Transnational Cinemas
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rtrc20

Welcome, Le Havre and Un cuento chino: visceral cosmopolitanism and the domestic sphere

Maud Ceuterick[a]

[a] Department of Media, Film and Communication, University of Otago, New Zealand Aotearoa

Published online: 09 Apr 2014.

To cite this article: Maud Ceuterick (2014): Welcome, Le Havre and Un cuento chino: visceral cosmopolitanism and the domestic sphere, Transnational Cinemas, DOI: 10.1080/20403526.2014.895225

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/20403526.2014.895225

Transnational Cinemas, 2014
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/20403526.2014.895225

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

REVIEW ESSAY

Welcome, Le Havre and Un cuento chino: visceral cosmopolitanism and the domestic sphere

Maud Ceuterick*

Department of Media, Film and Communication, University of Otago, New Zealand Aotearoa

As a theoretical framework, transnational cinema often describes film production, reception and narrative that crosses national boundaries, but less often reassesses the migrant/non-migrant dichotomy. Following this thought, Tim Bergfelder refers to Mica Nava's concept of 'visceral cosmopolitanism' as an adequate model to explore 'attitudinal (emotional, affective, ethical, imaginative) mobility … breaking down the distinction between mobile and sedentary, self and Other, and between "migrant" and "native"' (Bergfelder 2011, 64). *Welcome* (Philippe Lioret, 2009), *Le Havre* (Aki Kaurismäki, 2011) and *Un cuento chino/Chinese Take-Away* (Sebastián Borensztein, 2011) can all be considered transnational films as their actors, directors or producers cross national boundaries and in their use of multilingual and cross-cultural narratives. What interests me further, however, is their narrative engagement with cosmopolitanism, not only as a matter of the public sphere, but rather as a 'lived cosmopolitanism of public and domestic arrangements, and of private as well as political choices' (Bergfelder 2011, 63).

Since the three films' protagonists dissent against national immigration policies, they pursue what Mica Nava would describe as 'a positive engagement with difference' (Bergfelder 2011, 63). Rather than focusing on the physically or socially mobile, the three films focus on the vernacular cosmopolitanism in the 'contact zones' (Pratt 1991, 34)[1] of Calais, Le Havre and Buenos Aires, and on the reciprocal relations between 'natives' and migrants. In her conference paper 'On Staying', Mary Louise Pratt (2012) sheds a different light on the role of the 'stayers' and emphasizes their agency and their role in enabling the mobility of others. Instead of establishing a hierarchical link between migrant and native, the films' protagonists develop interdependent relationships and thus produce the necessary conditions for visceral cosmopolitanism to emerge.

While *Welcome*, *Le Havre* and *Un cuento chino* (hereafter *Un cuento*) are very different in style and outcome, they all portray white male protagonists who take in an immigrant with whom they establish an affective relationship. *Welcome* is the most realistic and pessimistic, while *Le Havre* imposes distance through an absurdist tone and *Un cuento* resonates with comical elements of fantasy. All three films could be considered road movies in which the protagonists are 'on the eve of a journey', echoing Laura Rascaroli (2013b, 21). Yet in opposition to generic conventions, the protagonists do not attempt to resolve their domestic conflicts on the road. On the contrary, they start an attitudinal and political journey during which they refashion the domestic space as cosmopolitan. When Nava discusses visceral 'domestic cosmopolitanism', she refers to

*Email: maud.ceuterick@postgrad.otago.ac.nz

'structures of feeling' which take place, get reproduced and transmitted in cultural environments such as 'the micro territories of the local: at school, in the gym and the café, *at home*' (2007, 135, emphasis in the original). Instead of ending with a reaffirmation of the 'national', which Bergfelder deplores (2011, 64) and of the patriarchal domestic sphere, these three films advocate for a non-Eurocentric cosmopolitanism, whose starting point is *visceral* cosmopolitanism.

Domestic cosmopolitanism

In *Welcome*, Bilal has left Iraq on foot to meet his girlfriend Mina in England and ends up in Calais (France). The narrative begins when he arrives in Calais, hoping to cross the border to England. Because of a past traumatic experience, Bilal cannot maintain a plastic bag on his head for long enough to cross in a truck (as the immigration police control the level of carbon dioxide in the lorries). He then starts taking swimming lessons with Simon (played by Vincent Lindon) to swim his way across the English Channel. Bilal lives in the streets of an unwelcoming country; he is deprived of his rights of mobility, while also being mechanically restrained, as he travels everywhere on foot. In the streets, Bilal is often framed in long shots among other migrants, which indicates their privation of proper space. They are all stuck on the border, lacking food, accommodation and showers because of their differences as foreigners. Mina's situation resonates with Bilal's as she also lacks the power to exist as an individual, with claustrophobic closed shots characterizing her house as a prison guarded by her father's authoritative figure With neither a mobile phone of her own nor any other means of communication, she is deprived of any right to voice her opinion (as is her mother, whose voice we hardly hear); she has to abide by her father's cultural and patriarchal tradition.

The ironic title of the film – *Welcome* – evokes the expression 'welcome home', but here the reassuring space of 'home' is absent. 'Home' for all three characters (Bilal, Mina and Simon) is regulated by patriarchal and national values with which they fail to identify. 'Home' in the film is neither 'anywhere' nor 'everywhere', like in *The Wizard*

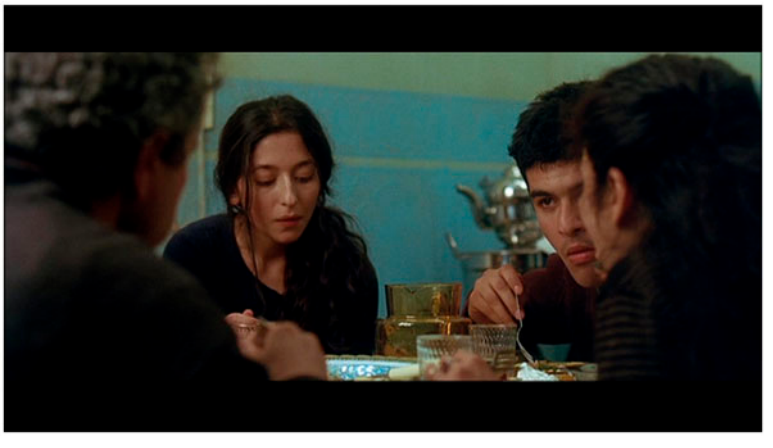

Figure 1. Mina eating with her family in *Welcome* (2009).

of Oz (Victor Fleming, 1939) as suggested by Pamela Robertson (1997, 271); it is nowhere attainable for now. If the film is about Bilal's impossible journey, it is also about Simon's refashioning of the domestic; about his attempt to welcome this 'other' home. The nucleus of Simon's domestic space ceased to exist when his wife, Marion, left him. Thus he tries to recreate a 'home' by treating Bilal like a son and hopes, by such means, to impress and regain his ex-wife's attention as she also provides food to migrants stranded at the harbour. Simon, however, fails at rebuilding his 'home' on a nuclear patriarchal model as Marion decides they should stop seeing each other and Bilal dies while crossing the Channel. These two events suggest persistent patriarchal and nationalist French right-wing politics (embodied by Sarkozy's appearance on television), which necessitate urgent transformations in order for France to become a cosmopolitan inclusive society.[2]

A cosmopolitan visceral link between Bilal and Simon emerges from their everyday experiences and from Simon's domestic sphere. Simon's house, the swimming pool, the supermarket and the harbour where the volunteers (including Marion) work become spaces where political resistance is established and where 'national' borders are collapsed. In fact, many of the scenes filmed in Simon's apartment take place in the corridor, as if the domestic space itself was a passage, not a transnational one where migrant and native are still distinguished, but a cosmopolitan one. In *Welcome*, 'home' is in process, in a domestic yet political process to positively recognize the ones who move.

All three characters (Simon, Bilal and Mina) rebel against a fixed notion of home governed by the nation-state by constantly negotiating their own borders. Mina disobeys her father by calling Bilal, and Bilal repeatedly breaks rules, sleeping at the swimming pool and calling Mina's house in spite of being warned not to, and finally attempting to cross the border until it proves fatal. Simon breaks the 'national' immigration rules by continuously helping Bilal, by inviting him to stay and by leaving the country while on probation to meet Mina in London after Bilal's death. The film ends in London with a shot of a football player from Manchester United, a team Bilal dreamt of playing for, followed by a reverse shot of Simon's wounded expression. This powerful moment indicates that Simon is taking his affective cosmopolitanism home with his last sentence, 'Je vais rentrer, je rentre' ('I'll come back, I'm coming back'). While the end of the film does not indicate a real change as it emphasizes Bilal, Mina and Simon's unequal right to mobility, it does insist on the necessary reconfiguration of the individual and their domestic sphere to recognize that 'we are *all* strangers, that the "other" is within ourselves' (following Julia Kristeva's idea; Nava 2007, 72, emphasis in the original).

The domestic sphere in *Welcome*, *Le Havre* and *Un cuento* becomes a place for 'inclusive thinking and feeling' (Nava 2007, 135). As the domestic could be considered a space where successors of the nation are born and raised, this reconfiguration of the domestic instead points to the reconfiguration of the 'nation' as cosmopolitan. While Breckenridge et al. (2002) also highlight the importance of the domestic sphere to constitute a cosmopolitan society, Nava (2006) goes further in acknowledging the domestic as the actual source of visceral cosmopolitanism. However, Breckenridge et al. and Nava alike associate their ideas with the 'feminine', which is limiting and constraining. Although Nava notes that 'women more often than men, are sympathetic to outsiders' (2007, 74), in the three films analysed here, it is men (directors and protagonists) who highlight the importance of the domestic sphere in the formation of a cosmopolitan society.

In spite of my reading against the grain of *Welcome*, its pessimistic attitude towards French and English (and even Turkish) immigration politics (Bilal dies in the Channel

after being chased by the English immigration police) differs from *Le Havre*'s optimistic ending.

In a similar way to Simon in *Welcome*, Marcel Marx in *Le Havre* hides Idrissa, a young immigrant from Gabon, and successfully assists him in crossing the Channel to join his mother in England. At the beginning of the film, the shipping containers (from which Idrissa appears) not only point to the free circulation of goods from Gabon to England, but they above all highlight how the politics limit people's mobility. Although *Le Havre* is set, like *Welcome*, during the actual 2009 dismantlement of 'The Jungle' where migrants had settled in Calais, it is built as a socio-political tale on the frontier of the absurd. At the beginning of the film, *Le Havre* installs a bleak harsh reality, against which Aki Kaurismäki uses magic realism, ensuring 'his characters' survival in a difficult or hostile environment' (Rascaroli 2013a, 332).

In the opening sequence Marcel and Tchang wait for the arrival of the train and for potential shoes to polish. The fixed frame close-up on people's feet symbolically indicates the characters' low status in society and their physical and social immobility, compared to the moving passengers. With a song by The Renegades ('Matelot', 1965) accompanying the opening credits, Marcel is depicted as solitary with no economic means. As a shoe merchant dislodges Marcel's shoe polishing post at the entrance of his shop, the protagonist is shown marginalized from contemporary society. As Rascaroli emphasizes, Marcel's occupation as a shoe polisher belongs to an ancient time and '[runs] contrary to the logic of capitalism' (2013a, 338). In the same way, he never pays for his groceries from the local merchants and as such is marginalized from the community, as if he was still living the old Parisian bohemian life he refers to. In fact, the music, language, attitudes and (lack of) possessions surrounding Le Havre's inhabitants denote a post-war period during which citizens were socially and politically involved in the public sphere (during the general social strikes, for example, taking place in 1960–1968 in northern Europe). On the contrary, the modern equipment used by the police evokes today's capitalist system in which surveillance of the private domestic sphere increases, while its participation in public matters decreases. Laura Rascaroli associates the film's deterritorialization of language, as well as its compression of time and space, with the characters' social milieu and their political involvement in the narrative (2013a, 327). As time is compressed within the narrative, the city space also shrinks as Marcel (like Bilal) travels entirely on foot and appears to know all the inhabitants. Le Havre thus recalls a village rather than the important harbour city it has become.

As soon as Marcel receives Idrissa at home and thus acts as a cosmopolitan citizen and against official immigration policies, (most of) the neighbours form a community against the nationalistic ideas that the police represent. In the socialist struggle uniting Marcel Marx (whose surname is significant) and Le Havre's inhabitants against the nation-state, people's rights to mobility become a priority. *Le Havre*, like *Welcome* and *Un cuento*, focuses on the agency of the ones who stay and who enable others' mobility. From the start, in the café central to the film, the villagers all appear as cosmopolitan citizens; they identify themselves from different regions of France, they welcome Idrissa and condemn the dismantlement of 'The Jungle' in Calais by the police. Tchang, who entered Europe illegally from Vietnam, is also an integral part of their community. The inhabitants develop into a united community against immigration policies: cafés, houses and local shops manifest as the micro-territories from which visceral cosmopolitanism emerges. In the 'war' between the cosmopolitan neighbourhood and national immigration laws, the domestic sphere again plays a decisive role in initiating positive open attitudes towards the 'other'.

Figure 2. Marcel Marx sharing the refugees' meal in a camp in Dunkirk, near Calais, in *Le Havre* (2011).

When referring to 'domestic cosmopolitanism', Nava identifies women's greater 'feelings of attraction for and identification with otherness' (2007, 8). Although Nava mainly refers to libidinal attraction,[3] she also insightfully explains her observation by invoking Walton's idea that women commonly empathize with ostracized men for being similarly denied power (2007, 73). It is not a coincidence, then, that the male protagonist of *Le Havre* – like Simon in *Welcome* – does not live in a nuclear patriarchal family, but is marginalized from the community and deprived of socio-economic power. Here women are not the only ones to be deprived of power like the migrants. Women and men, locals and migrants are instead all interdependent and form an inclusive cosmopolitan society. Marcel's statement, 'ne parle pas de mes dettes à ma femme, c'est encore moi qui commande à la maison' ('Don't tell my wife about my debts, I'm still the one in charge at home') or Little Bob's comment, 'faut qu'elle comprenne qui est l'homme à la maison, ça peut pas être elle' ('She must understand who is the man of the house, it can't be her') both appear ironic: Arletty, Marcel's wife, is actually in charge of their accounts and Little Bob's career entirely depends on his partner's presence. If Kaurismäki does not thoroughly challenge gendered relations in public and private space, he does provide his male characters with an affective and emotional cosmopolitanism that Nava generally associates with women.

Attitudinal mobility

Turning to *Un cuento*, the main protagonist Roberto, like Simon in *Welcome* or Marcel in *Le Havre*, is at first even more solitary and unsympathetic. We learn very late in the film, when the protagonist finally opens up, that Roberto took over his father's business in Buenos Aires after coming back from war. When Jun, a Chinese migrant, gets ejected from a local taxi, Roberto unwillingly gives him shelter in a house that is preserved as a past family home through its numerous accumulated objects. Since returning from England Roberto lives in the memory of his dead mother and father. Patti Gaal-Holmes asserts that memory plays an essential role for the migrant who reconstructs a sense of 'home' as an idea of a 'fixed' place, which itself actually needs constant (re)negotiation

(2012, 205). If social or geographical changes in the course of a life can be seen as mini-migrations (Roberto came back from the war; Simon was a swimming champion and a married man; Marcel was a bohemian living in Paris), then the protagonists of the films I analyse here are all in the process of renegotiating their 'home'. For Kristeva, the safety of the local, of the nation, must be left behind as a 'narcissistic impediment' to *cosmopolitan maturity* (Nava 2007, 72). Visceral cosmopolitanism is thus probably less about gender, as Nava seems to claim, than a recognition of one's fluid sense of 'home' and a consequent positive attitude towards difference.

By building an affective interaction with Jun, Roberto builds a cosmopolitan mobile future that lasts beyond the filmic boundaries. In this respect, planes in the film embody the characters' physical and cultural border-crossing. A real plane and a miniature one are first shown when Jun enters the narrative and these appear at the end again when Jun takes the plane to meet his uncle in Mendoza. On the one hand, planes symbolize death: a cow falling from a plane killed Jun's girlfriend and a military plane brought Roberto to a war that caused his father's death. On the other hand, they signify mobility, cosmopolitan and affective interactions. The miniature plane first hangs between Jun and Roberto as a symbol of reduced mobility for both characters (because of cultural barriers and mental ones respectively), but when Roberto finally leaves his house to join María in the countryside, the little model seems to be 'flying' on a blue sky background. The later shot towards the front of the moving car also contrasts with the initial shot 'trapping' the character in a mostly immobile car. It is precisely Roberto's new 'attitudinal mobility' that helps him renegotiate the boundaries of 'home' within open and fluid cosmopolitan ideals.

Simon in *Welcome,* Marcel in *Le Havre* and Roberto in *Un cuento chino* pertain to the lower class and quickly show their aversion for nationalist policies. Both Simon and Marcel oppose the enforced immigration laws approved under Sarkozy in France,[4] and Roberto rebels against the policeman who is treating Jun as a criminal. As Roberto asserts, the police are a *servicio público* ('public service') and as such they are supposed to represent the people. Since the police are seen as serving political and 'national' values that all three protagonists reject, Simon, Marcel and Roberto have no choice other than to constitute their own cosmopolitanism. As they fail to identify with the patriotic nation they live in, they may in all likelihood feel like Virginia Woolf who, Nava

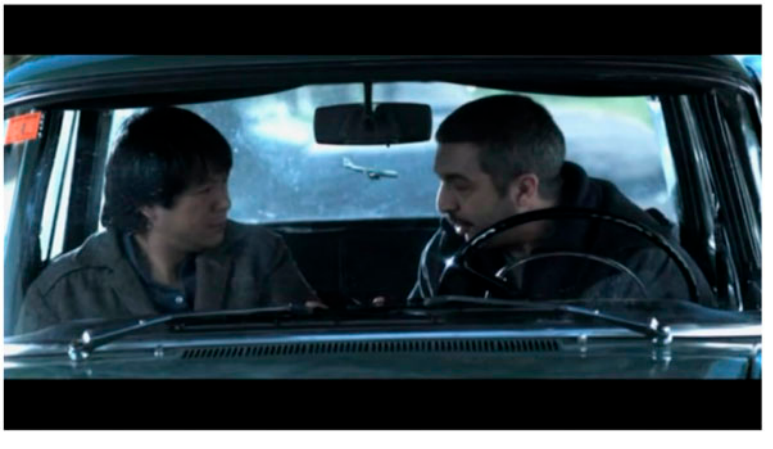

Figure 3. The miniature plane separating Jun from Roberto, in *Un cuento chino* (2011).

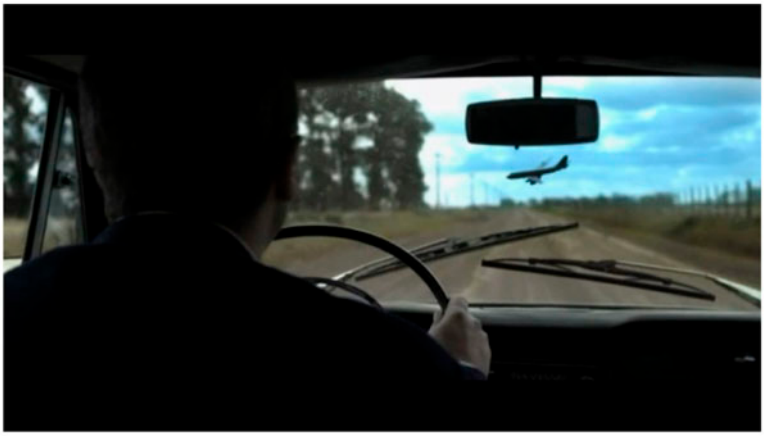

Figure 4. Roberto on the road to a cosmopolitan future in *Un cuento chino* (2011).

reminds us, declared that 'as a woman I have no country' (Nava 2007, 74). Instead of complying with Ulf Hannerz's vision of 'cosmopolitan' males who 'travel around the world while remaining culturally and emotionally detached' (Nava 2006, 47), Simon, Marcel and Roberto reconfigure their domestic environments as structures where cultural interactions, affect and hospitality may occur. Echoing here Nava's domestic cosmopolitanism and the concept of *cosmofeminism* as defined by Breckenridge et al.,[5] the three films advocate for a cosmopolitan culture that starts 'at home' rather than through travel. The next question would thus be: considering the migrants' lack of home, how can they participate in visceral cosmopolitanism once they reach their destination, and can this 'arrival point' ever become a cosmopolitan home for them?

Notes

1. For Mary Louise Pratt, the 'contact zones' refer to 'social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today' (1991, 34).
2. For more detailed political readings of the films, see Rascaroli (2013a, 2013b), Fevry (2013) and Fares (2013).
3. To explain what she calls 'instinctive extensivity', she refers to the work of Julia Kristeva, Jean Walton and Bracha Ettinger in particular. Her use of Ettinger's 'matrixial' or in other words the 'affective intrauterine connection between the mother and the child' (2007, 73) risks clustering visceral cosmopolitanism into a 'feminine' instance, which the three films I analyse here precisely contradict.
4. For more information on Sarkozy's politics of immigration, see Molenat (2012), and in relation to *Welcome* and *Le Havre*, see Fevry (2013).
5. According to Breckenridge et al., *cosmofeminism* would conceive the intimate sphere 'as part of the cosmopolitan … [by] open[ing] up a new understanding of the domestic', and would integrate with the public sphere instead of being spatially or socially confined to the private one (2002, 8–9).

Notes on contributor

Maud Ceuterick holds a Master's degree in Modern Languages and Literatures from the Université Libre de Bruxelles (Belgium) and an MA in Film Studies from the University of Cork

(Ireland). She is currently in the final stage of completing her PhD in Film Studies at the University of Otago (New Zealand). Her main areas of research are feminism and issues of gender, space and mobility, transnational cinema, language and aesthetics.

References

Bergfelder, T. 2011. "From the Transnational to the Cosmopolitan." In *Europe and Love in Cinema*, edited by L. Passerini, J. Labanyi, and K. Diehl, 61–83. Bristol, UK: Intellect.

Borensztein, S., dir. 2011. *Un cuento chino*. Buenos Aires: Pampa Films.

Breckenridge, C. A., S. Pollock, H. Bhabha, and D. Chakrabarty, eds. 2002. *Cosmopolitanism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Fares, G. 2013. "China y lo chino en tres películas latinoamericanas actuales. Una contribución a los estudios Lachinos." *Revista Internacional d'Humanitats* 29: 19–26.

Fevry, S. 2013. "Mémoires en dialogue: *Shoah et sans-papiers dans le cinéma français contemporain*." *Image & Narrative* 14 (2): 51–62.

Gaal-Holmes, P. 2012. "(Re)calling 'Home': An Artist's Negotiation and (Re)Negotiation between Memory, Geography, History and Language." *Crossings: Journal of Migration & Culture* 3 (2): 201–212.

Kaurismäki, A., dir. 2011. *Le Havre*. New York: Criterion.

Lioret, P., dir. 2009. *Welcome*. New York: Film Movement.

Molenat, X. 2012. "Immigration, Police, Justice: Nicolas Sarkozy, président de la fermeté?" http://www.scienceshumaines.com/immigration-police-justice-nicolas-sarkozy-president-de-la-fermete_fr_28799.html.

Nava, M. 2006. "Domestic Cosmopolitanism and Structures of Feeling: The Specificity of London." In *The Situated Politics of Belonging*, edited by N. Yuval-Davis, K. Kannabiran, and U. Vieten, 42–53. London: Sage.

Nava, M. 2007. *Visceral Cosmopolitanism: Gender, Culture and the Normalisation of Difference*. Oxford and New York: Berg.

Pratt, M.-L. 1991. "Arts of the Contact Zone." In *Profession*, edited by Phyllis Franklin, 33–40. New York: Modern Language Association.

Pratt, M.-L. 2012. "On staying." Paper presented at the Travel Ideals: Engaging with Spaces of Mobility Conference, University of Melbourne, Australia, July 18–20.

Rascaroli, L. 2013a. "Becoming-minor in a Sustainable Europe." *Screen* 54 (3): 323–340.

Rascaroli, L. 2013b. "On the Eve of the Journey." In *Open Roads Closed Borders: The Contemporary French-Language Road Movie*, edited by M. Gott and T. Schilt, 19–38. Bristol, UK and Chicago, IL: Intellect.

Robertson, P. 1997. "Home and Away: Friends of Dorothy on the Road in Oz." In *The Road Movie Book*, edited by S. Cohan and I. R. Hark, 271–286. London and New York: Routledge.