Migrant representations within popular culture

In the past few years, immigrant position within popular culture (the following essay will consider all art forms for mainstream use as popular culture) has been widely discussed in news media (Villafane, 2017; Ruiz, 2012). Popular culture has been subject to commercialisation: its products turning into commodities (Strinati, 1995). In this way, art forms such as TV series, reality TV, documentaries, which now include more and more immigrant characters and stories, have become commodified. As popular culture is often disseminated through different types of media, the latter’s tendency to sensationalise has transferred onto popular culture (Trebbe, Schoenhagen, 2011). Thus, diverse accounts of immigration may be present in media, but through that sensationalism, they have remained within discriminatory narratives and stereotyped categories, hence distorting public view of who the migrants are. This distorted image of diversity, consumed by the audience (Brayton and Millington, 2011), is also a reflection of current political and social life within a society. Popular culture representations of migrants do not seem to have strayed away from common public perspectives, so that marginalised notions of migrants continue to prevail within both popular culture and society. Thus, this essay will critically analyse the ways that popular culture confines migrant representations and maintains stereotyped narratives.

The current political discourse is highly influenced by capitalism and neoliberalism, specifically within Western democratic societies, which, as will be argued later, reflects upon popular culture. These societies often follow the principle of democratic closure, through which current societal members determine membership without giving opportunity for individuals to voice their opinion (Benhabib, 2011). Such view on membership is visible throughout popular culture, especially in reality TV, where migrants are categorised as external to a society by those in possession of membership. Thus, migrant representations in popular culture are often bound within certain stereotypical descriptors based on dominant societal perceptions. In a society, migrants are not only seen as Said’s (2003) conceptualisation of the ‘other’ as socially constructed (the ‘other’ is confined to specific categories by external parties), but also are continuously type-casted as poor and criminal (Anderson, 2013). Said (2003) also argues that the ‘other’ is often perceived to be uncivilised and backwards-thinking in comparison to members of Western societies. These public narratives have moved onto popular culture discourse, in which migrant communities are marginalised. Such essentialist accounts, which are further generated by neoliberal narratives within a country, may be used for propaganda purposes within media (Brayton and Millington, 2011). Furthermore, migrant depictions within popular culture are also forms of entertainment: in this way, diversity becomes commodified and consumed by the audience. Hence, these problematic ideas of diversity as an economic asset (Kymlicka, 2007) similarly promote persisting essentialist notions of migrants. From this conceptual framework, an analysis of empirical data on migrant representations within popular culture will follow.

Firstly, societal views on migrants and how those reflect upon the typology of migrants in popular culture will be explored. In modern times, democratic policies have tended to stigmatise and alienate migrants, whereas societal perceptions often confine migrants to low classes and categorise them as ‘poor’ (Anderson, 2013). Both of these perceptions (social and political) have transferred onto media. For instance, UK television often presents a stereotypical image of migrants who are predominantly from less economically developed countries in Eastern Europe, Asia and Africa (Vickers and Rutter, 2016). Moreover, another recurring theme within media coverage is the emphasis of migrant difference to the majority society through placement of migrant activities within criminal spaces (Anderson, 2013). In such cases, the dominant group becomes the one to confine migrant representations by attributing certain roles to the migrants themselves; migrants are no longer only a minority group but one with certain stereotypical characteristics. Such typecasting leads to marginalised representations, which migrants may be aware of. Trebbe and Schoenhagen (2011) discovered that Swiss migrants note their media image to come forth more so during times when they are newsworthy, often in relation to negative connotations such as criminal acts. Here, media’s inclination to sensationalise reduces migrants to an ‘other’ that is criminal and performs illegal actions. However, this stigmatisation is not repeated for cases of elite labour migrants such as celebrities and athletes, who are situated in a space different than their counterpart migrants. For instance, sport migration is neither considered problematic nor seen as impacting the host society providing that sport migrants are successful (Maguire and Pearton, 2000). Other migrants assert that celebrity migrants’ international value is emphasised more than their ethnic background within media narratives (Trebbe and Schoenhagen, 2011). Celebrity and athlete migrants’ diversity is not seen as problematic and has turned into a personal economic asset. Therefore, public and media discourses have created a hierarchy of migrants, some of which receive different, often preferential, treatment. Moreover, popular culture may portray migrants other than those mentioned by Anderson (2015), but stigmatisation and marginalisation persist within those accounts as well; this time, however, through the prism of a country’s neoliberalist practices and propaganda. A Dutch TV show used solely well-educated asylum seekers both to humanise them and change public opinion on these migrants (Romeyn, 2014) as a sort of propaganda. As Dutch policies have centred on the idea of multicultural societies, such TV shows are often used to promote a sense of society’s diversity. Moreover, putting the spotlight on educated migrants, who already feel part of society, only aggravates the problem of migrant portrayals by misrepresenting migrants and their experiences. Popular culture may add another layer to the typology of migrants, but their representations still remain deeply entrenched within essentialist notions.

Portrayals of migrants as marginalised groups across multiple forms of popular culture are to be seen both as embedded within and as promoting a neoliberal societal context. Moreover, migrants are often depicted in relation to the labour market, either lack of access to it or abuse of the economic, social or political system. Additionally, the nature of popular culture, which tends to commodify diversity, even further problematizes migrants’ position within society. Reality TV, as a form of popular culture, is seen as characteristically neither an extract of society, nor a depiction of a wide variety of individuals, but rather as “repackag[ing] difference into comfortingly familiar stock characters and stereotypes” (Wang, 2010:405). Thus, this genre can be accounted for inclusion of stigmatised and oppressive migrant depictions. The latter are often sensationalised through the commodification of diversity. For instance, in the Canadian version of *So You Think You Can Dance*, contestants’ ethnic backgrounds are overemphasised in order to promote Canada as a multicultural democratic country accepting of diversity (Boyd, 2012). Participants are not only racialized but also portrayed within stereotypical ethnic categories with the purposes of entertainment and generation of a particular national narrative. Furthermore, this type of migrant representation both sustains and is a result of a neoliberalist political context within Canada. In another example of reality TV in Canada, Brayton and Millington (2011) have analysed the trend of *Restaurant Makeover* to target more and more ethnic restaurants, despite the latter not being the show’s target. Repeatedly, the restaurant owner is obligated to discipline their own cultural diversity (by décor update, ‘spicing up’ of menu) in order to fit in dominant society and be economically successful (Brayton and Millington, 2011). Once again, neoliberalist narratives of migrant obligation to cultivate cultural difference in order to be accepted socially and economically are visible. Cultural diversity is an economic asset (Kymlicka, 2007) that the owners of ethnic restaurants should utilise and eventually, gain access to major society. Moreover, this TV show situates the ethnic cuisine into an exotic category and maintains public image of migrants as workers rather than citizens (Brayton and Millington, 2011). Hence, popular culture mirrors public and political agenda by presenting essentialist migrant perceptions. Another similar example can be found in the Dutch reality TV show in jeopardy style that quizzed soon-to-be deported asylum seekers on their knowledge of typically Dutch culture and language from integration laws (Romeyn, 2014). Similar language and culture testing occurs in most Western European democracies (Kymlicka, 2007) with an intention to prove membership to a society. This process is explained by Benhabib’s (2011) concept of democratic closure: during the TV show, participants (the asylum seekers) aim to prove their Dutch-ness in front of a Dutch audience, so these migrants’ acceptance and membership to the society is to be granted by those who already have the privilege of membership and possession of an amount of Dutch-ness. Such testing is often reliant on essentialist and exclusivist notions of citizenship (Kymlicka, 2007) that require individuals to self-improve and discipline to obtain membership. The idea of self-improvement is popular among various neoliberal contexts and is present on American TV as well. In the programmes *Top Chef* and *Project Runway*, American society is depicted as permitting Asian Americans to succeed in life through winning the reality programme (Wang, 2010). Thus, this popular culture references the idea of a meritocratic American society, which still enables achievement of the American dream. However, both TV shows present Asian Americans as lacking creativity, the attainment of which, throughout the stages of the competition, would enable them to win (Wang, 2010). Here, once again, the series capitalise on migrants’ ethnic diversity (Wang, 2010) by confining them to racialized categories, which in this case are related to supposed Asian technicality and lack of passion. In other words, the show is formatted so that it provides space for these migrants to discipline themselves and improve their lack of creativity (both on the runway and in the kitchen) in order to obtain the American dream, which also grants access to the American society. Therefore, the TV programmes discussed above demonstrate how deeply stereotyping and marginalisation, which reflect current essentialist notions of immigrants within Western democratic societies, are embedded within popular culture discourses.

Migrants have also been represented as the ‘other’ in popular culture contexts. In the above mentioned examples of *Restaurant Makeover* and *Top Chef*, migrants are seen as embodying exoticness (Brayton and Millington, 2011; Wang, 2010). The latter is regularly ascribed to groups of people perceived to be exterior to the general society as well as requiring modernisation, discipline, and self-control to join that society (Said, 2003). Neoliberal democracies tend to group the ‘other’ within such narrowed visions - a marker of the production of essentialist descriptors of external groups such as the migrants. Moreover, this sense of the migrant as the ‘other’ puts them in a marginalised position that is regularly categorised as possessing criminal behaviour. In the TV show *Border Wars*, migrants crossing the US-Mexico border illegally are portrayed as threats to American society (Jones, 2014). Border Patrol presumes migrants’ guilt and potential for violence (Jones, 2014), thus dehumanising migrants. Moreover, the latter are often depicted in contrast to Border Patrol (Jones, 2014): illegal and violent individuals, threatening national security against the protectors of that security. This opposition aggravates the stigma against migrants and further fortifies their position as the ‘other’. The TV show *Border Wars* also increases the perception of physical borders. Following Benhabib’s (2011) thought, borders, in this case, are closed off democratically and migrants can gain access through the permission of Border Patrol, who, as members of American society and with the possession of military resources, have a duty to guard the border from possible threats. The threats are migrants fleeing a country with “lack of governance” (Jones, 2014:532); thus, further exacerbating the contrast between US and Mexico, between order and crime. In this case, Mexican migrants are a political threat to the organised and democratic American society. Other TV shows present migrants as threatening dominant society economically. In the British documentaries *The Truth about Immigration in the UK* and *The Hidden World of Britain’s Immigrant*, migrants are portrayed as “disposable labour” due to the type of work they do – often, low-paid, low-skilled, and temporary (Vickers and Rutter, 2016:12). As a result of the political and economic context of migration in the UK, precariousness has turned into an essentialist characteristic to describe and marginalise migrants’ position within major society. Hence, capitalist exploitation of migrant minorities is reinforced by categorising them as a poor and criminal ‘other’ unfit to British society (Vickers and Rutter, 2016). Being negatively framed within the context of such popular culture formats situates migrants further away from general society. Moreover, according to the documentaries, migrant workers are not only aliens in the British environment, but are also threats to British workers and already-established migrants (once again, migrants are opposed to members of the society). Vickers and Rutter (2016) suggest that migrant portrayal is contrasted to the image of British workers; the latter are seen as responsible in comparison to the former’s inability to reach economic independence. Thus, popular culture and real life narratives converge; popular culture mirrors public discourse. The above mentioned popular culture formats present ‘othering’ of migrants as economic and political, often criminal, threats to society, through accounts of negative framing.

This essay has tried to explore and analyse migrant representations within popular culture, which were found to reflect current political, social and economic discourses within Western societies. Popular culture portrayals of migrants embody neoliberalist practices of democracies, which not only marginalise migrant groups but also use them as a source of propaganda. Moreover, the migrant representations described above are fundamentally essentialist and limiting to categories of criminality and ‘other’: notions that are exacerbated through the commodification of diversity. Popular culture narratives depict migrants as passive victims to economic and political circumstances, rather than agents of their own stories. Consequently, popular culture is nothing more, but a tool and mirror of a neoliberalist society.

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