Breaking and Entering: neoliberal urbanism, serial sociality, and the stranger

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ABSTRACT
This article offers a critical analysis of Anthony Minghella’s film *Breaking and Entering* (2006). The film was intended as a critique of postmodern urbanism and investment driven urban planning agendas. Its backdrop is the redevelopment of King’s Cross, a megaproject emblematic of the neoliberal rollout of global finance capitalism. The article argues that *Breaking and Entering* falls short in its promise of delivering a critique of neoliberal urbanism. Although it embarks on an exploration of the unequal social worlds brought into conflict by the imposition of urban regeneration blueprints, the narrative ultimately backs away from its acknowledgment that structural violence is a strategic aspect of neoliberal urban transformation. The film retreats into well-worn dichotomies that enlist the ‘stranger’ (the migrant) as an agent of revitalization for upper class, white genteel Britain. It presents the return to a ‘wholesome’ (monocultural) alignment of place, time, and identity as a ‘healthy’ response to the ‘excess’ of the other. In order to quell the anxieties that the film’s probing of the global city, citizenship and urban sociality provokes, the narrative reverts to myth in its effort to sustain the modernist illusion of a return to non-conflictual home, (family and national) harmony and homogeneity.

KEYWORDS
Neoliberalism; global urban imaginaries; urban restructuring; the stranger; migration; postmodern urbanism

Introduction
Director Anthony Minghella, best known for his lavish screen adaptations and period pieces *Cold Mountain*, *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, and *The English Patient*, never garnered much praise in the world of film criticism, and his status of ‘auteur’ did not consolidate. His films, including the Oscar winning *The English Patient*, were considered too middlebrow, too glossy, too neatly wrapped with international stars and exotic locales to be taken seriously (Falsetto 2012, xxviii). The same can be said for *Breaking and Entering* (Weisman 2006), a London set melodrama written and directed by Minghella. Upon its release, *Breaking and Entering* was panned by critics for its clichés, for its contrived plot, and its overenthusiastic use of metaphor. *The Guardian* lamented the fact that ‘Everything is spelled out verbally and visually’ (French 2006). *Time Out* excoriated its ‘disorientating directorial mood swings’ which made the reviewer wonder whether he was watching one of Stephen Frear’s ‘compassionate urban social dramas,’
was about to be immersed in the ‘glittery moneyed London of Notting Hill’s Richard Curtis,’ or if it was ‘Woody Allen who direct[ed] the shot of Will mooning with a beautiful Bosnian-Muslim refugee on the Millenium Bridge?’ (Hammond 2006).

The film provoked unfavorable comparisons with similarly themed movies such as Michael Haneke’s Code Unknown and Caché; and, with its ‘interlocking mini-stories that illustrate how people from different backgrounds affect each other’s lives’ was found to be a pale imitation of Gonzales Inarritu/Arriga movies such as Amores Perros, 21 g or Babel (Danby 2007; Emerson 2007). The fact that in critical discussions of the film, Minghella finds himself in the company of these directors typically associated with global cinema—albeit as a middle-brow version—has not warranted the film much of a place in scholarly discussions of global cinema and the global cinematic city—with the exception of Charlotte Brunsdon (2007).

This is curious because neoliberal urbanism is emphatically the main thematic interest of the film. In Breaking and Entering, Minghella wanted to probe London as a ‘global city,’ specifically with respect to such issues as ‘citizenship, rights and responsibilities’ (Falsetto 2012, 146). Minghella’s global London is a city in flux, and the film deals with the urban displacement caused by the juggernaut redevelopment project of St. Pancras/King’s Cross head on. In addition, as a cinematic space Minghella’s London features a variety of post-colonial and global migrants, and the film reiterates the longstanding preoccupations of urban modernism with social fragmentation, ephemerality and legibility from the perspective of the global city, its economic unevenness and its lack of relationality. In global London, according to Minghella, the coexistence of native born and migrant identities is characterized by a ‘guarded indifference.’ Breaking and Entering, then, expressed his concern that ‘while we share the geographical space, we don’t share much else. . . . We coexist rather than create communities’ (Lyall 2006).

If Breaking and Entering was intended as a critique of postmodern urbanism and investment driven urban planning agendas that are oblivious to the needs and concerns of urban residents, is Minghella, given the spotty critical reception of the film, then hitting all the right places in the wrong way? Rather than merely analysing the film as a flawed representation of the inconsistencies and contradictions of neoliberal urbanism, my questioning concerns the ways in which the film reproduces these inconsistencies on an imaginary level. In my discussion, I will take the film’s shortcomings—which are many—as ‘symptoms’ in the Freudian sense, substitutions which critical analysis can probe for processes of repression. What insight does the film hold in abeyance, and cannot admit to, in its liberal critique of neoliberal urbanism?

One of the things that most irked reviewers of Breaking and Entering was its excessive use of visual and verbal metaphors. The Time Out review, for instance, was exasperated by the film’s overenthusiastic citation of St. Pancras station (‘As shots of Lewis Cubitt’s famed train shed in every other frame remind us, we’re in King’s Cross’) (Hammond 2006). But if we examine the cinematic hypervisibility of St. Pancras in terms of what Akbar Abbas has called the ‘exorbitant city’ with its visual ‘logos’ and ‘super landmarks,’ this excessive citation can serve as a jumping off point for an examination of the contradictions of neoliberal urbanism and the ways in which Minghella maps these in his movie. The exorbitant city is the global city caught up in a ‘hypervisibility of iconic images’ which render it ‘neither securely graspable nor fully representable’ (Abbas 2003, 145). Exorbitance, in Malini Guha’s reading of Abbas’
concept, ‘allows urban settings to exceed their role as mere backdrop for the unfolding narrative: exorbitance allows thinking about the contradictions of the global city as they relate to a certain tension between legibility and opacity’ (Guha 2015, 59).

St. Pancras/King’s Cross, often hailed as the biggest inner city redevelopment in Europe, encapsulates the contradictions embedded in the spatialized roll-out of neoliberalism and its multi-scalar dimensions, and highlights the problem of il/legibility and the narrative/cognitive challenges posed by the exuberance of contemporary finance capitalism. In its narrative about the redevelopment of St. Pancras/King’s Cross, *Breaking and Entering* reproduces these contradictions and disjunctions, while at the same time insisting on narrative as well as social cohesion and legibility. The excessive visual referencing of the exorbitant city, and the film’s over-use of verbal metaphors can be seen as symptomatic of the anxieties and disturbances this narrative of neoliberal urbanism both provokes, and tries emphatically to contain.

**Neoliberalizing King’s Cross**

The emergence of the City of London as an ‘Alpha-Level Full Service World City’ in the 1990s is intimately connected with the multiscalar overlap of the local, regional and global forces that drive contemporary urban change (Pryke and Badi 2016, 12). This dynamic of ‘glocalization,’ a term developed by Swyngedouw (1997) to suggest the imbrication of the local and the global as mutually constitutive, manifests itself most clearly as a networked space of flows of capital, people, communication and information that work through local, tangible places, linking them for the purpose of facilitating interaction between a dispersed, global elite of social actors. The distribution of the nodes of the global space of flows meanwhile follows a specific geography of power that is concentrated around ‘global cities, trade centers, financial hubs, and headquarter complexes.’ This geography of power articulates a new spatial hierarchy of centers and peripheries, and structures the nature of social activities and economic exchanges that take place within them (Warf 2009, 72). The hyper mobility of the space of flows also implies, as Saskia Sassen points out, a certain de-materialization of places, as strategic nodes are de-territorialized and lose aspects of their integrative function within the nation (Sassen 2003, 20). This transnational spatial configuration amounts to what various critics have described as an ‘unbundling’ or ‘plurilateralization’ of territorial sovereignty, in which national borders become increasingly porous/blurring, and the difference between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ increasingly problematic (Warf 2009, 69).

Globalized, flexible capitalism creates polycentric and networked city regions traversed by ‘nomadic and migratory currents,’ and undermines any unambiguous sense of national identity, community, belonging and ‘home’ (Mörtenböck and Mooshammer 2008, 242). Having redrawn the relationship between nation and economy, global capitalism also outgrows the need for the citizen as worker and consumer, and with that suspends the contract between nation and democracy as the gradual expansion of the space of civic inclusion (Sassen 2006). This results in the multiplication of what Sassen calls ‘spaces of expulsion’ (Sassen 2014) and a proliferation of new borders that operate as ‘cornerstone[s] of institutional violence’ (Galt 2010, 227) and that function as ‘instruments of security and control […]'
wherever there is a need to organize social space and political governance’ (Papadopoulos, Stephenson, and Tsianos 2008, 27). These borders adapt to an urban landscape characterized by rising economic inequalities. The repercussions for urban sociality are ominous. Manuel Castells refers to the emergence of an urban space that is increasingly segmented, with different social worlds lacking ‘contact points or channels of coalescence.’ Postmodern urban sociality threatens to disintegrate into discontinuous, ‘parallel universes’ increasingly incapable of sharing social codes (Castells 1977, 172, 224, 228; Mörtenböck and Mooshammer 2008; 242).

Meanwhile, rising social discontent is harnessed and directed in particular towards racialized immigrant and immigrant-descended populations. The redevelopment of St. Pancras and King’s Cross exemplifies the ‘unique ambivalence of rail stations areas as redevelopment objects’ under neoliberal urban restructuring, in that railways stations function both as ‘nodes’ in emerging, heterogeneous transportation networks, as well as ‘places’ in a both temporarily and permanently inhabited portion of the city (Bertolini as quoted in Pryke and Badi 2016, 16). This ambivalence, then, is inherent in ‘glocalization,’ in the sense that the forces of globalization, in the shape of ‘translocal societal ordering processes,’ become locally concentrated (Mörtenböck and Mooshammer 2008, 22).

Moreover, in addition to constituting a borderscape in its linkage of Britain and Europe as the terminus of the Eurostar railway, St. Pancras/King’s Cross represents an example of the emerging prevalence of private/public partnerships in urban regeneration, with policy makers seeking to harness architecture, planning and design for urban policy, and encouraging private investors as new stakeholders in developing ‘private public spaces’ in the urban core (“Revealed” 2017). Indeed, the availability of finance and overseas investment opportunities was crucial in the redevelopment of St. Pancras/King’s Cross, with venture capitalist real estate developers, such as Argent (backed by the BT (British Telecom) Pension Fund) largely driving the project. The Argent plan, approved in 2003, envisioned a ‘new urban composition’ that made use of the area’s iconic Victorian era heritage to stimulate a ‘comprehensive regeneration’ comprising a wide range of ‘physical, economic, social and community benefits’ (Pryke and Badi 2016, 7).

The Argent plan expressed the belief that the initiative for urban regeneration was best left to private commercial developers, working closely with local authorities. Inevitably, this geared the project towards a perception of urban space primarily in terms of its ‘exchange value’ and the maximizing of profit and capital accumulation through developing office and luxury retail areas, rather than its ‘use value’ for agents of ‘non accumulating interests,’ or all those wishing to enjoy the space to work and live (Pryke and Badi 2016, 17; Holgerson and Haarstad 2009). Not surprisingly, local groups worried about ‘being squeezed out of traditional organized working class employment.’ Moreover, they were concerned that affordable and social housing was being marginalized in the plan at the expense of expensive office space, upscale retail developments, and luxury apartments. The resulting conflict of interests between a wide array of local interest groups and transnational actors, as Holgerson and Haarstad (2009, 358) have argued, was hidden from view by the official veneer of ‘community’ representation and consultation in the planning process.

In Breaking and Entering, the mutual imbrications and conflictual relationship of local and global creates a glocal interface that is reproduced in the blurred city


**BREAKING AND ENTERING: THE SERIAL SOCIAL SPACES OF POSTMODERN URBANITY**


WILL, THE PROONENT OF THIS MODERNIST AESTHETIC, THINKS OF HIS JOB AS 'CLEANING UP.' 'IF THERE'S A MESS BETWEEN BUILDINGS, WE COME IN,' HE SAYS, LATER ON IN THE MOVIE. IN THIS, HE UPHOLDS MODERNITY'S OBSESSION WITH THE CONSTRUCTION OF A 'CLEARLY ORDERED, BOUNDED, AND MAPPABLE "COGNITIVE SPACE"' THAT PUTS ITSELF IN THE SERVICE OF THE PRODUCTION OF ORDER AND HOMOGENEITY (BAUMAN 1993, 146). WHILE BUSY 'CLEANING UP MESSSES,' WILL IS ALSO
‘making London safe for the world of up-market noodle bars, sandblasted lofts and public art’ (Sudjic 2006). The disciplinary production of homogeneous space (and of the uniform collective identities that go with it) requires a process of exclusion and elimination. And, as Henri Lefebvre has put it, ‘What is different is, to begin with, what is excluded: the edges of the city, shantytowns, the spaces of forbidden games, of guerilla war, of war’ (Lefebvre as quoted in Mörténböck and Mooshammer 2008, 78).

Will is oblivious of the urban margins. This obliviousness is a consequence of his privileged position as an upscale white architect, who lives in a sterile town house North of the Regent Street neighborhood; his faith in top down planning; and of the ‘lateral invisibility’ that is one of the effects of the dissembling of urban space into discontinuous, serial social worlds. According to Castells, the global logic of flows causes a temporal and scalar ‘distortion’ that drives apart social worlds that despite their connections offer few contact points. The question Castells poses is whether these distorted spaces and parallel universes can generate ‘new forms of sociality’ or whether they in fact implode the notion of urban sociality altogether, because they ‘increasingly render [… ] it impossible to share cultural codes’ (Castells as quoted in Mörténböck and Mooshammer 2008, 244).

In the Director’s commentary to the film, Anthony Minghella himself formulated the question of how to relate the parallel worlds of serial social space as a desire for the film ‘To break open London. To cut open, and cut across, social space, territories which usually you don’t travel – which are sealed off, dislocated, who share geography but not psychology’ (Director’s commentary). Breaking and entering, then, is a blunt metaphor for the breaking, by force, of the seal of the ‘serial social spaces’ emblematic of urban postmodernity (Durham 2010). As Scott Durham (2010) has observed, in urban cinematic narratives, it is typically an incidence of violence that forces diverging social spaces to converge. In Breaking and Entering, the vanguard of this violence is the rescaling of London itself, or what Anthony Vidler has called the ‘war ideology of the plan.’ As Vidler explains, the plan itself is not an abstract extraneous force, but an exponent of an ideological program designed to transform social life. As such, it inevitably produces social conflict, which then is harnessed to provide the desired pretext for the forces of transformation (Vidler as quoted in Mörténböck and Mooshammer 2008, 82).

The plan of neoliberal urban regeneration, as exemplified by the master plan for King’s Cross developed by Argent and approved in 2003, injects the logic of privatization, venture capitalism and urban space as exchange value into previously ‘under-valued’ and ‘underdeveloped’ urban areas. As Charlotte Brunsdon has pointed out, the architectural model of King’s Cross in Breaking and Entering bears the ‘symbolic weight’ of the destruction and remaking of King’s Cross as ‘city of spectacle’ which at some point in the film elicits the commentary of the down to earth police detective Bruno Fella (Ray Winstone): ‘This is brilliant, are you really going to do all this, put a canal through it?’ It proposes the obliteration of the everyday spaces of the city, the cleaning up of the ‘mess’ in between the landmarks, and its transformation into what Marc Augé (1995) calls a ‘non-place’ of ‘shiny surfaces’ (Brunsdon 2007, 217).

The plan involves the establishment of an urban frontier in which stakeholders—such as landscape architects and other members of the ‘creative’ class (who, according to Richard Florida whose book on the topic became the bible of urban development in
the early 2000s, provide the engine of urban renewal)—literally survey and ‘stake out’ places at the urban margins (Florida 2002). Indeed, as a literal ‘proponent’ of the plan, Will moves his office and his industrial chic aesthetic to a redesigned old factory in the middle of King’s Cross. By doing so, Will unknowingly enters what the film frames as a border zone. This sets stage for the confrontation of ‘two utterly different worlds that overlap in place, but not in time’ (Sudjic 2006). This is casually underlined when police detective Bruno Fella, who is investigating the series of burglaries to which Will’s office promptly is subjected, uses the firm’s architectural mock up of the area to point out to Sandy (Martin Freeman), Will’s associate, where he is: ‘You know what your problem is, Sandy? King’s Cross. That’s you there. You’ve got the British Library over there with Eurostar, and bang in the middle you got crack village, with a load of Somalians walking about with machetes. It’s an area in flux!’ (Sanchez-Palencia 2013: 116).

For Minghella, King’s Cross, with its ‘collision between this beautiful architecture and some of the ugliest architecture’ provided the opportunity to ‘create a movie where London is both ugly and beautiful simultaneously’ (Segal 2007).

But as Brunsdon (2007) and Guha (2015: 28) point out, this bifurcation of city space into ‘dirty/prettty’ also allows for the rearticulation of Victorian tropes of the ‘dark and the bright city’ in the context of the global city. With its roster of local characters, which include prostitutes, thieves, post-colonial and Eastern European migrants and asylum seekers, the film engages what John Orr calls a ‘neo-Dickension art of the city’ (as quoted in Brunsdon 2007:118). In an updated version of the Victorian urban trope of ‘London by Day and London by Night,’ by day Will’s office ‘hums with the comfortable entitlement of middle-class creatives. But at night it is overtaken by Nigerian cleaners and Kosovan crack dealers’ (Sudjic 2006). The film’s rearticulation of a bourgeois moral geography underpinned by the Victorian-era dualisms of city and slum also opens up the possibility of exploring the ‘continuities and differences of imaginaries of desire’ (Brunsdon 2007: 118). In the film, the slum represents what bourgeois morality represses, excludes, and pushes to margins. As Stallybrass and White (1986) point out in their discussion of the Victorian urban imagination, what is socially marginal is symbolically central; what is excluded is also what is desired. What Will desires is the space to be ‘bad,’ and in the ‘slums,’ as Minghella puts it, he ‘senses an opening’ (Director’s commentary). At the same time, the slum is also the ‘benchmark of the real’ (Kaplan 1988, 44).

King’s Cross, then, is a site of “uneasy convergence of multiple social realities and relations, as well as licit and illicit exchange “(Brunsdon 2007: 94). It is where Will’s settled life collides with the ‘wild,’ which in the film is symbolized by the fox (and his stink which keeps ‘polluting’ Will’s gentrified space); the Ukrainian prostitute, whose cheap perfume stinks up his car from where by night he stakes out the office in an effort to apprehend the burglars who time and again make off with the newly acquired electronic and computer equipment (practical and symbolic instruments of global flows and e-mobility); Amira, a widowed seamstress and Bosnian refugee played by Juliette Binchoe; and by the ‘Balkans’ which in the film represents everything that defies disciplinary order. Will—who is all ‘will’—has carefully designed a life for himself that he, according to Minghella’s commentary, ‘does not know how to live.’ His half-Swedish wife, Liv, (an amputated liv-e, played by Robin Wright) is even more drained of color and blood, and obsessively takes light baths to ward off depression. Bea (pronounced ‘be’), Liv’s intractable teenage daughter whose obsessive compulsive behaviors include an eating disorder, nightly acrobatic sessions,
and an inarticulateness that places her somewhere on the autism spectrum, is the ‘wild’ thing in the family that threatens to tear it apart.

In a transcoding of psychic desire onto the city’s social formations and topography, Will—the privileged, bourgeois male subject—projects his desire for transgression onto the slum and what it represents. The opportunity for transgression is initiated by the series of burglaries, themselves a response to the violent imposition of the ‘plan’ and the ‘compulsive reforming of King’s Cross’ (Sudjic 2006). The starting point for the burglaries is the stealing of the security code for the alarm system of the building. On the second break-in, one of the burglars leaves Will a computer disc with family photographs he has copied from Will’s own laptop, stolen during the first burglary. This act registers a ‘displacement of affect’ which sets in motion an ‘exchange’ between ‘multiple worlds that are imagined as normally sealed off and non-communicating,’ and allows for an opportunity to glimpse their underlying ‘codes’ (Durham 2010, 258).

As Malini Guha, David Bordwell and others have argued, network narratives, with their choreography of intersecting trajectories, multi-strand narrative, fragmented storytelling, and foregrounding of chance and simultaneity, enact the ‘problem of urban cohesion’ in the content as well as the structure of the narrative. The way in which certain characters are brought together in the city, and remain disconnected, as Guha puts it, ‘mirrors the fractured condition of the city scapes themselves’ (Guha 2015: 56; Bordwell 2008). Breaking and Entering does incorporate aspects of the network narrative structure. However, in its orientation towards melodramatic excess, it ultimately insists on transparency, meaning, symmetry, community and cohesion, rather than opacity, inequality, discontinuity, and rupture.

The particular divergent social realities the film brings into exchange are those of Will and Amira. It is Amira’s son, Miro—who whose skill in parcours, the urban sport of jumping over obstacles, has been monetized by his Serbian uncle and his clan—who facilitates the burglaries, by jumping on the roof with a pair of binoculars and copying the security code used by the cleaning crew. After the third burglary, Will hunts Miro down to the council housing estate near King’s Cross where he lives with his mother, a seamstress. He repays the injury of the burglaries by infiltrating Amira’s home under the false pretense of wanting to have his jacket repaired.

Burglary, defined in 1641 as ‘breaking and entering a dwelling of another in the night with the intent to commit a crime therein,’ functions in contemporary law as a so-called ‘location aggravator’ that can be attached to other crimes (Anderson 2012). Breaking and entering, then, is the shared ‘code,’ the violence/violation that allows for an exchange between these divergent, ‘unequal’ worlds, as Miro ‘breaks’ the code of the burglar alarm, Will ‘breaks’ into Amira’s home and ‘breaks’ the code of Amira’s guardedness, and Amira will break Will’s bourgeois self-alienation. If in Michael Haneke’s Code Inconnu the code that allows for the mutual translatability of the disparate social worlds of the global city is ‘unknown,’ in Breaking and Entering, the code is ‘known,’ and allows the city to become legible.

**The stranger, ambivalence, and the logic of exchange**

The mutual violation—the breaking, by the master ‘plan,’ of the master codes of maintaining parallel worlds—establishes a ‘fictive coalescence’ between these divergent
social realities, and permits an exploration into their terms of exchange (Durham 2010). On this score, the film exhibits a marked conceptual and moral ambivalence. On one level, it maintains the liberal posture that this is an exchange on voluntary and equal terms that can be captured in terms of symmetry and sharing. On this level, the connection of these two worlds is imagined as a ‘doubling’ (Naficy 2010). Both Amira and Will have problem children who seek to escape through acrobatics. Miro’s interest in design and architecture matches Will’s own; moreover, they both prefer a bird’s eye view of the city, which does not recognize obstacles. Miro recognizes this affinity when he comes across Will’s architectural mock ups of a refurbished King’s Cross during the break-ins, and when he finds videos of Bea’s summersaults on the laptop he has snatched from Will’s office. It compels him to leave a disk with ‘Will’s life’ (his mediated record of it) on Will’s desk at the next break in. Will recognizes the affinity when he witnesses Miro’s acrobatics at a playground; and when at Amira’s house, in Miro’s bedroom, he sees the mock up buildings Miro has built and populated with the figurines he has grabbed from Will’s desk. On another level, the film registers the power differential embedded in the exchange, which is set in motion, after all, by the disciplinary application of abstract space, whose violent infiltration produces the fragmentations and disjunctures of urban life and pushes the margins toward continual displacement and expulsion (Lefebvre 1991). Miro does long to be an architect, but has dropped out of school to become a burglar. Amira, a classical pianist, makes a living as a waitress. The African cleaning lady courted by Will’s business partner Sandy quotes Kafka but is immediately suspected of having arranged the break-ins.

The film, then, oscillates between the representation of the exchange between Will and Amira, center and margin, or city and slum in terms of an ethics of mutuality, and alternatively as marked by the logic of coercion, appropriation, expropriation and expulsion. Indeed, it is the negotiation over the terms of exchange that provides the main subtext of the narrative. This is made explicit in a nightly scene in which Will, staking out his office from his Landrover in an attempt to catch the burglars, engages in a conversation with the Ukrainian prostitute who has taken shelter in his car against the cold, in exchange for a cup of coffee.

Prostitute: So what, you clean this area up, is that it? If you work with nature so why are you so against nature? The fox in your garden, the only wild thing in your life, and it makes you crazy. It’s like Disney land. Go ahead, clean up. We will go to another alley and take the foxes with us. Because this is the human heart. This is the world. It’s light, and dark.

Will: This is shit.

Prostitute: Ok, that’s 50 pounds.

Will: What?

Prostitute: I give you coffee, you give me shelter, we have chit chat, that’s free. You insult me, that’s business. 50 pounds.

The ambivalence over the logic of exchange between Will and the prostitute (which continues when she steals his car while Will chases Miro after the burglary, but then drops the car off in the same spot a few days later, leaving the gift of a fur fox in the back) mimics the fact that the prostitute, in the bourgeois imaginary, is the quintessential stranger (Stallybrass and White 1986). According to Bauman (1991: 61) the stranger
‘stands between friend and enemy, order and chaos, the inside and the outside.’ ‘His proximity, as all proximity […] suggests a moral relationship, while his remoteness, as all remoteness […] permits solely a contractual one’ (60–61).

The conceptual ambivalence embedded in the relationship with the stranger also provides the dramatic scaffolding for the film’s exploration of Will’s affair with Amira, another exchange between unequal worlds. Initially, the possibility that this is an exchange on voluntary, equal terms, ruled by the codes of reciprocity, is suggested by the idea that the worlds of Amira and Will mirror each other (Naficy 2010, 3). But there is the difference between night and day. The fact is that the affects exchanged between Will and Amira are not in their ‘right place,’ and are a consequence of the initial forced ‘displacement’—the imposition of Will’s plan for cleaning up King’s Cross—that has set these worlds in collision. The burglary, and Will’s intrusion into Amira’s world are part of a cycle of violence, lies, as well as cycles of gift giving that are simultaneously paybacks and acts of retribution.

This cycle includes the moment when Will ‘pays back’ Miro for his ‘gift’ (the disk with Will’s family photographs which Miro has copied from Will’s stolen computer, and in a subsequent break in, has left on Will’s desk) by leaving behind his own business card in Miro’s room, on top of the model city Miro has built. Upon finding the card, Miro realizes that his identity as the burglar has been uncovered. Amira, in an effort to protect her son, monetizes the sexual intimacy between herself and Will (‘I give myself to you,’ she says, ‘and I want it to be worth something’) by making a series of incriminating pictures, with which she threatens to blackmail Will into not denouncing her son to the police. There is no question here of a free and equal exchange. As Mörtenböck and Mooshammer (2008, 244) explain the condition of forms of reciprocity within the framework of global economic dependency, the relentless ‘marketization of all existential concerns means that there is no apparent provision of spaces for the articulation of social coherence and cultural exchange outside of the framework of the economic.’

But the film ultimately undercuts this astute insight. It resolves the oscillation in the exchanges between Will and Amira, which keeps wavering between coercion and reciprocity and thus mimics the conceptual ambivalence represented by the stranger, by reframing Amira xenophically and troping her, the stranger/immi-
grant, as ‘a giver to the nation’ (Honig 2001, 99). Legible and direct, rather than opaque and submerged in her emotions, tribal and local rather than individual and cosmopolitan in her affinities, Amira—the ‘touchstone of the real’—is the life that Will, in his relentless pursuit of control and the ‘pretty’ hyperspaces of super-modernity, has designed out of his own life. Amira is, in the words of Minghella, a ‘bloody character’ (who is, not surprisingly, from the ‘Balkans’) in Will’s passion-
less, sterile, mediated, emotionally stunted world (Todorova 1997). Visually this is rendered through the infusion of color, laughter and music that Amira brings even to her bleak, starkly modernist environment (she lives in another totalitarian modernist utopia, the brutalist social housing complex of the Alexandra estates, built in the 1960s). It is also registered in the un-obscured relationship between Amira and the camera, which stands in contrast to the colorless and lifeless modernism of Will’s townhouse and the visually impeded view we have of its inhabitants.
In her tribalism and localism, the ‘code’ of Amira’s world provides the narrative’s moral compass. Her fierce loyalty to her son represents a ‘tribal’ instinct that Will, who has a hard time distinguishing the sounds of Bea’s crying from the fox’s yelping, will eventually learn to apply to his own family. The movie makes Balkanism a metaphor for Europe’s ‘Other’ and all localized, tribal, immigrant identities. As Minghella puts it in his director’s commentary, ‘Nowhere is tribalism more apparent – not only in London – than in the Balkans.’ But Balkanism, in its alignment of territory, identity, and affinity, also provides a ethnic ‘correction’ to the misdirected and misplaced affects of Will and his alienated, individualistic, bourgeois, cosmopolitan ethos. With that, the narrative constructs a moral geography that represses the violence of the master code of neoliberal urbanism, and transcodes the unequal exchange of city and slum, high and low, the global and the local, self and Other, as the coalescence between ‘cold’ blooded bourgeois WASP individualism, and warm, ‘bloody,’ alien, Balkan tribalism (Todorova 1997; Galt 2010; 225).

In his bourgeois life style and his profession, Will embodies the male cosmopolitan ‘right to the city,’ whereas Amira’s life is circumscribed by locality and tribe. Miro and Amira’s living conditions embody the lost mobility of the global migrant. Amira relies on public transportation and Will’s first overture to her is the offer of a ride to the supermarket. Miro has retrieved some of this mobility in his mastery of parkour, which signifies a practical, urban philosophy of freedom and an art of overcoming obstacles, in short, the poor man’s right to the city. His only access to e-mobility and the space of flows however comes from Will’s stolen computer. Miro and Amira are also captives of the tribe, since it is the brother of her deceased Serbian husband who forces Miro to work in his burglar’s gang. The movie, however, suggests that, for all her tribalism and localism, Amira is freer than Will is. Freer, that is, from the straight jacket of alienated bourgeois life and English social conventions.

‘Are you happy?’ she asks him, while they stand on a bridge. ‘I am happy enough,’ he answers, to which she responds, ‘How English you are.’ If the movie is meant to illustrate that ‘where you reside conditions characters and their truth’ (Minghella’s commentary) and that truth is necessarily fragmentary and provisional, then Amira offers Will a bridge to a different, more passionate life and a truth that is less obscured. Here, the movie privatizes the opaque nature of the neoliberal global city and of the social and economic power dynamics that structure it. The illegibility of exorbitant London, the opaque city of surfaces and non spaces, iconic hypervisibility and masked connections to the imperial past and global flows, is translated as Will’s problem to be honest with himself. In what is probably the film’s most clichéd moment, Will acknowledges that ‘I don’t know how to be honest anymore. Maybe that’s why I’m so fond of metaphors.’ The same can be said for the movie. It opts for the suggestion that the real problem of global urbanism consists of cosmopolitan liberal bourgeois self-alienation, rather than the precarious belonging of global migrants and asylum seekers.

The migrant as ‘giver’ to the nation

Troped as a ‘giver,’ it is Amira who breaks the coercive cycle by handing the memory card containing the incriminating photographs back to Will (a double take on Miro’s
restitution of Will’s family photographs.) But in staying true to her ‘code’ of reciprocity, Amira’s handing over of the incriminating photographs of their liaison also deprives her of the power of negotiation over the terms of their exchange, and she turns into the ‘beggar’ in the relationship. Falling to her knees, she implores Will to attend the ‘reconciliation meeting,’ a confrontation of victim and perpetrator organized by the city council which might keep Miro out of jail, but which will also force Will to officially acknowledge his ‘inappropriate’ relationship with Amira. Initially, in a moment in which the film seems to register who really is ‘on top’ in neoliberal Britain, Will refuses his former lover’s plea. But ever the benevolent gentleman, he relents, and comes clean to his wife. Eventually, at the reconciliation meeting, the now restored and reconciled couple join forces to keep Miro out of jail by lying that Will’s stolen laptop (the main evidence against Miro) was actually a gift of Will.

Thus, the negotiation over terms of exchange ultimately turns into a melodrama of family restoration and boundary reconstruction. The temporary transgression of spatial and social boundaries sets the stage for the reconsolidation of family unity, tribe, and community, and redirects displaced affect back to its ‘correct’ circuit. In return for the Amira’s ‘gift’ of giving Will his (now less occluded) life back (the return of the incriminating photographs, the code of reciprocity rather than coercion), Will sets Miro free, Amira receives the gift of her son’s release from jail, Liv gets a reformed husband, and Will a restored family. Violence is reassuringly temporary, and beneficial. Even Will’s model for the redevelopment of King’s Cross gets the trees put back in (Kabat 2006).

‘Sometimes, things have to be broken before they can be fixed,’ Minghella muses philosophically, in his commentary on the scene. But what gets fixed and revitalized, ultimately, is the sanctity of the white, nuclear, upper-middle class family. And therein lies the problem with the movie. In opting for a restoration of the (albeit revitalized) status quo ante, the narrative backs away from its subliminal recognition that this imagined coalescence between serial social worlds is not equal, that it is spatially produced, and that the primal code, the framework of breaking and entering, is the deliberate reconstruction of the city under the aegis of neo-liberal urbanization. In backing away from this recognition, the film confirms Mörttenböck and Mooshammer’s insight that neo-liberal urban reconstruction inevitably provokes ‘social conflict that cannot be acknowledged and incorporated into twenty first century conceptions of citizenship’ except as a ‘state of exception,’ which ‘in turn provides a rationale for a further transformation of the urban fabric in the direction of a society of control’ (Durham 2010; Mörttenböck and Mooshammer 2008; 82). The knowledge of structural violence and expulsion as a strategic aspect of planned neoliberal urban transformation, which the movie subliminally acknowledges, ultimately has to be kept in abeyance.

Moreover, the framework of community ‘reconciliation’ constructs the law as benevolent, and in agreement with justice. The movie, in Minghella’s words, ‘asks us to look at the world from multiple points of view,’ and to recognize that ‘where you reside conditions the characters and their truth.’ This includes the fact that, as the neighborhood detective Fella tells Will and Sandy, ‘we all break the law. The only difference is that you call a lawyer, while they go straight to jail.’ But the ideological function of the conciliation meeting suggests an agreement between law and justice that ‘coincides with the normative organizational design of the city as a non violent zone of civilization’ (Mörtenboöck and Mooshammer 2008, 82). With that ending, the
film obfuscates the racialized violence of the urban development under a mask of liberal benevolence, and sanitizes the inevitable conflict it in turn provokes. As Mörtenböck and Mooshammer argue, (2008, 82) ‘Conflict and denial of conflict are both intrinsic components of the urban condition and embedded in its spectrum of political action. If conflict is declared to be something that cannot be fit into twenty first century conceptions of citizenship, it is defined as a state of exception that exists outside the bounds of urban society.’ The lip-service that the film pays to ‘community,’ in that sense, recapitalizes the official veneer of community consultation and representation in the planning process of the redevelopment of King’s Cross, which all along continued to mask the reality of opposing and irreconcilable conflicts of interests between the various stakeholders in the area.

Instead, in order to quell the anxieties that the film’s probing of the global city, rights, citizenship and urban sociality provokes, the narrative ultimately reverts to myth. Claude Lévi-Strauss interprets myths as ‘narrative strategies for dealing with what humans experience as insolvable worldly contradictions.’ Roland Barthes meanwhile stressed that myths ‘have a tendency to naturalise what they communicate.’ Myth, then, has an ideological charge (Meisner 2012). One component of the mythic urban imaginary to which the film resorts to resolve its inherent contradictions is a retrograde rendition of a mythic ‘village London’ in which the ‘multitude’ comes together, and in which the only fractured social structure in the city that needs healing is the family (Guha 2015: 75; 142). In addition, in its effort to sustain the modernist illusion of a return to non-conflictual home, (family and national) harmony and homogeneity, the film ultimately outsts Amira and her son from the urban terrain of London. The social homogenization that is established in the film’s ending is underwritten by the fact that Amira finally convinces Miro to return to Sarajevo with her—a process of (self) exclusion that the film writes as a return ‘home,’ and which elicits Minghella’s rather peculiar commentary that ‘Usually immigrants are represented as people who take something from the country they move to. But people who come to this country are very happy to go home. That’s where they want to be. […] It’s not that everyone wants to live in streets paved with gold in London’ (Director’s commentary). Missing here is an understanding that, as Doreen Massey has observed, ‘home’ under conditions of globalisation is not home anymore. Imagining home as a ‘stable space in the constantly shifting oceans of capitalist change,’ she adds, is a reactionary characterization (Massey as quoted in Warf 2009, 75).

If ambiguity, as Bauman suggests, is the ‘waste’ of modernity, than the removal of the stranger, the embodiment of ambiguity, carries the modernist project to its utopian conclusion (Bauman 1991, 15). If the stranger represents the blurring of inside and outside, of what is interior and what exterior, the embodiment of the blurred landscape of the glocal city and the tensions between legibility and opacity, her departure presents the reconsolidation of these boundaries, and engages in a phantasy of a return to an unambiguous sense of a territorialized home, homogeneous national identity, and unalienated belonging (Mörtenböck and Mooshammer 2008, 242). The fact that the stranger/refugee—Amira—leaves voluntarily, ultimately denies the violence of the neo-liberal program, and obscures the systematic expulsion of refugees that has become the norm in the European-wide delegitimation of asylum since the late 1990s. In addition, it rewrites the policy of social exclusion that the Blair government was developing at the
time as a way of ‘containing’ poverty, simultaneous with the dislocations that accompanied the revitalization of King’s Cross, as ‘voluntary relocations’ (Sassen 2014). Neoliberal urban regeneration, after all, was primarily pursued as a business activity aimed at growth and competitiveness, not as a project of community building or intercultural communication. Not surprisingly, the development impacts of St. Pancras/King’s Cross alone involved a retail rent increase of 53% in neighboring Camden between 2001 and 2006, and a 42% hike in housing prices (Pryke and Badi 2016).

And while the film does not dwell on the fact that Amira is a Bosnian Muslim, in its ending the movie maps European space along the familiar axis of a cosmopolitan center and a tribalist periphery, and repatriates violence, the stranger, the migrant, Islam and ambiguity to where it supposedly belongs, the Balkans. By doing so, it maintains the mythic possibility of a return from (bourgeois) self-alienation to stable identitarian positions and a ‘wholesome’ (monocultural) and non-violent alignment of place, time, community and identity. From this perspective, it is precisely Amira’s ‘tribalism’ that is her greatest gift to Will, and to Britain. In neoliberal Britain, a return to home, family and tribe is presented as a ‘healthy’ response to the ‘excess’ of the other. In the end, the film retreats to a mythic, backward looking, phantasmatic closure of Britain as a (white) island nation that Brexit would politically articulate 10 years later.

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