desire (not least through imageries of mirrors and doublings meant to evoke, in a somewhat cliché gesture, the duplicity and two-sided nature of the characters' actions), but they also engage, for all the abled and beautiful bodies of their protagonists, with the question of abjection and abjectifying of the other.

*Tales of objects, tales of liberation; tales of victims,
tales of entrapment*

In the four films discussed, society is shown performing a de/abjectifying, one way or another, of the protagonists who are led – or lead themselves – into self-willed or non-deliberate states of abjection. It appears clearly in the case of *Border* and *Thelma* where the protagonists, by way of their supernatural nature, deliberately abjectify themselves to gain agency and perhaps happiness. In *Gutland*, Jens is at one and the same time dequeered and deabjectified by the community, leaving his better part (the part of freedom) behind, and becoming a victim of the system unawares. In *Queen of Hearts*, Anne at first uses and embraces Gustav – who is de facto the victim of repeated rape – before abjectifying him wholesale, causing his death. All four films have in common a narrative of liberation and emancipation, although they play out very differently: *Border* and *Thelma* present their characters as having experienced a positive epiphany (however gruesome) and accomplishing partial emancipation through self-abjection. They cannot reveal their secret identity, but they can hope to manoeuvre Northern European society as discerning and powerful women, beyond the law of men. Conversely, the protagonists of *Gutland* and *Queen of Hearts* are obliterated or damaged in their quest for emancipation: Jens is completely absorbed and sheds his past delinquent self behind to become a perfectly integrated Luxembourgish subject, while Gustav commits suicide out of despair. In the two latter cases, Giorgio Agamben's theory of the *homo sacer* is more pertinent even than Elsaesser's abject. Although Jens and Gustav are European citizens (German and Swedish respectively), they find themselves in neighbouring states in a situation of socioeconomic (and legal) precariousness. While both men at first undergo a process of 'deabjectification' (they become objects of sexual desire for their hosts), this is done hand in hand with stripping them of their rights – a stripping bare of their status as legal and social subjects: Jens will

be 'deabjectedified' to the point of alienation and psychological annihilation; Gustav will be rejected and violently abjectedified, silenced in his right to voice the truth of his predicament. In both cases, the characters become Agambenian 'bare lives': they embody a truth about society that is inconvenient (Jens) or intolerable (Gustav) and must be sacrificed (see Agamben 1998). And so, bereft of any genuine legal protection, they are killed (one metaphorically, the other literally).

Together, these four narratives of abjection serve as a sobering lesson of both, as Elsaesser pointed out, 'what neoliberalism does to human beings and the social contract' (Elsaesser 2018: 129), and, more specifically, of the fate proposed to migrant, minority, or any form of precarious groups. For if finding fellow nationals or people of the same religion or even sexual orientation can generate bonds, this process is stricken by the stigma of withdrawing into minority (i.e. peripheral, socially abject) status. Although migrants are protected by some laws, they can also be violently reduced to bare lives (the Agambenian 'state of exception' (Agamben 2005) not so far removed from the 'state of emergency' implemented by several European states after the terrorist attacks of 2015–16 and now during the Covid-19 pandemic) and excluded from the state where they sought refuge, without having committed any crime and without any solid legal protection. They are abjectedified also in the conditions by which they are contained. In order to get out of this literal precarious containment (rudimentary camps with tents in public squares and parks, overcrowded rooms in disaffected military barracks in places such as Ixelles in Belgium and Leiden in the Netherlands), not to mention the untenable legal and psychological limbo they are maintained in for lack of a clearly defined legal status, refugees are encouraged to integrate: to learn the language of the 'host' country, a trade, go to school. Spuriously enough, a will to become integrated into the social body, which germinates in many a resilient refugee's mind, is concomitant with something that constitutes perhaps an even greater violence bestowed upon them (even as it is validated by the host states and compensated with a modicum of increased social rights), namely a shedding of one's own 'old' identity that can at best be negotiated by the hybridising of necessities. In other words, the migrant is confronted with a rather impossible choice between abject or victim status: the former undesirable yet with an undeniable disturbing, disruptive quality, and perhaps power; the latter apparently more desirable but ultimately threatening to dissolve the self's very essence and seat of political agency (however immanent and un(ac)countable (for)). This is a predicament that many in the host countries, even those on the left and in the centre, fail to recognise for lack of imagination or empathy.

Seeing and touching, differently

Beyond the rather obvious critique of the status of minorities contained in the four works discussed, I would like to close my analysis by pointing to

the dimension of affect that powerfully traverses them. The way in which they each fail to conform to certain models seems like a parapractical resistance to a homogenic (read ‘commercial’, or even ‘Global’, or ‘Hollywood’) industry – their own stolid, sturdy way of standing abject to the dominant model. As a function of their embracing genre, all four films emphasise – over traditional narration, dialogue, and even the visual/descriptive – dimensions of textures and touch. This is very clear in the way the gaze carries a haptic, sometimes gripping, quality, and the sound mix is carefully executed. But this concern goes further than mere technical aspects of sound and cinematography, spilling into the motivic and thematic concerns of the films. For instance, *Thelma* engages fascinatingly with touchscreens and surfaces: the way Anja disappears into the surface of a window is in direct dialogue with the smartphones with which the characters communicate through the film. This is also strongly evoked in the film’s final image, with the two youths walking on campus with the typical hunch that has afflicted the posture of Generation Z-ers who grew up with smartphones in the 2010s. *Border* deals with smell but mostly touch in a quasi-haptic way, as when Tina walks on moss and mulch in the forest, or gleefully bathes in the cold waters of a lake. *Gutland* opens on beautiful images of dimly lit wheat fields that can almost be sensed (the image reinforced by the extraordinary soundtrack of wind rustling in the blades of wheat, immersing us in the countryside setting). And the film’s greatest set-piece is one in which Jens, lost in the field of tall wheat, cannot see and is confused by the direction of sound: he must guide himself with instinct and touch (Figure 15.4). Likewise, he is ‘blind’ to his predicament in the making, not knowing really where the deadly blow

Figure 15.4 Jens (Frederick Lau), about to hide in the wheat field from what he perceives as a threat from the local community, in *Gutland* (2017)

Source: *Gutland* (2017), directed by Govinda Van Maele © Bauer & Blum, Les Films Fauves, Novak Production, and Tarantula (Luxembourg) (2018).

will come from and only sensing the doom or menace that will eventually befall him. One of the most moving scenes of *Queen of Hearts* involves Anne looking at herself, naked, in the mirror, relating the senses of sight and touch, as she painfully comes to term with her fading beauty and ageing. Gustav, reduced to silence and denied his right to voice the injustice he experiences, is removed from sight, his dead body never shown – only alluded to in its frozen, bare, and forever silent solidity. All this suggests that when talking about minorities, sexual and otherwise, sight becomes a scrutinised and fraught mode: it is the dominant mode of patriarchy, the realm of the evident and visible, as in the visual obscenity of the Western media showing the unforgettable image of the dead child Alan Kurdi on the beach – part of a group of eleven Syrians who drowned on 2 September 2015 in the Aegean Sea off the coastal town of Bodrum in Turkey.³ By contrast, smell (*Border*) and touch (*Thelma*) still carry more authenticity, and they provide minorities and dogged communities with the means to regain dignity and, in the end, reclaim the realm of the visible as a shared space. Certainly, it is in the way these films enable us to appreciate that we are given, through them, not only to feel but also to look differently, that they are most productively political.

Ultimately, what the four films share in common is the topic of integration and the more-often-than-not abject failure of this project in a neoliberal society. *Border* proposes tenuous and reduced models of community among people of the same ‘race’ and sexual orientation. *Gutland* highlights how, in a case-study example of Foucauldian biopolitics, a society will turn an outside member into part of its social body or eliminate them. *Thelma* addresses the topic of queerness and coming out as an important means of dialectically bypassing older societal models, all the while discreetly thematising the corollary question of touchscreen and portable social media devices and allegorising the dimension of touch in the shaping of a new *Gemeinschaft* over the old, traditional, religious *Gesellschaft*. Lastly, *Queen of Hearts* shows how precarious a ‘multi-kulti’ *Gesellschaft* can be if it is founded not on a community (the *Gemeinschaft*) but on a score of rather alienated bourgeois individuals who will objectify and instrumentalise the other, even as the latter happens to be a member of the family. Whilst individually they may be flawed on one level or another, as a conglomerate of sorts these films create a cogent network of meaning, revealing how cinematic genre has a renewed valence in addressing deep societal issues and dealing with the *homo sacer* status, and how abjection, self-abjectifying, and objectification are played out and can be productively used (if only as parapraxis) by people from minorities – be they sexual, ethnic, or indeed geopolitical. That such works can be empowering to representatives of these groups is far from certain, but that they express the anxiety of established entities over the organising and mobilising into genuine political communities of those who successfully resisted uniformisation is both unsettling and exhilarating. Indeed, that these films contribute to an expansion of an empathetic perception of

minorities, whatever they may be, and therefore propose ways of identifying with minorities, is both empowering and noteworthy – even as it, too, reveals the normative and manipulative ways of any mainstream medium which can – and probably always does – cut both ways.

Notes

- 1 This motif recurs over and over in recent Nordic films: think of the status of lower-middle-class, Middle Eastern people in the art world satire *The Square* (2017, Sweden/Germany/France/Denmark, dir. Ruben Östlund), or that of mentally disturbed people in *The Guilty/Den Skyldige* (2018, Denmark, dir. Gustav Möller).
- 2 The actress playing Anne, Tryne Dynholm, is Danish, while the actor playing her husband, Magnus Krepper, is Swedish, addressing subtly the boundaries and borders between these two proximate countries – with a past of condescension and stereotypes from Sweden looking down on Denmark as the poor, lesser other.
- 3 This revolting image was front page of most European mainstream media outlets the following day or shortly thereafter. That it was released just as Germany was making a push to admit more migrants on European soil raised a series of queries regarding the ethics of using the image of the dead boy. A number of conspiracy theories arose in this context, some stating that the position of the child in the picture was arranged for maximum dramatic effect.