5 Queering the cinematic field

Migrant love and rural beauty in *God's Own Country* (2017) and *A Moment in the Reeds* (2017)

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From urban straight to rural queer

To appreciate how far European cinema has evolved in its portrayal of differently gendered migrants, it is useful in the first instance to consider migratory film as a genre within a national film tradition. Stephen Frears's pioneering 2002 film *Dirty Pretty Things* (UK), part anthropological documentary, part thriller, and part tentative love story, set around a large London hotel, initiated a new trend of British films about contemporary migrants by exploring the multicultural urban grit of the metropolis within a largely social realist idiom. While involving the gruesome trade of body parts, it offered a realistic consideration of the travails and struggles of urban life experienced by migrants in Britain. *Dirty Pretty Things* was, in fact, part of a new cycle of British feature films about migration produced in the late 1990s and 2000s focusing on migrant experience in the UK rather than the journey itself (as documented, say, in Michael Winterbottom's *In This World* (2002, UK)), and which presented, as Gareth Millington terms it, a novel and radical aesthetic of planetary urbanisation based upon the mobility of the migrant and the dissolution of the city (Millington 2016). Other films in the cycle include Pawel Pawlikowski's *Last Resort* (2000, UK), set in the seaside squalor of Margate, Shane Meadows's drama/comedy *Somers Town* (UK, 2008), located in the central London working-class district of the same name, and Ken Loach's *It's A Free World* (2007, UK/Italy/Germany/Spain/Poland), an activist drama unfolding in East London. Yet if such films offered a necessary alternative to the 'cultural cityism' of previous works about migration, in each case the city haunts the frame like a spectre: the city that has been lost, the 'present' city that excludes, and the possible 'cities of refuge' of the future (Millington 2016).

In the particular case of *Dirty Pretty Things*, which takes place largely at night, the notion of spectre applies equally to the characters, none of whom is native English: the hotel receptionist Okwe is an illegal Nigerian doctor (defined by the British authorities as an 'illegal immigrant'); his Turkish co-worker Senay is a refugee without papers; Juliette is a feisty British Caribbean hooker plying her trade; the doorman Ivan is Russian; Señor Juan is a

hotel employee making use of the hotel for his own money-making schemes; and Guo Yi is a Chinese night porter in a morgue. Secondary characters include a motley collection of Somali, Nigerian, and Kenyan men who work at the cab company and a South Asian owner of a sweatshop (even the immigration inspectors who make the dreaded surprise checks for illegal aliens are of colour). Despite their omnipresence, however, the ethnically diverse characters of the film's busy narrative remain largely unseen to the world outside and are effectively invisible. As Esther Peeren has argued in her account of *Dirty Pretty Things*, such lack of full visibility translates not into the desirable ability to see without being seen (as in Derrida's 'visor effect', for example), but rather into an extreme form of vulnerability, for what is at issue is the disempowerment of being considered insignificant and expendable, and therefore overlooked (see Peeren 2014).¹ Indeed, the film established the trope in British cinema of the undocumented migrant as invisible ghost, taken up in Nick Broomfield's *Ghosts* (UK, 2006), based on the 2004 Morecambe Bay cockling disaster, where a young Chinese girl is smuggled illegally into the UK so she can support her son and family in China.

Yet more is at stake in *Dirty Pretty Things*. From the outset, when Okwe (Chiwetel Ejiofor) is entrusted to remedy the taxi drivers' venereal diseases, the film is littered with both sexual acts (usually forced sex and fellatio) and references or allusions to sex, as in Okwe's impassioned, accusatory declaration: 'We are the people you do not see. We are the ones who drive your cabs. We clear your rooms and suck your cocks'. It is vital to the smooth running of the narrative, however, that the putative love affair between Okwe and Senay (Audrey Tautou) remain entirely chaste. In fact, Okwe is not presented in sexual terms at all, as if that might potentially jeopardise his portrayal as the caring, smart, fatherly, wise, and ethically minded 'good' migrant. A tension is thus created between sex as crude transaction (part of an illegal migrant's daily survival at the hands of corrupt employers and enslaving middle-men in Europe), and a lack of physical desire and passion between migrants as the very condition of their loyalty and solidarity to each other. For this reason, despite Ejiofor's vivid performance, Okwe remains, like the film's framing of London as a generic global metropolis, more a symbolic, universal figure of the African migrant eking out a precarious existence in the West than a fully fleshed-out individual who also happens to be a migrant.² The same applies to the other films mentioned, where migrant sexual desire is almost never allowed to rear its head, even when, as in *It's a Free World*, the protagonist Angie, a white, working-class young woman and single mother, becomes romantically involved with a migrant called Karol, an English-speaking Pole in the same predicament as those whom she recruits for her work agency (initially only for legal immigrants, then migrants without papers). In the case of *Somers Town*, the two boys can form only an idealising and wholly non-sexual attachment with an older, glamorous, French waitress.

It is in the context of this general and still prevalent depiction in British narrative cinema of the migrant as at once urban, straight, and chaste, that Francis Lee's debut feature film *God's Own Country* (2017, UK) – a gay romance set, as the title suggests, in the county of Yorkshire – blazes such a daring new path, for in the very act of sexualising the migrant film genre it also decisively queers it. Johnny (Josh O'Connor) is a troubled and embittered, twenty-something, closeted gay man obliged to look after the family sheep farm where he lives with his disabled father (Ian Hart) along with his ageing grandmother (Gemma Jones). He finds relief from his daily frustrations and resentments only through binge drinking and casual sex. All this starts to change, however, when a Romanian migrant worker Gheorghe (Alec Secareanu) is hired for the lambing season, and Johnny falls slowly in love for the first time. In its foregrounding of queer male desire and sexuality within a realist framework and family milieu, the film harks back to Frears's earlier film, *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985, UK), one of the key works of new British cinema in the 1980s which featured a romance between a young white skinhead (also called Johnny) and his former school-friend Omar, a second-generation Pakistani immigrant. Indeed, certain scenes in *God's Own Country*, such as Johnny and Gheorghe sharing a small bath and opening up to each other in carefree banter, evoke the lyrical, erotic moments between Omar (Gordon Warneke) and Johnny (Daniel Day-Lewis) flicking soapsuds at each other in a positive image of unity and hybridity. Yet the setting of this interracial and cross-generational comedy drama was the diasporic Asian community of inner London under Thatcherism, and it raised hard-hitting questions about postcolonial identity in relation to the politics of race, class, and gender. Moreover, while *God's Own Country* has a similar pro-immigration subtext and has been hailed by some as a love story for contemporary, Brexit-era Britain, with symbolic appeal for gentleness at a time of national instability (see, for instance, Gilbey 2017), its earnest – at times dour – drama is entirely different in tone and ambition from *My Beautiful Laundrette*, which played seductively with social and sexual taboos in provocative and subversive fashion.

With its intensive focus on one man's gradual understanding of himself as gay and his gradual acquiring of sensitivity and tenderness through affection and erotic love, *God's Own Country* corresponds more to what Andrew Moor has termed the 'New Gay Sincerity', that is, the current trend in independent queer British cinema towards low-key naturalism which references also the high-style postmodernism of oppositional 1990s New Queer Cinema (Moor 2018). By recording quotidian and largely non-metropolitan gay lives, such cinema aims to achieve both LGBTIQ+ specificity and a universal application. A prime case in point is Andrew Haigh's *Weekend* (2011, UK), shot entirely on location in Nottingham, though it could, in fact, be any other mid-sized northern provincial town. The film's agenda, Moor argues, is to marry its *vérité* realism – including sensitively and naturalistically filmed

sex scenes that are neither overly eroticised nor subject to an explicitly pornographic grammar (the two protagonists's bodies are not hyperbolically muscled or lingeringly objectified) – to patterns of static long shots that detach the viewer from the material (Moor 2018: 5–7). In Moor's neat formalisation, the film displays a commitment to a mode of observational realism founded in the long take and buttressed by rack focusing and camera movement which effectively edit what we notice within each shot. Such 'emphatic naturalism' characterises also *God's Own Country* with its frank depiction both of sex (explicit rough sex outside in the mud, bracing after-sex conversation while naked in the bath, used condoms lying on the floor, full-frontal shots of both men naked from the waist down and casually displaying their genitals), and of rural reality (brooding grey dawns, the dirt and muck of farmwork, lambing and examining of pregnant heifers undertaken by the two leads themselves) – all intensified here by Joshua James Richards's luminous cinematography capturing the dramatic Pennine landscape.

By heading into the more racially homogenous and traditionally 'straight' regions of the northern British rural countryside (the film takes place in and around the Silsden area of Keighley in West Yorkshire), *God's Own Country* takes New Gay Sincerity into entirely new social and migrant territory. Often regarded as a site of gay oppression and repression – an isolated, hostile zone where both gays and migrants can be invisible figures – the rural countryside is presented here as an authentic space of refuge and potential liberation.³ Indeed, the film traces a clear and affirmative arc: a personal journey from desperate solitude and abjection (Johnny's random, impersonal, almost feral, anonymous sex performed in a state of self-hate) to domestic and spiritual awakening through the acceptance of emotional attraction and loving commitment. It is through Gheorghe's kind and dexterous hands – hands that can skin a dead lamb clean and put its still-warm pelt on an orphaned baby (the all-but-dead runt of the litter) in order to persuade another ewe to suckle it and keep it alive – that Johnny, himself a lost lamb, will learn finally to accept vulnerability and articulate his feelings, even about his mother whom he lost early, while at the same time opening himself up to emotion and fulgurant sensuality (the pleasures of a fireside kiss, a sustained caress). Sometimes this process can appear overdetermined, as when the portentous birds heard at one point flying above are revealed to be swallows that migrate and mate for life. Yet the film is also about the redemption of place, for Johnny's self-disgust has been induced in large part by feeling imprisoned by a legacy (the farm) that he rejects. Following his father's second debilitating stroke which leaves him comatose in hospital, Johnny will eventually secure his place on the farm with Gheorghe. Despite their temporary falling-out after Johnny's reversion to old sexual habits, prompting Gheorghe's abrupt departure to an arable farm in Fife, the two men are back together at the end and free to establish a new life on the farm together as a couple.

Figure 5.1 The very picture of New Gay Sincerity: Johnny (Josh O'Connor) opening up to Gheorghe (Alec Secareanu) after their first night together in *God's Own Country* (2017)

Source: *God's Own Country* (2017), directed by Francis Lee © Dales Productions Ltd/BFI, and Lionsgate/Picturehouse Entertainment (2018).

Migrant space foreclosed

God's Own Country is a consummately crafted film charting sensuously, yet unsentimentally, an intense, transformative relationship and the creation of softer, more supple forms of masculinity inflected by class and cultural and ethnic difference. Reading the film phenomenologically, Alice Pember has justly praised its startling affective force and haptic focus on small visual details, such as the textures of flowers and lambs' wool which Gheorghe carefully tends, to which we may add the lovely moments of Johnny smelling Gheorghe's clothing or finally reaching out to touch the hand of his hospitalised father. As Pember suggests, the empathy generated between the audience and the screen is modelled by Gheorghe's sensibility and sensitivity: not only does Gheorghe cherish the natural scenery (Gheorghe: 'It's beautiful here!'), but also he displays genuine care and love for the animals which Johnny has been taught to brutalise for profit. By learning not simply to assert his superiority over animals but rather embrace what he shares with lambs (a basic need for food, water, shelter, and protection), Johnny gradually develops a non-hetero-patriarchal way of relating to others grounded in their sameness and particularity. The result, Pember persuasively argues, is an alternative queer politics rooted in the empathetic embodied communications between human and animal, spectator and screen (see Pember 2018).

Yet the achievement of *God's Own Country* is also marred in a number of crucial ways, starting with its largely complacent use of the trope in European cinema of the migrant other as saviour. Possessing, like Okwe in *Dirty Pretty Things*, 'secret', intuitive knowledge and calm, moral authority, as well as the gift of expression, Gheorghe is the more worldly, older, Eastern man who initiates the lonely, loutish, and repressed pale Englishman into both meaningful emotional and erotic loving, and the appreciation of natural beauty (until now viewed by Johnny as a virtual tomb). As Shima Vezvaei notes, as the colours grow brighter and daffodils light up the kitchen table, Gheorghe, a supreme jack-of-all-trades (he even finds time to make cheese), appears less a character than an image: that of 'an exotic saviour of the lost "Western soul" in a patronising dichotomy of West versus Other' (Vezvaei 2017). Indeed, with his wide, soft, soulful eyes, light beard, deep voice, and all-round sensuous charm, Gheorghe is consistently exoticised as the swarthy, smouldering, itinerant, handsome other. What makes this portrayal even more dubious is that his own backstory is made effectively irrelevant and denied context. Gheorghe reveals virtually nothing about himself or his former life in Romania, except that 'Springs are very beautiful', although he does murmur vaguely, while confiding his need for peace and a place to belong, that he suffered heartbreak in Romania ('I can't do that again. There was someone'). Moreover, nobody defends him when he is bullied by Johnny's family, the female bartender, or the racist white man at the local pub who flicks beer at him while the drunken Johnny is having it away in a casual encounter in the toilets. Johnny himself even tars him on several occasions with the ethnic slur 'gypsy' or 'gypo'. At the end, when a repentant Johnny tracks Gheorghe down in Scotland and asks clumsily for forgiveness, the other grants it almost instantly in a shallow final dialogue that, as Vezvaei rightly states, plays out almost like a standard Hollywood rom-com (Vezvaei 2017).

Directly linked to these glaring ethical pitfalls of representation is the film's construction of the queer male gaze, which raises unsettling issues of point of view and positionality. The formal axe around which the film functions is the act of looking and being looked at, in particular the suspicious staring of the foreign 'outsider' by the white 'insider', starting with the moment Johnny first picks Gheorghe up at night in his Range Rover to take him back to the farm. By means of a high-angle subjective POV shot, the viewer assumes the position of Johnny looking out through the car window at a lowly seasonal migrant worker waiting below in the indistinguishable shadows of the station entrance. 'Fuck's sake!', Johnny bleats out. No reverse-field shot suggesting a return subjective gaze is supplied; instead, Gheorghe is automatically positioned as the alien, foreign other. From then on, the ever-proximate camera hugging close to Johnny's body is almost invariably aligned with the Englishman's point of view, even if not always in the strict form of a subjective POV shot. For example, when a half-naked Johnny enters the kitchen where Gheorghe is being fed by the grandmother, we are

immediately invited through a simple eye-line match to share Johnny's subjective point of view of Gheorghe in a high-angle POV shot. Even while Johnny is penetrating from behind, with almost brute contempt, a young, blond-haired farm assistant he has casually picked up at a sheep market, we are treated to a subjective POV shot of what he is observing outside through the bars of the livestock trailer. The first truly erotic POV shot is naturally a subjective POV shot from Johnny's perspective: the raw sight of Gheorghe outside the lambing shed wearing only jeans (00:29:40). No other character in the film enjoys such privileged point-of-view access, least of all Gheorghe who, after first being objectified as other and inferior, dutifully assumes his position as an object of erotic/exotic attraction. Significantly, one of the rare subjective POV shots from Gheorghe's point of view, when we pass from Gheorghe looking down tenderly and desiringly at Johnny sleeping in front of him (0:35:29) to an angled close-up gaze of Johnny's neck (00:35:33), goes unnoticed and unreturned, as if almost irrelevant.

The magnetic attraction of the camera towards Johnny appears unstoppable. Later, when the two men arrive at the farmhouse back from the moors on a buggy driven by Johnny, a cut to the grandmother staring down at them from a top window in the farmhouse is followed by Johnny looking up in her direction – Gheorghe can do no more here than act in kind by following the direction of Johnny's gaze. Hence, if Gheorghe represents the point of emotional and moral gravity in the film due to his innate good sense

Figure 5.2 'I will fuck with you': Gheorghe (Alec Secareanu) making his intentions known after Johnny (Josh O'Connor) has insulted him again in *God's Own Country* (2017)

Source: *God's Own Country* (2017), directed by Francis Lee © Dales Productions Ltd/BFI, and Lionsgate/Picturehouse Entertainment (2018).

and kinship with the material world, the camera's visual point of gravity is only ever that of Johnny. Even the occasional moments of pathetic fallacy, when the vast landscape is framed as oppressive or expansive according to changing personal mood, are reserved for Johnny alone. At best, the film provides objective two-shots of the two together fighting naked, then rutting together in the mud, then in the bath or in bed, either in medium or long shot. Hence, at the very moment the thematic and geographical field is being opened up queerly in *God's Own Country*, the cinematic field itself is being squarely reduced and foreclosed, with clear boundaries designated for the non-indigenous and always secondary other.

In a film where every composition and movement is presented as momentous, what happens in the pivotal scene of Johnny's sudden appreciation of natural beauty is crucial. With Gheorghe again leading the way, Johnny ascends to a high peak in the countryside. We move from an objective close-up shot of Johnny inspired by Gheorghe to look out (0:50:09), to a reverse-field shot of the landscape (0:50:10–0:50:14), then back to Johnny, with the figure of Gheorghe still present within the frame but more like an outlier lurking in the distance while peering out over the horizon in a side direction. The reverse-field shot is clearly a subjective POV shot from Johnny's point of view, as he takes in the stunning panorama of the landscape below and opens his eyes to the extraordinary landscape as if undergoing an epiphany. The sequence is extended for another twenty seconds by a series of objective two-shots from different angles and focal distances as the two men together marvel at the bounteous sweep of the landscape. Yet such shared wonder does not compensate for the fact that, although the landscape is largely filtered via Gheorghe's receptive gaze, he remains here essentially an enabler, retraining his maladjusted lover in the art of seeing, rather than a fully autonomous agent on a visual standing with Johnny. The same in matters of intimacy where Gheorghe is required to do all the necessary leg-work in the slow, staggered build-up to their first romantic kiss and caress in extreme close-up (00:45:32) – the moment when Johnny finally recognises, under Gheorghe's patient guidance, the sensuous pleasure of kissing which he had aggressively refused up till now.

The increasing use of two-shots in *God's Own Country* teases with how open, equal, and inclusive the cinematic frame can be. The wide-angle shots during the tense reunion of Johnny and Gheorghe at the farm in Fife emphasise the distance between the two figures facing off against each other from opposite sides of the frame. Johnny finds himself unable to apologise for his cruel and disrespectful actions at the pub (Gheorghe: 'Is that it?'), yet with his tearful demeanour and some well-rehearsed blunt talk initiated once again by Gheorghe ('You're a freak!'; 'So are you!'; 'Faggot!'; 'Fuck off!'; 'Faggot!') the two men are quickly back together in the middle of the frame in a two-shot of passionate kissing (01:38:35). Should Gheorghe's remarkable and quite implausible decision to return now with Johnny to Yorkshire (even though, as he explained earlier, he was determined not to repeat mistakes made before

in Romania: ‘I’ve been through this before on my farm, not again’) be put down in the end purely to insatiable physical lust and desire for Johnny? Or is it more his desperate need simply to belong? As we ponder this question, the film goes into two-shot overdrive with the men’s return to the farm. After seeing Gheorghe’s initial living quarters (the caravan) being towed away, the couple turn around to face the camera before striding in unison towards the door of the farmhouse in the centre of the frame, with Gheorghe deferentially gesturing to Johnny to enter first. This symbolic crossing of the threshold to a new life together sealed by a two-shot – a spectacular queer rendition of the romantic happy ending – feels like an unjustified leap into the realms of fantasy, to the point precisely of gay ‘insincerity’. For if the two can now, as a couple, redefine their relationship and build a new livelihood together – a process that will doubtlessly be complicated by the stark realities of being a committed gay couple in a patently xenophobic local farming community – their lives together will, of course, ultimately lie in the hands of the UK Immigration Service. This issue is never raised in the film, which precludes any engagement with political issues and the related socio-economic implications (it was already in postproduction when the Brexit referendum took place in June 2016). Nevertheless, it remains a matter of genuine speculation whether Gheorghe will be able to stay and set up roots as a naturalised British citizen (will he even be able to apply for SOGI asylum post-Brexit?).

Releasing the multi-field

With its fervent, fully embodied and embedded portrayal of alternatively gendered migrant desire, *God’s Own Country* illustrates how far British migrant cinema has travelled since *Dirty Pretty Things*. Yet, for the reasons given, it is severely compromised by its persistent and fundamentally uncritical use of troubling formal and thematic tropes, aggravated by a gleeful adherence to the expectations of genre. Such ethico-aesthetic limitations are thrown into acute relief by another contemporaneous European, queer migrant, rural drama, also working within the mainstream genre of romance but this time set in the countryside of Finland: *A Moment in the Reeds* (2017, Finland/UK, dir. Mikko Makela), a film hailed as the first-ever Finnish gay feature. Although the social context here is very different – this is not a working-class farming community but a remote area for second homes on Lake Saimaa in South-East Finland – the basic narrative set-up appears strikingly similar to that of *God’s Own Country*: a muscular, dark-haired, Syrian refugee (Tareq), an architect by profession, is hired by the father of a young, fair-haired Finnish man (Leevi), a student in Paris, to help with manual work (the renovation of the family lakehouse for sale). A similar simmering tension exists between father and the son, not only because Leevi (played by Janne Puustinen) has returned home reluctantly in midsummer, but also because he still blames his taciturn father for the unclear, possibly murky circumstances around his now-deceased mother’s departure many years before. Further, with its stylistic sparseness and restraint, *A Moment in the Reeds* displays some of the defining features of

New Gay Sincerity, such as the long take and a documentary-like emphasis on naturalism and authenticity, punctuated by sudden swells of queer desire and rapture in the bosom of nature recorded with impressive candour. The same meditative attention to material and affective surfaces and textures witnessed in *God's Own Country* is visible here too, but focused more on natural objects like the eponymous reeds on the lake, for there are no animals to serve as vehicles to refract male desire and mutual care. Moreover, the appreciation of the landscape is experienced by both men simultaneously, since Leevi admits he was blind to the beauty of the natural environment when growing up due to his wish to escape the confines of Finnish society and convention.⁴

Another key distinction from *God's Own Country* is that both leads in *A Moment in the Reeds* are openly gay, and, in the case of Tareq, the actor Boodi Kabbani himself migrated from Syria to Finland in 2014. This allows them to bring much of themselves into largely improvised performances. The characters communicate via the lingua franca of English, sometimes falteringly so as the softly spoken Tareq searches tentatively for words adequate to express his thoughts and feelings. Sound is an integral component of embodied spatiality, and their hushed exchanges are grounded in compassion and natural empathy. While they may have a diametrically opposed relationship to Finland – Leevi feels alienated and seeks to escape; Tareq finds refuge and wishes to set up new queer roots ('I feel free in Finland', 'I have to believe in this country') – each understands the other's need to leave a homophobic family and homeland, along with the realisation that thereafter one no longer belongs to one's home country. Tareq speaks painfully of his journey and humiliation as a migrant fleeing persecution and war in Syria, while Leevi talks in turn about the sadness of losing his artistic mother. During lighter moments they exchange confidences about their first loves, and Leevi talks about his thesis on gender and performativity in the writings of Rimbaud and Kaarlo Sarkia. Such knowing meta-references risk, of course, turning the film into something rather academic. But a difficult phone call between Tareq and his mother serves to remind us of the very real fear and fragility engendered by the migrant condition: Tareq wishes for his mother and family to be safe, yet he does not want them in Finland because that would oblige him to return to a closeted double-life.

The crucial point of difference between the two films lies, however, in how sexual desire and passion are represented and framed. From the outset, the formal option of POV shots to capture the moment Tareq enters this all-white family world is declined, allowing for a non-hierarchised perspective to be established. First, father and son come forward slowly into the frame, the former moving into the right foreground while looking ahead past the camera to movement taking place off-screen. Cut to Tareq pictured behind the father and son as he gets out of his car in the distance. He is not captured, however, from their subjective point of view, and we are situated very quickly within Tareq's general physical space, with Leevi and his father Jouko (Mikko Melender) occupying the background. What then proceeds is a series of awkward formal handshakes – a case-study in indigenous white

folk encountering a foreign other – matched by a deliberately stilted and equally uncomfortable series of shot/counter-shots. Yet significantly no POV shots are offered during this formal introduction to the three characters who are immediately presented on equal terms in the same frame. Hence, the film is encouraging us already to reflect on the relational aspects and commonality of vision, rather than suturing us into the power relations of point of view.

As Leevi becomes aware of Tareq working outside, we are treated very briefly to what might constitute a subjective POV shot of Tareq from Leevi's point of view (0:21:00), although nothing actually confirms this: as soon as Tareq looks back in Leevi's direction, the shot is cut and the latter is glimpsed in an objective POV shot looking away, slightly embarrassed. This would appear simply a device to suggest Leevi's growing physical curiosity in Tareq, and, while not consolidated or repeated, it will be complemented ten minutes later when Tareq is pictured from behind looking wistfully into the distance in Leevi's direction – a shot serving in turn to indicate a level of mutual interest and the pricking of desire. From then on, every action is rigorously conveyed in objective point-of-view fashion, and usually in the form of two-shots whereby the men are positioned in parallel – laterally, frontally, from the rear – as equally other to the viewer. Such refusal of privileged subjective POV access to either figure represents a clear formal and political *parti pris* by the director Makela. With the need for conventional shot/reverse-shots rendered immaterial, there is no sense here of an opposite or negative reverse field. Instead, *A Moment in the Reeds* deploys wide-angle shots and inclusive frames to track the men's burgeoning desire and play of furtive glances in the slow-burn passage to sexual arousal and passion. What is being created by this serene yet resolute queering of the cinematic field is a kind of extended, open 'multi-field': a versatility and elasticity of cinematic space, ranging from wide shots of the landscape and lake at dusk and dawn to extreme close-ups in the sauna and bedroom, based entirely on the equivalence and reciprocity of subject positions.

When the two men are later filmed making love, it is in lingering two-shots and long takes allowing for their sensual intimacy within the same close frame to take full hold. We start on the porch by the lake with both wearing only towels after taking a sauna together, sweating in the early evening heat while engaging in gently probing conversation and enjoying the irony of Tareq accidentally choosing a quintessentially Finnish popular song from the family record collection. Suddenly, the scene cuts dry to black and, a split second later, the sauna door flies open as the two rush forward together into the frame physically entwined and lustily kissing. It's the beginning of an intense, sultry love scene lasting almost five minutes (0:46:54–0:51:00), skilfully edited to present a continuous performance of body parts in real time where sexual pleasures are generously shared and distributed. Indeed, an easy, gentle, consensual reversibility is generated (kissing, oral sex, copulation) where neither figure dominates and each becomes an initiator of libidinal, carnal desire: after Tareq fucks Leevi, there

Figures 5.3 and 5.4 The reversible field: Tareq (Boodi Kabbani) and Leevi (Janne Puustinen) in *A Moment in the Reeds* (2017), their sameness emphasised by the shared colour tone of their t-shirts (grey-blue in 5.3, maroon in 5.4)

Source: *A Moment in the Reeds* (2017), directed by Mikko Mäkelä © Wild Beast, and Peccadillo Pictures (2018).

is a mutual masturbation scene before Leevi fucks Tareq in turn. On a formal level, they occupy the cinematic field together equitably in multiple positions (front, lateral, reverse). Tareq's deep eyes, beard, and hairy chest contrast with Leevi's smooth, glabrous, slim physique, but in the warm, reddish hue of the interior lighting their differences in skin tone and hair colour appear

levelled out: a subtle play of light and flesh subsumes them both, the eddies of sexual desire and yearning further extended by the fluid movement of water gently lapping in the lake outside. Such ardent play with indistinction and sameness – they are both, as it were, the equally indiscriminate other filmed objectively but in a wholly non-objectifying manner – deconstructs the formal positioning of indigenous subject vs. migrant other observed in *God's Own Country*, where an often paranoid fascination with the unknown other fosters a mutual antagonism that can only be resolved through acts of violence, physical, and verbal, or else, as we saw at the end, flipped into fantasy and summarily negated.

Each love scene in *A Moment in the Reeds* is compellingly different and exhilarating. Later, with the father called away due to financial matters, the two men come together again in the home sauna for two and a half minutes of sustained kissing and caressing (starting at 1:00:04). Presented as if one long take, such uninhibited, immersive queer *jouissance* – a swirl of gyrating body parts, heavy exhaling, and reverberating squeals of sexual ache and ecstasy – graphically tests the limits of New Gay Sincerity by verging on the explicitness of gay male soft porn, though significantly minus shots of genitals or ejaculation. When the scene cuts to the next morning, the two are filmed holding each other in the heady, lambent, summer light, touching the reeds as they move together through a sensate frame accompanied for the first time by moody, yet wondrously light, stylised theme music (by Sebastian Kauderer and Luke Richards) that blends with the soft breeze rustling across the water. After agreeing simply to enjoy the moment and spend time with one another in the landscape, the lovemaking becomes more muscular and direct, presented largely in mid-shot, with Leevi taking Tareq from behind. But again, they share the frame equally in a two-shot multi-field that allows the viewer to witness – and participate in – an erotic intermutuality of the objective gaze. Such intimate, self-effacing receptivity to the world, which again contrasts dramatically with Johnny and Gheorghe's ultimate desire literally to close the door and retreat solipsistically into a fantasy of belonging, evokes what Leo Bersani, building on his earlier theory of 'homo-ness' and 'expansive narcissism' (where difference is posited not as a trauma to be overcome but as a non-threatening supplement to sameness),⁵ has recently formalised as a 'oneness of being in which the subject never ceases to correspond with, and to, the world' (Bersani 2015: xii). Here, the subject loves the other not as a source of hidden knowledge about oneself, but *aesthetically*, as a repetition, even extension, of one's likeness. (Bersani elaborates this further in *Receptive Bodies* (2018) as an ethics of 'inaccurate replications' which, by countering the 'intractable; hatred of otherness, may enable '[t]he viability of our being-in-the-world' (Bersani 2018: 49).) Such relational thinking conveys beautifully how Leevi and Tareq 'migrate' simultaneously to each other and the landscape through an appreciation – at once mental and material – of the reversible processes of sameness and difference.

It is Leevi's conservative father Jouko, lurking always around the corner and excluded from the conversations in English, who will eventually arrest

this otherwise irresistible flow of reciprocal emotion and impersonal desire. After upbraiding his son for not ensuring the successful completion of the painting (with the clear insinuation that Leevi has wasted precious time and money by cavorting with Tareq), he then lashes out at Tareq in ugly racist tones: 'You foreigner, go back to Syria!'. This, and the father's declaration that he will not pay Tareq, precipitates the latter's immediate angry departure despite Leevi's anguished pleading – a decisive act on Tareq's part offering final proof of his agency and autonomy. Although an explosive climax, this charged stand-off between father and son does not progress into all-out conflict. When Leevi returns inside the lakehouse to retrieve the car keys for his own furious exit, his father makes an unexpected and startling admission: 'Do you not think that I blame myself for your mother's death as well?'. Unable to respond, Leevi feels emotionally bound to stay. The final shot is of him bereft on the porch in the evening light, taking in the sudden total loss of Tareq who has left with no desire to remain in touch. Cut to black and a return to the gentle musical theme as the credits start to fall. The film thus ends with what was surely always meant to happen but which, with the irrepressible surges of desire and tenderness between the two men, the viewer was encouraged to overlook: the prospect of Leevi finally confronting both his repressed feelings towards his father and his relation to his motherland.

Reading this last scene against the denouement of *God's Own Country* underlines its structural inevitability. In Lee's drama options become possible for the two lovers because the ailing father, although not yet actually dead, is unable to impose his will and power on the present and future (in fact, his last conciliatory words to Johnny, delivered in impaired speech, reveal a genuine concern for the young man's happiness). In other words, the farm is no longer bound by paternal rule within 'God's own country'. In *A Moment in the Reeds*, however, the father remains very much alive, patrolling the family territory for as long as he remains its owner. It means that there can be no possibility of Leevi and Tareq – both (e)migrants in transit – forming a permanent relationship under the nationalist and homophobic Law of the Father. Their romance in the splendour of the Finnish countryside is fated to remain just that: 'a moment in the reeds'.

New queer/migrant imaginaries

Taken together, *God's Own Country* and *A Moment in the Reeds* constitute an ironic set of formal and thematic tensions and paradoxes. In the first, the regressive replaying of conventional cinematic codes and forms goes hand in hand with subscribing to standard tropes of the migrant as European saviour and enabler. Yet this conspires ironically to produce a strangely positive narrative outcome and sense of queer futurity, however unreal. In the second, a fluid, poetic play with cinematic form frees up progressive new ways of portraying the queer migrant figure, yet this ultimately leads nowhere in narrative terms other than to a resigned though fundamental acknowledgement that one can never simply escape one's family and background, and,

moreover, that the trauma of migration, whether forced or voluntary, remains on-going. However, by so dynamically extending and sexualising the physical and social spaces and parameters of British and European migratory cinema, both films open up vital new cinematic sites and vistas for apprehending the concrete materialities and complex affectivities of queer migrant experience. By doing this within an aesthetic framework of natural beauty, they also reveal powerfully that rurality can stimulate potent new forms of queer imaginary – an intrinsic element in the emerging interdisciplinary field of rural queer studies and alternative, non-urban sexualities and genders.⁶

It could be argued, of course, that both films also end up effectively projecting – and in their own way inscribing – a new norm in queer migration cinema: that of the safe, established, ‘queer migrant/native couple’ (impossible in *A Moment in the Reeds*, attainable against the odds in *God’s Own Country*). There is certainly nothing immediately transgressive in *God’s Own Country* about the couple’s shared commitment to animal husbandry and homesteading, which ensures the legacy of the farm and fulfils parental expectations while remaining firmly within the normative bounds of both social/sexual propriety and property (monogamous love behind closed private doors). Yet in the case of *A Moment in the Reeds*, the radiant shared moments of queer migrant desire retain their revelatory force and ‘transmigratory’ promise precisely by not being mobilised as personal fantasy or social/political ideal. Such ultimate refusal of fixed social models, born of a profound trust in the ethical potential of the cinematic field, will surely inspire other new, radical counter-mappings of queer migrant lives.

Notes

- 1 See Peeren (2014), which takes account of such statements in the film as Guo Yi’s ‘This is a weird city. Only ghosts are left [in the hospital]’.
- 2 Agnes Woolley rightly claims that by representing Okwe and Senay as wholly virtuous victims of oppression, *Dirty Pretty Things* merely replaces negative stereotypes with new ones. See Woolley (2014: 71–4).
- 3 The countryside as a place of refuge is a well-established trope in British cinema, notably in films made in the 1940s and 1960s, yet such refuge is usually temporary and fulfils only briefly a wish to flee the city, as in *A Taste of Honey* (1961, UK, dir. Tony Richardson) where the troubled teenager, Jo, and her gay student friend, Geoff, escape with a group of children into the beautiful hillside scenery outside Manchester. See Higson (2006) for a compact overview of the representations of the rural, and the urban/rural opposition, in the history of British cinema, where the rural setting appears to embody the nation and a picturesque version of rural England is frequently offered as the ‘true England’.
- 4 We note that in Finland, where homosexuality remained illegal until 1971, same-sex marriage has been legal since 1 March 2017.
- 5 See Bersani (1995: 7). Focusing on certain works by Proust, Gide, and Genet where gay desire reveals itself as a desire for the same from the perspective of a self already identified as different from itself, Bersani argues persuasively that the concept of homo-ness could lead to a salutary devalorising of difference.
- 6 For an excellent introduction to rural queer studies, which focuses essentially on the North American context, see Gray et al. (2016).