

Ipek A. Celik. *In Permanent Crisis: Ethnicity in Contemporary European Media and Cinema*.
University of Michigan Press, 2015.

Reviewed by
Michael Gott
University of Cincinnati

The “permanent crisis” referenced in the title of Ipek A. Celik’s incisive, timely and thoroughly researched book can be interpreted in (at least two) fundamental ways. The state of crisis in Europe over both the continuing arrival of migrants and refugees and the enduring debates and struggles over the place of minorities in European societies is the primary concern in the films analyzed in the book and indeed central concerns in an ever-growing list of European cinematic productions. The reference to (news) “media” in the title underscores the critical eye that Celik, and the filmmakers in question, place on the media’s role in covering the aforementioned crisis. The second crisis implicit in Celik’s study concerns cinema itself, specifically the pitfalls inherent in the cinematic representation of the lives and images of minorities, migrants, and refugees. The author argues convincingly that while the “politically well-meaning directors” whose films are considered in her text “do point to the limits of minority visibility” in European societies, they nonetheless reproduce “in many different ways but repeatedly, the trope of inescapable victimhood for refugees, migrants, and minorities in Europe” (131). The “permanent crisis” therefore both a socio-political crisis and an accompanying, ongoing artistic one: how does one use cinema in a fashion that adds to social understanding of these issues and calls into question the oversimplified and alarmist coverage of identity and migration in European media? Celik’s adroit close readings of four films from as many different generic categories and nations reveals how the each director attempts –ultimately without success, she argues – to do this in “so many complex ways” (126). The list of films includes a disaster movie, *Children of Men* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2006, USA/UK); a thriller, *Caché/Hidden* (Michael Haneke, 2005, France/Austria/Germany/Italy); a documentary drama that is also a road film, *Omiros/Hostage* (Constantine Giannaris, 2005, Greece/Turkey/Austria); and *Gegen die Wand/Head-On* (Fatih Akin, 2004, Germany/Turkey), which Celik reads as a melodrama.

Each film focuses on a “sensational minority-related event” (4) or European insecurity related to migration – riots, population decline, honor killings – and attempts

to use its respective generic conventions to intervene in complex ways in social debates over the historical and geographic implications of those events and their “affective residues” (4). While each film and director can clearly be situated within transnational cinematic categories of production and reception, Celik’s study aims to push past this categorization to consider the “historicity and eventfulness” (7) explored in each film. Herein lies the uniqueness of this work, for as Celik rightly points out, the cinematic production and cinematic scholarship of post-Berlin Wall Europe – “Fortress Europe” with ostensibly sealed external barriers and porous internal ones – has been more attuned to mobility at the expense of temporality and historicity. In a physically borderless Europe, lines are drawn internally and symbolically, with “reference to a temporality of permanent crisis” that relegates the minority events to “non-coevalness and violent eventfulness” (7). The antidote to this proposed by the four films in question is a historicity that lies behind or beyond the event as portrayed in the media. *In Permanent Crisis* moves adeptly between theoretical analysis and social context to uncover this historicity, a feat all the more impressive given the diverse linguistic and national contexts that are covered in the corpus. While transnational in production context and outlook and dealing with what are wider European issues, the films are firmly rooted in their respective national and regional contexts (historical, political, social, mediatic) and Celik’s readings of the historicity of each hinges on very detailed research of the issues surrounding and preceding each case study. The analysis also draws on theory, particularly Badiou’s post-September 11 conception of the “Event,” without being constrained by theory. Celik makes her argument by following the aforementioned historical, social, and media background with convincing close readings of key segments of each film. Particularly notable is an analysis of sound and camera movement in order to demonstrate the author’s contention that Akin’s *Head-On* questions the “terms of visibility” of minority women and minority gender conflicts (114-115). This is but one example of a convincing technical analysis at the service of the author’s wider argument about *Head-On* that “the melodrama undoes both the so-called objective minority reality and authentic minority fiction” (112). In other words, Celik argues that Akin draws on melodrama to suggest that neither media representations nor the realist aesthetics so often privileged in films about refugees, migrants, and minorities can adequately represent the lives and images of those people as individuals or groups.

The chapter about *Head-On* incisively begins with an epigraph in the form of an excerpt from a *Der Spiegel* interview in which an activist is asked by a journalist who misquotes an episode from *Head-On* to interpret the film as an “authentic” ethnographic artifact. This interwoven nature of media representation with filmic text and filmic afterlife is consistently and convincingly brought to the fore in each chapter. This incisive exploration of the imbrication of the media and mediated image that has had such a central role is public discourses on migrants and refugees since the book was released in 2015 marks *In Permanent Crisis* an essential and timely intervention in the

fields of European media studies and cultural studies. Beyond offering a compelling and atypical reading of four transnational films, the book provides an essential introduction to the study of the cultural, social, and historical context of contemporary European refugee, migrant, and minority cinemas. While it covers a relatively small roster of films, the depth of each reading is sure to enrich readers' understanding of numerous other films with similar themes. In this sense it is a welcome and novel addition to an already significant corpus of books on the topic.