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On 'Not Being Nothing'

Post-ironic Melodrama in James Gray's *The Immigrant*

Abstract

This essay analyzes James Gray's The Immigrant *(2013) discussing it as an instance of post-ironic melodrama (Włodek 2017) aimed at recovering the purity shown by this genre in the early phases of cinematic history. The essay argues that, although the movie pays evident homage to pre-classic silent-era melodramas, it also destabilizes the genre's conventions by resorting to a particular use of the mise-en-scène and characterization. This directorial choice allows the film to retain pathos without eschewing ambivalence and indeterminacy, finally contributing to produce a complex representation of immigrants' experience as well as a rather bleak portrait of the American Dream.*

Keywords: *James Gray,* The Immigrant*, migration cinema, post-irony, melodrama*

Although he has often found more credit in Europe than in his own country,[1] James Gray has been hailed as one of the most talented American directors of his generation. Mintzer observed that Gray has managed to "build a remarkably effective and highly personal *oeuvre*—one which exists in that tough, murky area between independent and studio filmmaking" (2012, 10); his movies have in fact been said to occupy "a vanishing middle ground in an industry increasingly polarized between ginormous tentpoles and micro-budget indies" and to feature "old-school stylistic virtues" (Ebiri 2014) that appeal to viewers, while at the same time displaying a significant revision of cinematic conventions.[2] Jonah Jeng (2017) has contended that "visually, Gray's films tower above most of their contemporaries, opting for elegant compositions over the Hollywood habit of disregarding *mise-en-scène*. Thematically, his films

[1] French director and critic Jean Douchet once stated: "it was clear from his very first film that James Gray was what we at the *Cahiers* [*du Cinéma*] called an auteur" (Mintzer 2012, 13).
[2] Alpert (2012) also remarks that "contemporary films are frequently either art-house films, which are ironic and intellectual, or blockbusters, which consist of comic book and fairy tale stories. Gray's films partake of neither and are more akin to classic, Hollywood narratives."

transcend typical narrative trappings to become deeply personal works that draw on his ethno-cultural heritage and the city [New York] he called home, a tendency that has resulted in works with a vivid sense of place."

By following in the steps of renowned New Hollywood directors like Martin Scorsese and Francis Ford Coppola, who had a strong influence on his work, Gray made his debut by revitalizing the film noir genre, narrating stories of contemporary immigration and crime in his native Russian-Jewish New York (as, for example, in *Little Odessa,* 1994). Immigration is also at the heart of his recent *The Immigrant* (2017), a period drama set in the early 1920s and centered on a young Catholic Polish refugee, Ewa Cybulska (Marion Cotillard), who arrives at Ellis Island with the hope of finding a better life for her ailing sister Magda (Angela Sarafyan) and herself, but becomes a victim of prostitution in a Lower-East-side brothel run by a Jewish man called Bruno (Joaquin Phoenix). Gray called this film "vaguely historical" (Kelsey 2014), as it was partly based on stories his grandparents told him which he reworked in order to best convey the endurance and strength of an entire generation marked by the experience of migration. With this film, Gray took a further step into the transition from the noir crime (*Little Odessa* but also the following *The Yards*, 2000 and *We Own the Night*, 2007) to other cinematic genres, which he had already begun to explore with the remarkable melodrama *Two Lovers* (2008). Although the setting remained the city of New York, as in his previous films, in *The Immigrant* Gray shifted to larger, epic-scale global themes, such as 20th-century mass migration, eventually moving on to the exploration of new continents in the historical adventure thriller *The Lost City of Z* (2016) and the colonization of new worlds in the recent introspective sci-fi noir *Ad Astra* (2019). All these latter movies stage stories of journeys gone astray which debunk the Western myth of unlimited expansion and unveil its underlying contradictions, problematizing our relation to the world we call 'home.'[3]

Jean Douchet has pointed out that "the films of James Gray, both in their thought and expression, are classic works which reinvent our conception of classicism. They are, therefore, entirely modern" (qtd. in Mintzer 2012, 15). His ability to revisit well-established genres has actually led some critics to describe him, along with older directors like Clint Eastwood or Michael Mann, as a major representative of contemporary Hollywood's 'neoclassic' cinema (see Leigh Davies 2014 and Flores 2018). One of the distinguishing traits of his neoclassic cinematic

[3] Douchet wrote: "With each film, he returns to the same *thought* over and over again. No matter what we do, our pasts are inescapable. It's the very definition of tragedy […] All of James Gray's films consist of one or several characters looking to escape their pasts and liberate themselves, knowing all the while they will never do any such thing" (qtd. in Mintzer 2012, 13).

poetics has been identified in the ability of giving voice to human emotions without making them appear hackneyed or trite. Regarding *Two Lovers*, Anthony Oliver Scott (2008) noticed that "though it takes place in the present, the look and mood of [the film] are old-fashioned, perhaps even anachronistic, but nonetheless there is something grand about the film's sincerity and the intensity of its emotions." In its unabashed deployment of melodrama, which makes no concession to the cynical and/or playful evocation of genre motifs so typical of postmodern cinema, Gray's filmmaking can be seen as one of the latter manifestations of the 'New Sincerity' aesthetics, described by Jim Collins in the 1990s as an "ethnographic rewriting" of a classic genre film in order to recover a lost 'purity,' which pre-existed the Golden Age of the genre itself (Collins 1993, 245 qtd. in Włodek 2017, 225).

Drawing on Collins's study and his reflections on the 'New Sincerity' phenomenon, Patrycja Włodek has recently read Gray's *The Immigrant* as a post-ironic[4] work that attempts to recover the spirit of great silent-era melodramas,[5] as in the notable tradition of directors like D. W. Griffith, King Vidor, or Frank Borzage. As Belton has argued, in the history of American culture, in its multifaceted manifestations, "silent melodrama, in many ways, represented the melodramatic impulse at its purest and most powerful" (2012, 127) and had a significant role in shaping and creating consensus around the myth of the American Dream resorting to a fictional space where, as Daniel Gerould pointed out, "contingency rules; things can and will be otherwise. The individual can make of himself what he will" (qtd. in Belton 2012, 132). The power of silent melodrama mostly resided in its extreme readability, which pulled, as Gledhill maintains, "generic signifiers towards binary oppositions" (2000, 240 qtd. in Stewart 2015, 171), and allowed for a clear-cut understanding of righteousness and corruption.

Włodek defines Gray's melodrama as 'post-ironic' (or pre-classic) on the ground that it seems to represent a deliberate rejection of the conventional strategies belonging to those later forms of melodrama, which flourished during the 'classic age' of the genre, in the aftermath of the limitations of expression imposed by the Hays code (early 1930s-late 1960s) with directors like

[4] Evan Torner explains post-irony in contemporary cinema and television as follows: "[Their] irony is certainly not the literary device, in which the signified is the opposite of what the signifier would suggest, but rather the gaze or disposition of the jaded viewer, who has presumably 'seen it all.' Post-ironic cinema and television interrogate the notions of irony and sincerity and themselves, appealing both to the naïve and jaded viewer. Post-ironic cinema achieves its appeal by either playing straight an absurdly contrived situation, or riddling a sincere situation with clichés that undermine its possible coherence" (2015, 94, footnote 4).

[5] The scientific debate around the nature of melodrama has a long-standing tradition. More than a genre, according to established criticism, melodrama would identify a 'mode' of expression which can be found across many artistic forms (see Gledhill 2000). In this essay, melodrama refers to both a mode of expression and the above-mentioned filmic tradition.

William Wyler and Douglas Sirk, and whose most distinguishing trait was indirect communication. Reprising Thomas Elsaesser's influential reappraisal of classic melodramas, Susan Hayward notices that during the code-period, in fact, "in order to convey what could not be said (primarily on the level of sex and repressed desire), *décor* and *mise-en-scène* had to stand in for meaning" (2013, 220). On the contrary, as Włodek pointedly argues, not only is Gray's melodrama set in the times of silent and pre-classic cinema (1921), but it also directly evokes its aesthetics by resorting to an unequivocal *mise-en-scène* and characterization to which the viewer is called to emotionally respond in a straightforward manner (2017, 231).[6]

Acknowledging his passion for melodrama and almost reacting to an unfavorable association of his films to it, Gray himself has explained his own understanding of this cinematic mode. In an interview, he stated that "there is only a truth or an untruth, and this to me is the difference between melodrama and 'melodramatic.' If you commit to it, then it is not contrived or forced. And I thought it might be a bold thing to try to make a film using this idea of melodrama, with its full range of emotions, in order to depict the very modern psychological condition of codependency [ie. between Ewa and Bruno]" (*Flicks and Bits* 2013). On a similar note, while reflecting on the deployment of operatic elements in his film, he observed that "the word 'operatic' is often misused to mean over the top, where someone is over-emoting […] and that does a terrible disservice because 'operatic' to me means a commitment and a belief to the emotion of the moment that is sincere" (Ng 2014).

The distinction provided in these two statements may help us understand the meaning of Gray's post-ironic gesture in a melodramatic film like *The Immigrant*. Post-irony can be seen as a conscious attempt to gain an immediate emotional appeal to viewers, while at the same revisiting a 'jaded' tradition so as to make it interesting and new. The accomplishment of Gray's film would not reside in a return to the past or in the meticulous homage it pays to it, but in the ways in which it exploits its potentiality in the present. I will more precisely argue that, although the film evokes pre-classic melodrama by retaining its pathos, it also concurrently destabilizes its conventions: it does so by resorting to a particular use of the *mise-en-scène* and by modulating the victimhood and agency often associated with certain typological characters, thwarting any clear-cut moral judgment of their actions and providing a more incisive narration

[6] In this regard Włodek underlines Gray's use of pre-classic props, such as the fresh, white rose given to Ewa by Orlando which withers as the young woman is back to the brothel. The symbolism of the flower is clear and unequivocal (post-ironic), meaning both the loss of innocence and hope on the heroine's part (from the symbol of purity turning into a sign of disintegration), and the passage of time—like cards falling from a calendar in early cinema.

of their inner struggles.[7] Jean-François Hamel has remarked that "*The Immigrant* tells this melodramatic story with admirable restraint, avoiding overemphasizing the misery of its central character, preferring to show her as unhappy, certainly, but also enterprising and courageous, which gives it all its depth" (2014). At the same time, the film does not allow for a definitive judgment on the story's villain: "The ambivalence of his character," Hamel argues, "at once manipulative and angry, generous and sensitive—makes him a fastidious character, forcing the viewer to continually revise his perception of the protagonists" (2014, 48, my translation).

For his female protagonist, the Polish immigrant Ewa Cybulska, Gray took inspiration from the main character of the opera titled *Suor Angelica* (1918, from Puccini's *Trittico*), which had been staged in 2008 by renowned New Hollywood director William Friedkin for the Los Angeles Opera.[8] Gray was greatly moved by this version and said:

> [*Suor Angelica*] focuses on a woman who is a nun and it's pure melodrama, an outsized dramatic situation that has the courage of its emotions. When done right, melodrama is the most beautiful thing because nothing is fake—the artist, when making the work, believed completely in the truth of the emotion. I saw this Puccini operetta in Los Angeles, it was directed by William Friedkin. I was in tears at the end. I really tried to push *The Immigrant* in this direction. And having a female protagonist enabled me to explore grand emotions without the macho component that's part of the male persona in Western culture. Ewa is both in control of her own destiny and a victim. She feels guilty about her own sins, perceived or real. She has a lot of strength. (*female.com.au* 2014)

In the film, Ewa recalls a quintessentially pre-classic, silent-cinema melodramatic heroine,[9] which critics have identified with the naturalistic type of the 'prostitute with a golden heart' (Gnaba 2014, 51; Włodek 2017). Ewa, however, shows a rock-hard, uncompromising side that seems to be entirely at odds with such a fictional type. Fear and humiliation do not seem to affect her determination to re-unite with her sister, for which she is ready to pay any price, adjusting to the situation. Her unswerving moral principles, and the resulting guilt she feels by violating them, are also in tune with her being a devout Catholic, a trait which alienates her

[7] Underlying the elusiveness of the film, Brody has written: "*The Immigrant*, for all its meticulous detail and dramatic nuance, turns naturalism inside out. Gray proves—as he has always proved—that what matters isn't frames and cuts, story lines and character traits, but the melodies and harmonies, the moods and tones that arise from them, and that, in turn, seem to deflect, distort, shudder, and shatter them" (2014).

[8] Gray defined his film as "a verismo opera written for an actress" (Flores 2018, 82). On the relation between Puccini and the film, see Salazar 2018.

[9] Gray himself commented on Cotillard's performance stating that: "She's like a silent film actress […]. I found myself removing dialogue for her. I think she's genius" (qtd. in Kelsey 2014).

even more from the other immigrants in the Lower East Side, where most people were Jewish ("I didn't want her to fit in, not even in that way," Gray said [*female.com.au* 2014]).[10] According to Leigh Davies, Ewa is "a character that is of her time without ever feeling old-fashioned or emotionally inaccessible. [She] is, above all else, a survivor, and even while forced to do things that she finds ethically indefensible she maintains a fierce sense of her own moral code. […] As the film progresses, Ewa is increasingly ground down and calcified by her predicament, and also, paradoxically, stronger and more assertive" (2014). Ewa's resoluteness is so unflinching and adamantine that she never allows herself to sympathize with the plight of other women in the story, whether they are the other prostitutes in the Lower East side or the other women immigrants at Ellis Island.

Whereas the representation of the female protagonist is consistent throughout the story, the male counterpart is presented to the viewer in a more ambivalent fashion. The film starts with a semi-subjective shot[11] in which the camera is placed behind a man who is observing a ship docking at Ellis Island (fig. 1).[12] The man, we will later discover, is Bruno Weiss. The character introduces himself as a representative of the Travelers' Aid Society[13] and eventually drags Ewa into the hell of prostitution with the pretext of helping her save her consumptive sister from the quarantine at Ellis Island and the subsequent deportation. In cinema, semi-subjective shots are often used to invite viewers both to identify with the filmic character and, at the same time, to distance themselves from her/him and scrutinize her/him attentively.[14] This initial shot anticipates the interpretive and emotional work viewers are called to perform on this character.

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[10] For this character, Gray was also inspired by the work of the great photographer of migration Lewis Hine and in particular by his portraits of young immigrant women. See Petit 2017 and Kilday 2013.

[11] See Mitry 1965.

[12] Aptly placed at its beginning, at the center, and at the end of the film, Ellis Island can be considered the true emotional center of the story, acting as a sort of magnet which incessantly pulls both the exploiter and the exploited. Interestingly, this opening evokes and at the same time distances itself from early 20th-century silent movies which 'objectively' filmed the arrival of immigrants in the new land (the most obvious example perhaps is Thomas Edison's *Emigrants Landing at Ellis Island*, 1903), but also plays with the opening of classic films such as Chaplin's *The Immigrant* (1917) which, by adopting the immigrants' point of view while they were approaching the Statue of Liberty, made viewers sympathize with their hope and expectations.

[13] On the history of the Traveler's Aid Society, an organization involved in preventing women from falling victim to the white slave traffic, see Cimino 2016.

[14] According to Leigh Davies: "Both Gray and Phoenix work to make sure that Bruno is not a one-dimensional villain: though he exploits his 'doves' [his prostitutes] and takes advantage of Ewa's undocumented status, as a Jewish man, he does not himself occupy a position of great social power and will never be able to enter the echelons of high society to which he aspires" (2014).

Fig. 1: A man gazing at a ship docking at Ellis Island

Critics have generally seen Bruno as a hypocritical, self-victimizing exploiter (Álvarez López 2018, 126). Surely, at the beginning, he deceives Ewa, discrediting her with her aunt's family to secure for himself what he believes to be a promising new addition to his brothel. But Phoenix's acting also goes in the direction of conveying ambivalence (Hamel 2014, 48), exploring Bruno's inner turmoil and consequent search for some kind of pragmatic, although cynical, balance in the difficult and hostile environment in which he lives. Underlying how *The Immigrant's* characters are "too idiosyncratic" to fit into any "familiar binarism," Leigh Davies has observed: "There is something fundamentally weird and slightly sad about Bruno: though socially capable, particularly with men more powerful than himself, he is always performing, uncomfortable in his own skin, desperate for love" (2014). Speaking of characterization in his films as a reaction to the pervasive ironic trend in contemporary cinema, Gray once stated that:

> Even with characters as horrendous as Joaquin [Phoenix]'s are, what I'm always trying to do, is to put as much love and humanity as I can into this person so we can at least understand them. We don't have to like him, of course, but understand what he is, what he's about. This seems like a very democratic approach. A lot of art today is very ironic and distancing and sometimes flat out rude to the people it's about, and I'm just anxious to do the opposite of that. (Weston 2015)

In the film, the ambivalence of a character like Bruno, who displays respectable manners considerably at odds with his real occupation, is effectively mirrored by the *mise-en-scène*. His poor but decently furnished apartment, far from presenting evidence of debauchery, appears as a bourgeois interior where domestic ordinariness and tranquility reign. The presence of a little young girl at his place, when Ewa first visits it, contributes to convey a sort of family atmosphere

suspended between innocence and corruption. Another young girl at the theater, who scrutinizes Ewa while holding a cigarette in her hands, leaves the viewer unable to decide whether she is only the daughter of one of Bruno's employees or a child prostitute herself (fig. 2).

Fig. 2: Young girl at Rosie's

In this world, Bruno has taken on the role of a father figure, offering support and protection but, paradoxically, also moral guidance to his women, resolutely punishing any act of disrespect against what he defines as his and his women's 'family.' Always leery and cautious, Ewa seems to be impervious to this form of patronizing. When she dodges Bruno's comforting embrace after she has told him what happened to her family in Poland, she is punished as an ungrateful child and publicly scolded in front of another employee of Bruno's for having stolen money from her colleagues. In this scene, the camera closes up on Ewa withdrawing to a corner at the side of the mantlepiece where several family pictures are displayed (fig. 3), almost to emphasize the surreal atmosphere in which the boundaries between affection and exploitation are blurred and the latter are forced to coexist.

As the author and director of the burlesque show that covers up for his prostitution business,[15] in which the dancers impersonate real and imaginary exotic half-naked female figures, Bruno

[15] The story conflates Bruno's personal crisis with the effects of the Prohibition Era and the changing situation of criminal activity in New York which, although never explicitly mentioned in the film, also determined the waning power of the Jewish in the prostitution business. As Jocelit underlines, "for much of the pre-war period, it was Jews […] who were most closely identified with that area of crime: as procurers, pimps, madams, and prostitutes" (1983, 45-46).

gives his employees instructions on how to perform, introducing them with words and gestures meant to arouse his customers' fantasies. This is no secondary detail since, as he will later reveal to Ewa, he himself, as a child, worked as a dancer on the streets and seems to know how hard it is to please customers and make money. Ewa's clumsy debut on stage, when she makes a swift appearance dressed as Lady Liberty with only the mime to cheer up the atmosphere, seems to epitomize Bruno's cynical exploitation of her dreams of happiness, but it also has a consequence that takes the man unawares: Oskar Staub, a wealthy Jewish in the garment business,[16] wants Ewa to provide sexual initiation to his unexperienced young son. Straub offers a considerable amount of money to him and wins Bruno's reluctance to give up Ewa on the ground that she is still unexperienced and new. This scene fully reveals Bruno's sadomasochistic relation to the young woman: Ewa, still drunk with the absinthe another dancer gave to her before the show, is convinced to sell her body, while Bruno remorsefully says to her "I don't want you to do this either but it's not my decision," and kisses her foot in what appears to be a grotesque act of chivalric submission.

Fig. 3: Ewa at Bruno's

Whereas Bruno feels a constant need to camouflage exploitation as a form of disinterested affection and mutual support ("We are here to help each other"), Ewa always eschews any

On the real-life models which serve as inspiration for the characters of Bruno Weiss and Rosie Hertz, see Gilfoyle 2015, 456.

[16] Jews were particularly thriving in the garment industry, as testified by one of the classic novels of early Jewish American literature, Abraham Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917).

rhetoric about her profession or her relationship to him from their dialogues, never allowing him to do otherwise ("I like money. I don't like you. I hate you. And I hate myself"). Unsensitive to the lures of material gain and to the prospect of 'making it' alone in the new country, Ewa is almost obsessively trying to reunite with her sister Magda, the person she identifies as the only 'home' left to her. The promise of mutual support which binds these two women, deemed either physically (Magda) or morally (Ewa) unfit to enter the land of opportunity, cannot comply with the philosophy of individual success and the obsolescence of family relations fostered by the burgeoning capitalistic American society. In the film, the two sisters' almost symbiotic tie is hinted at, and cynically parodied, as some sort of spectacular impairment in the scene when Ewa descends the staircase that leads to the theater and the camera lingers on the poster advertising the show of the conjoined twins Daisy and Violet Hilton (1908-1969), a then famous entertaining duo (fig. 4).

Fig. 4: Siamese Twins

Ewa's steadfast commitment to Magda is starkly in contrast with Bruno's fickle relation to his cousin Emil/the magician Orlando (Jeremy Renner). Unlike Ewa, who is separated from Magda by outer circumstances, Bruno tries in any way to sever his ties with Emil, but always finds him on his way. Up to a certain extent, the film encourages viewers to see Emil as the *anti-villain* of the story. Orlando's show at Ellis Island, unlike Bruno's burlesque in the Lower East Side, is neither vulgar nor a cover-up for illegal business, but simply aims at entertaining the newly-arrived immigrants and strengthen their confidence in the American Dream. This last aspect is best epitomized in the scene which sees the showman levitating with stretched-out arms as a sort of Christ-like figure and hovering on the enraptured audience.

Álvarez López has pointed out that while Ewa disdains Bruno "precisely because he reminds her of that dirty reality of her situation; that the only possibility to save her sister lies in the sacrifice of her body, which (in her mind) makes her grow small in the eyes of God. Orlando, by contrast, only demands faith from her. He speaks directly to Ewa's religious being, her in contact with God" (2018, 123).[17] My impression, however, is that Ewa is never entirely won by Emil's 'spiritual' charm, as evident from the very early stages of their acquaintance. Unlike the other immigrants attending the show on Ellis Island, in fact, she does not seem particularly impressed by Orlando's tricks, and they never get her attention as she seems to be only intent on finding her sister in the audience. Ewa's emotional involvement is instead full and unrestrained—she is moved to tears—during the performance of the aria sung by Caruso (Joseph Calleja), in line with the 'operatic purity' that Gray bestows on her character.

Whereas Bruno's sadomasochistic self-discipline ultimately supports the system and its exploitation of immigrants in all its hypocritical contradictions, Emil's recklessness seems instead to embody its implosion. Bruno's problems become serious as Emil returns to work at Rosie's theater, in particular in the scene in which he drags Ewa/Lady Liberty on stage to perform a mind-reading trick[18] and involuntarily makes her undergo the very offensive insults of the audience, which, annoyed by her wariness, publicly exposes the grim truth about her profession. Orlando's improvisation, which ends up in a riot and Bruno's subsequent layoff, has in fact undermined the acquiescence that Bruno has patiently strived to impose on Ewa within his catalogue of exotic women. As we know from a later dialogue between Bruno and the woman, Emil had already acted in a similar way in the past, taking Bruno's former fiancée to see the burlesque, therefore unveiling his cousin's profession before the woman's very eyes.

All the women who have power over Bruno (Rosie, Ewa) seem to side with Orlando, whose energy and prowess make him stand out as a less parasitical figure than Bruno, a man who makes profit by exploiting other people's work.[19] In spite of his alleged fame as a troublemaker

[17] Álvarez López underlines that Bruno and Orlando would both represents a manifestation of the American Dream which is equally impossible to attain for Ewa. The critic also notices that "from Ewa's viewpoint, Bruno and Orlando represent totally opposite realities. But, inside the big capitalist machine, they are two sides of the same coin. Bruno stands for dirty reality (work with its sacrifices and rewards); Orlando stands for the clean façade (faith, hope and spirituality)" (2018, 125).

[18] He asks her: "what do you want here in America?" and she replies, half-hypnotized: "I want to be happy."

[19] Other prostitutes, mostly out of jealousy for Bruno's special attention to Ewa, blame the Polish woman for having turned them out of the theater and out as streetwalkers. Confronting the charges made to her by Belva (Dagmara Dominczyk), Ewa replies: "at least I don't kiss the feet of the man who makes me feel like a piece of trash."

and a gambler, and until his departure for California with his crew, Emil progressively stands out as the respectful good guy in charge of restoring dignity in Ewa's life. The epitome of this can be found in a scene which inverts Bruno's 'selling' Ewa to the wealthy man's son: Orlando hires a fifteen-year-old kid and asks him to pretend to be 'a john,' just to make contact with Ewa, who now works in Central Park, and to later meet her in private in Bruno's flat. This scene seems to reestablish a kind of intergenerational order in which, unlike the previous scene, the boy reveals himself to be just a go-between, a love messenger between two consenting adults. After Emil has once more crossed his way, Bruno seems no longer able to exert any control over the environment in which he earlier prospered, and sees his former friends and customers (wealthy people, politicians, police) turn into enemies. Even his ethnic affiliation is now deprived of any screening from stigma, as is evident in the scene where a policeman threatens him to wipe his "kike" (Jew) smile from his face.[20] This progressive loss of control is aptly emphasized by the film's *mise-en-scène*, as when Bruno is released from prison after his fight with Emil, and an incredibly oppressive long shot of the building almost buries his figure on the screen (Fig. 5), or when he is beaten almost to death by the police in the stifling obscurity of the caves of Central Park.

Fig. 5: Bruno stepping out of the prison gate

All this paves the way for the most melodramatic turn in the film's characterization, which takes place in the scene during the Sunday mass in which Bruno eavesdrops Ewa's confession. During this last violation of Ewa's privacy, which fetishistically aims at replacing the intimacy

[20] On the portrayal of ethnicity in the film, see Biskupski 2016.

and confidence he is unable to establish with the woman, Bruno learns that he has misjudged Ewa from the beginning, and that the low morality attributed to her by the immigration officer at Ellis Island was something that covered her rape on the ship. He therefore resolves to help her and give her the money to save her sister.

The final confrontation between the now-redeemed Bruno and Emil—who has suddenly reappeared from his planned trip to California with the allegation that he has won the money to save Ewa's sister at gambling—leaves viewers unable to decide about Emil's real honesty and trustworthiness. Ewa reveals to him that Bruno has a gun for protection and the man unloads it to be sure that Bruno will not use it improperly in what appears as one more act of symbolic emasculation of his relative. But the insane pretense in which Emil confronts Bruno pointing the unloaded gun at his head, and which leads the latter to stab him to death, is so absurdly unexpected and uncalled for that it only barely recalls a romantic duel between the villain and the hero (fig. 6).

Fig. 6: An insane pretense

We do not know whether Emil was actually deluding Ewa about the sum he had won at gambling (as Bruno also suggests), while Bruno is robbed of the money he was willing to give her by the cops who beat him up in Central Park. The fact remains that neither of them is able to provide Ewa with what is necessary to rescue her sister on Ellis Island. It is Ewa who makes a final, radical decision, which no longer sees her as passively hoping for help from the outside. Overturning her financial dependence on Bruno, she obtains money from her aunt's family promising them to disappear with her sister and no longer bother them with the risk of a scandal (welcoming a woman of 'low morality' like Ewa). The solution she finds is very humiliating, and

far from what she had earlier fantasized: instead of enabling a reunion, her aunt's money will only pay for preserving the family's respectability and undisturbed assimilation.

Ewa's final furtive expedition to Ellis Island, with Bruno seriously bruised and miserable at her side, reverses the triumphal crossing on the ferry to Manhattan which saw her first as a scared creature in the hands of a self-confident good Samaritan at the beginning of the film. On the island, the massive, towering cement structure of the buildings looms over the human figures confined in the background, as in the long shot in which Ewa and Bruno are following the officer to the depot. Here, while they are waiting for Magda's release, Bruno decides to confess all his faults to Ewa: "I picked you […]. If you could lick my heart, you'd taste nothing but poison… I took everything from you, and I gave you nothing! Nothing. Because I'm nothing." This moment can be taken as another melodramatic peak in the film, one in which the villain finds redemption and is eventually rewarded by the only unrestrained emotional outburst from the heroine ("you are NOT nothing"). As Leigh Davies observes, in his profound self-loathing, Bruno "underestimates [Ewa's] fortitude and diminishes her spirit. When Ewa tells him that he is not nothing, she is asserting her own value and consequently placing his crimes in context" (2014). In this final exchange between these two characters, however, there seems to be no real communication besides emotional release. Ewa's worldview is in fact larger than Bruno's: she rejects his notion that human value can only be measured in terms of a mutual exploitation, implying that, just like her, he may find recognition and a new identity outside of it. "Though Bruno made her life a sin," Leigh Davies continues, "he could not take everything from her, because some essential part of her exists outside of him and his world. She is not nothing, so Bruno is not nothing, either" (2014).

Fig. 7: On separate ways

The movie ends with a puzzling and complex mirror shot[21] provided by cinematographer Darius Khondij (fig. 7), which allows a fragmentation and multiplication of points of view. Hanich explains that what we see

> is a three-part image: a flat wall on the left, an anterior depth of field outside a window in the middle, and an anterior-posterior depth of field in the mirror on the right. While in the middle Ewa […] sails away with her sister into freedom, Bruno […] walks into a confined, narrow world, symbolised by the constricting composition with various lattices and frames-within-frames-within-frames. Khondjis's complex mirror shot thus allows for—maybe even pushes us towards—an oscillation between the three viewing modes […]: from looking *onto* its flat triptych composition to looking *into* the anterior depth of the mirror (and the window) to looking *beyond* the image into the off behind the camera. (2017, 147-148)

As Álvarez López has noticed, this final mirror shot represents "a powerful reversal of the beginning," where the camera zoomed out revealing Bruno watching the arrival of the ship on firm land, and ultimately dramatizes the incommunicability of the two main characters (2018, 128). Álvarez López intriguingly writes: "Gray fashions a cinema of *misalignment*. Characters travel along the same road, but are in different phases of the journey, or move in opposite directions. This is precisely the drama of *The Immigrant*" (2018, 128; her emphasis). The misalignment the critic has traced in this scene can be also interpreted as one of Gray's many departures from a standard melodramatic plot, which restrains any truly dramatic resolution at the end of the film, by disconnecting its protagonists while on the brink of a mutual disclosure and confrontation and by just allowing them a brief, precious moment of potential insight. By so doing, Gray evokes the conventions of pre-classic melodrama, just to resist them and blot them out in a frustrating conclusion. The result is a film both emotionally engaging and intellectually captivating, which gives full scope to the understanding of human frailty and of the plight of immigrants in the first half of the last century.

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[21] Mirrors are often used in movies to achieve specific effects. Their function has often been explained through the lens of psychoanalysis. See, for instance, Christian Metz's classic book *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema* (1977).

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