

2025, Vol. 6(2), 447-457

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DOI: 10.47613/reflektif.2025.226

Article type: Research Article

Received: 18.04.2025

Accepted: 13.06.2025

Published Online: 21.07.2025

Övgü Bozgeyik*

Localized Marginalization: Migrant Spaces and Non-Places in Istanbul *Yerelleşmiş Dışlanma: İstanbul'da Göçmen Mekânları ve Yok-Mekânlar*

Abstract

This article argues that migrant non-places of Istanbul are made visible through cinematic narratives, revealing the tension between the cosmopolitan desires and exclusionary realities in the city. Through an analysis of feature films and documentaries set in Istanbul, the article examines how economic conditions and social narratives construct non-places, spaces of transition, alienation, and instability using various cinematic modalities such as visual metaphors, narrative structures, and documentary realism. Situating these films within the discourse of localization and glocalization, the paper highlights how cities can become both sites of exclusion and adaptation, where migrants negotiate between belonging and displacement. Furthermore, it argues that these non-places themselves take on a migrant quality, constantly shifting, mirroring the instability of those who inhabit or pass through them. Cinema emerges as a crucial tool for analyzing how place and exclusion interact with the city's global aspirations.

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Öz

İstanbul'un göçmen yok-mekanlarının sinematik anlatılar ile görünür kılındığını iddia eden bu makale, şehrin kozmopolit arzular ve dışlayıcı gerçekleri arasındaki gerilimi ortaya koyar. Bu makale, ekonomik koşulların ve toplumsal anlatıların geçiş, yabancılaşma ve belirsizlik mekânları olarak yok-mekan (non-place) kavramını nasıl inşa ettiğini metaforlar, anlatı yapıları, ve belgesel gerçekçiliği gibi çeşitli sinematik yöntemlerle, İstanbul'da geçen film ve belgesellerin analizi ile incelemektedir. Bu yapımları yerelleşme ve glokalleşme bağlamında ele alan çalışma, şehirlerin hem dışlanma hem de uyum alanları olarak nasıl işlediğini ve göçmenlerin aidiyet ile yerinden edilme arasında sürekli bir müzakere halinde olduğunu göstermektedir. Ayrıca, İstanbul'daki yok-mekanların kendilerinin de göçmen niteliği taşıdığını, sürekli değişerek içinde yaşayanların ve gelip geçenlerin istikrarsızlığını yansıttığını öne sürmektedir. Sinema mekan ve dışlanmanın ve şehrin global hedefleri ile etkileşimini analiz etmek için kritik bir araç olarak ortaya çıkar.

Keywords

Non-place, place in film, migrant city, localization, urban marginalization

Anahtar Kelimeler

Yok-mekan, filmde mekan, göçmen şehir, lokalizasyon, kentsel ötekileştirme

* Özyeğin University, ovgu.bozgeyik@ozu.edu.tr, ORCID: 0000-0002-8380-6426.

Introduction

The city is often imagined as a land of opportunities, a place to start over. The allure of the city center fades as one moves toward the peripheries, where migrants are frequently relegated. Life as a migrant in a metropolitan context entails various financial, social and political challenges. The opportunities can quickly give way to a harsher reality where it becomes a struggle to hold on to life, or simply to belong. For migrants, the city can take multiple, often unfriendly forms and meanings. Istanbul, as a metropolis, shapes migrant experiences through its fragmented urban landscape. While offering opportunities, its socio-spatial dynamics push migrants into precarious, transient, and exclusionary spaces. Drawing many migrants in the search of a better life, Istanbul is a city that generates numerous non-places for people who struggle to find a sense of belonging. At the heart of this condition lies the inherent temporariness of migrant life. In this article, the term migrant is used as an inclusive concept that encompasses mobile populations, ranging from villagers migrating to the city, to displaced locals of urban transformation, to individuals seeking new opportunities in the metropolis. Regardless of their movements, forced or voluntary, the uncanny nature of being a foreigner in a city generates similar conflicts and disparities, as migrants occupy ambiguous roles as strangers, transients, and guests of the city.

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This article argues that cinematic narratives shed light into Istanbul's migrant non-places, creating a conflict between the city's cosmopolitan, economic ambitions and its exclusionary realities. Istanbul, as a metropolitan city, can produce uncanny, dangerous and unreliable non-places for strangers as in the films such as *Tabutta Rövaşata* (*Somersault in Coffin*, 1996, Derviş Zaim), *Hayat Var* (*My Only Sunshine*, 2008, Reha Erdem), *İstanbul Hatırası: Köprüyü Geçmek* (*Crossing the Bridge*, 2005, Fatih Akın), *Ekümenopolis: Ucu Olmayan Şehir* (*Ecumenopolis: City Without Limits*, 2011, İmre Azem), *Maddenin Halleri* (*Phases of Matter*, 2020, Deniz Tortum) and *Vesikalı Yarım* (*My Licenced Love*, 1968, Lütfi Akad); non-places of transition that are void of history, memory and identity as exemplified in the films *Gurbet Kuşları* (*Birds of Exile*, 1964, Halit Refiğ), *Ah Güzel İstanbul* (*Oh Beautiful Istanbul*, 1966, Atıf Yılmaz), *Otobüs Yolcuları* (*Bus Passengers*, 1961, Ertem Göreç); and the spaces for the residents, but non-places for guests, as in the films of *Uzak* (*Distant*, 2002, Nuri Bilge Ceylan), *Toz Bezi* (*Dust Cloth*, 2015, Ahu Öztürk), *Uzak İhtimal* (*Wrong Rosary*, 2009, Mahmut Fazıl Coşkun). Whether a guesthouse, a transitory area or an uncanny space, the city contains various non-places that underscore the temporariness of migrant existence in a metropolis. As local structures shape their lived experiences, migrants continuously negotiate their identity, belonging, and survival within an urban landscape that is both familiar and exclusionary.

Marc Augé (1995), who introduced the concept of the non-place, defines it as a space devoid of history and identity—a hallmark of what he terms supermodernity. The rise of

globalization has fueled the proliferation of capitalist symbols and transitory hubs, where the experiences of passengers are predetermined. These non-places lack a sense of home and belonging, creating a detached form of individuality. Drawing on Relph (2009), Trigg (2017) introduced “placelessness” as a broader concept than non-place, referring to the loss of meaningful connection to places. He (Trigg, 2017) explains the significance of placelessness emphasizing its “central role in contemporary discourse on the phenomenology of place” (p. 128). It is not only about spaces becoming standardized, but also about people becoming detached from their surroundings. While non-places are socially produced, placelessness reflects a deeper alienation from all places, including those traditionally associated with meaning and identity. In this sense, the non-places can produce the feeling of placelessness as depicted in the selected films and documentaries taking place in Istanbul where urban spaces, whether temporary housing, construction sites, or nightclubs, function as non-places for migrants and outsiders. In these non-places characters struggle with placelessness, unable to establish meaningful connections to their surroundings, reinforcing their isolation and instability within the fragmented urban landscape of Istanbul.

Istanbul, like many global metropolises, is a city of contradictions. While it promises opportunity, it simultaneously enforces exclusion, pushing newcomers, including migrants from villages, refugees, and even long-term residents, to its margins. Individuals often find themselves in a state of instability, unable to fully integrate into the urban fabric. This struggle is reflected in the physical landscape, where certain urban spaces take on a transitional, unreliable nature. As Appadurai (1990) conceptualizes through the idea of ethnoscaping, migrants navigate urban environments shaped by economic, social, and political forces beyond their control. In Istanbul, this disjuncture is visible in the way non-places such as transit hubs, night bars, and temporary housing function as transient spaces, reinforcing the unsteady existence of newcomers. While migration is traditionally understood as a movement of people, this paper argues that spaces themselves can also be migratory, constantly shifting, unclaimed, and resisting localization. Through an analysis of films and documentaries set in Istanbul, this study examines how Istanbul’s non-places function as migrant spaces, shaping and mirroring the precarious existence of those who pass through them. It aims to explore how the city produces and reinforces non-places for migrants through localized urban strategies and the tension between tradition and modernity.

Globalization and Non-Places

The concept of non-place is tied to globalization. The global capitalist urbanization erodes identities and cultures, creating sameness. Standardized global spaces such as malls, business districts and transportation hubs like train stations or airports all erode local identities, and create spaces of urban life. As Augé (1995) explains, these spaces are productions of

supermodernity, and the global citizen is constantly reminded of the regulations and formalities of urban life. These non-places are sites of transition or commerce and therefore lack meaningful social relations that foster belonging and identity. Since non-places are not in relation with the feeling of belonging, spatial and personal histories are erased and anonymity is created. In this way, the cinematic representation depicts the urban poor and migrants pushed to the fringes and forced to negotiate identity and belonging.

Istanbul, as a globalized and urbanized city, produces similar non-places. Urbanization and the speculative real estate in Istanbul, as seen in *Ekümenopolis: Ucu Olmayan Şehir* (2011) mirror global patterns that Sassen (2005) describes in her concept of the ‘global city’. As Sassen (2005) explains, both global and national markets need central places to get the work done and cities are the sites of such production of services. The cities become key points in national and global economic networks, and they also create a conflict between centralized power and the daily realities of marginalized residents. The profit seeking behavior of capitalist globalization results in displacement of locals, creating urban inequality. Transnational labor flows create migration to cities, and the peripheral neighborhoods are thus shaped accordingly. Istanbul is a city which has undergone and is still undergoing urbanization, and thus there are various places turning into transient and uncertain spaces, in Augé’s terms, non-places.

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As urban transformation creates unstable spaces, responses from the marginalized emerge. Simone (2004) argues that in unstable and exclusionary environments, marginalized residents create their own infrastructures through their daily social and economic practices. He redefines ‘infrastructure’ beyond its conventional association with roads, pipes or cables, framing it instead as “a platform providing for and reproducing life in the city” (p.408). His concept of ‘people as infrastructure’ offers a valuable lens to understand how marginalized populations in Istanbul engage with and give meaning to urban non-places in their daily lives. Localized adaptation occurs as marginalized residents navigate and survive within non-places. For example, *İstanbul Hatırası: Köprüyü Geçmek* (2005) shows musicians living and performing on the streets, depicting how people navigate and interact with city life. In the film *Toz Bezi* (2015), the informal survival strategies of the working women reflect Simone’s concept of ‘people as infrastructure,’ portraying cleaning as invisible labor resulting from urban exclusion. In *Tabutta Rövaşata* (1996), the protagonist tries to survive in stolen cars or temporary shelters, linking to both Simone’s informal infrastructures and Augé’s non-places. These Istanbul films portray a city shaped by global economic flows where localized marginalization and unsteady adaptation unfold within non-places. Through cinematic representation of night bars, construction sites, and train stations, Istanbul emerges as a landscape of non-places inhabited by migrants and outsiders living in temporary and disconnected spaces. This visual and narrative depiction emphasizes the global transformation of the city, making both the spaces and their residents unstable. Together, these films reveal how urban transformation produces non-places and patterns of marginalization within the global city.

Uncanny, dangerous and unreliable non-places for strangers

We can see different types of non-places for strangers in Istanbul. The word “stranger” fits the characters of the selected films, as they live in the city, but lack a sense of belonging, unable to find a place to call home, and often pushed to dangerous sides of the city. Their dwellings remain as mere shelters, not homes. In every case, these strangers live in non-places.

Uncanny spaces are non-places that are not safe, usual or tidal. For example, Hayat lives at a run-down shack just near the sea in *Hayat Var* (2008), street musicians in the documentary *İstanbul Hatırası: Köprüyü Geçmek* (2005) make music and live on streets, the character of Mahsun lives around Rumeli Fortress and sleeps in construction sites in *Tabutta Rövaşata* (1996). Furthermore in the documentaries *Ekümenopolis: Ucu Olmayan Şehir* (2011) and *Maddenin Halleri* (2020), we see lives affected from demolished and rebuilt spaces, and Sabiha adopts a lifestyle in the nights as a sex worker living in the fringes in *Vesikalı Yarım* (1968). In the documentary *Maddenin Halleri* (2020), although the inhabitants of Cerrahpaşa Hospital are not necessarily migrants, the constant threat to demolish the hospital renders doctors, nurses, workers and patients strangers to the place. Cerrahpaşa Hospital becomes a non-place marked by the feeling of danger, instability and lack of belonging. Similarly, in the documentary *Ekümenopolis: Ucu Olmayan Şehir* (2011), depicts local residents as strangers to the urban transformation facing the loss of home and memory, and living on the edge. *İstanbul Hatırası: Köprüyü Geçmek* (2005), a street band describes life on the streets as invisible, unidentified and unvalidated. The only validation comes from the occasional listeners, but their creative or artistic potential is not discovered, and the musicians remain on the streets. Similarly, Sabiha in *Vesikalı Yarım* (1968) is a sex worker at a nightclub in one scene, she reflects that she has ‘fallen into this life’. The city pushes Sabiha into an unstable nightlife where she remains unidentified with unfulfilled potential as a part of the bar as a non-place. The unreliable and tidal nature of these non-places makes them transient spaces rather than rooted, stable locations. Thus, the spaces take on a ‘migrant’ quality, constantly shifting, unclaimed, and resisting localization, reflecting the experiences of their residents.

The unreliable non-place can be depicted in different ways. In *Hayat Var* (2008), Hayat lives in a waterside house no proper family, symbolizing the instability and unreliability of life. Her life in this non-place, reflects her longing for compassion and belonging, as shown by her constant humming and thumb-sucking. The absence of a family makes her feel lost. In the film, we see the reflection of Hayat on the surface of the water, symbolizing Hayat’s struggle to find her identity. The reflection on water echoes Göktürk’s (2002) idea of destabilized identity with upside-down images symbolizing her struggle for self. In the end, Hayat leaves for a place, anywhere but Istanbul, which means that she equates the dangers and restlessness to the city.

We can also see the image of water in *Tabutta Rövaşata* (1996). Mahsun, a homeless man in Istanbul, lacks a stable place to sleep, often sleeping in construction sites or in stolen cars as a reflection of his unstable life. His friend dies from the cold while sleeping on a boat

which makes the boat a recurring image throughout the film, introducing the image of a boat as a leitmotif. The beaten up, unstable life of Mahsun is represented through his life on the waterside. Mahsun's instability as a character is further highlighted when he apologizes to a stolen peacock before trying to kill it in order to eat it. As a homeless man in Istanbul, he remains a stranger to urban life with no option but to live on the streets.

The city can be a dangerous place for its strangers, migrants or not, who lack ties to the city. For these strangers the city produces dangerous non-places, where the identity or the memory of the residents are not validated, such as construction sites, spaces under the constant threat of demolition, nightclubs and streets. Films use images of water or construction sites to reflect this instability. These unreliable spaces highlight the precarity and marginalization that prevent strangers from localizing themselves in the urban city.

Non-places for transition that are void of history, memory and identity for transitioners

As Yiğit (2022) notes, many films from Yeşilçam, the name given to Turkey's popular film industry between the 1950s and 1980s, depict the struggles of migrants in Istanbul, presenting the city as an object of desire while reinforcing urban stereotypes.

Often beginning at Haydarpaşa train station, these films follow rural immigrants trying to "defeat Istanbul" often failing to adapt to urban life. This depiction of Istanbul persists in later films, as the city continues to produce non-places and generate similar experiences for the migrants.

Transition into city life is captured in various ways in the films. In *Gurbet Kuşları* (1964) Haydarpaşa train station is the non-place welcoming the migrants in the city, while in *Otobüs Yolcuları* (1961) the bus is a transitional space for the main characters, Kemal and Nevin, and also for the other characters in their endeavor to connect to the city. In *Ah Güzel İstanbul* (1966), the transition space for Ayşe is Haşmet's photo booth.

Haydarpaşa train station is a vivid example of non-place based on Augé's (1995) definition of spaces, like airports, stations, and supermarkets, as sites of transit where individual identities are erased in favor of shared roles like passengers or consumers. As a train station that connects Istanbul to the other parts of Turkey, Haydarpaşa constitutes a transition space that equates all the passengers. In *Gurbet Kuşları* (1964), the identities or memories of Bakırcıoğlu family members as passengers in Haydarpaşa becomes irrelevant in this space of passage. Haydarpaşa thus serves as a symbolic gate into the new life they yearn for.

In *Otobüs Yolcuları* (1961) Kemal is not a migrant in the city, but a migrant in the corrupted city life who is opposed to unjust, corrupted urban transformation and erosion of values. While urbanization is often linked to progress and opportunity, it also brings harsh realities such as the corrupt construction practices, and displacement of locals with false promises of urbanization. The bus holds an important role in the film, because it is

where most of the communication takes place. The film depicts the bus as a space beyond a transportation vehicle, but a non-place symbolizing the changing lives in the city. The bus constitutes a transitional space, both literally and figuratively, for the main character bus-driver Kemal and for the passengers with different backgrounds. The film is also about the local residents demanding justice against the false promises of a construction company, with a side story of Kemal and Nevin's love story.

Haşmet's photo booth in *Ab Güzel İstanbul* (1966) is a transitional space for Ayşe upon her arrival to Istanbul with the dream of becoming a star. Haşmet works as a photographer with a mobile booth where the act of taking photographs is a symbolic connection to the past. Ayşe comes to Haşmet to have her photographs taken for a competition. The photo booth becomes a transitional space for Ayşe, as a migrant with the hopes of transforming her life. Her life is divided into before and after, not only because she meets Haşmet at the photo booth, but also because it is a catalyst for her dreams. The photo booth is void of history, memory, identity for Ayşe, it is just a seat with a curtain as background and a camera in front. She values prosperity and fame without thinking about the implications and realities of stardom. Her superficial outlook is similar to a photo, where the realities are hidden under the surface.

The non-places of transitions, whether a train station, a bus, or photo booth, define a turning point in the lives of the migrants, because they are forced to reset in the city, which surprises the migrants with urban life customs. These non-places are not just checkpoints for the migrants; they also function as 'migrant spaces' themselves, constantly shifting and temporarily inhabited, with no lasting identity. These places serve as landmarks in the lives of migrants, marking a reset or a pause as they confront the new urban customs and life in the city. In this way, the non-places of transition reflect the instability and impermanence of the migrant experience, as both the spaces and their inhabitants navigate unfamiliar terrain.

Spaces that are normally places for the residents, but non-places for guests

A house that may feel like home for its residents, can be a non-place for migrants especially when they are guests in someone else's house. As Bachelard (2014) suggests, a home is built through memories and lived experience, forming a sense of unity and belonging. However, in the houses where migrants live or work, there is no unity nor any memories, therefore they are not places but non-places. House as a non-place is depicted in different ways in the films, such as being a guest in *Uzak* (2002), working at different houses in *Toz Bezi* (2015), or living in employer-provided housing in *Uzak İhtimal* (2009). The protagonists of these films move to İstanbul from different locations and their struggles to hold on to the city life make them feel like temporary occupants in their houses and workplaces.

In *Uzak* (2002), Yusuf comes from a village to Mahmut's house in Istanbul as a temporary visitor, a guest with a dream of finding a job on a ship. When he cannot find that

job, his stay as a guest is prolonged. As a guest he is expected to obey Mahmut's rules and expectations, just as he has to obey the rules of the city. However, instead of adapting, Yusuf remains as an observer or a flaneur, moving through Beyoğlu's public spaces, such as hotels, nightclubs, cinemas, and fast-food joints, underscoring his alienation. As Adil (2007) notes, these urban spaces are not sites of belonging but displacement, viewed through different gazes' that do not include him: the cartographer's, the consumer's, or the tourist's. These perspectives underscore his outsider status in his own city. This sense of 'unbelonging' aligns with the concept of non-places, where individuals lack connection, history, or rootedness.

The main characters in *Toz Bezi* (2015) work in wealthy houses as cleaners, while themselves live in poverty. The sense of belonging does not occur neither in the houses they work for nor in they live in. For Nesrin, the absence of a proper place to call home while cleaning others' houses emphasizes her struggle to belong to a city, where she is marked as 'other'. As a working class minority woman, Nesrin faces constant distrust - from her employers questioning her labor, her landlord who doubts her ability of paying rent, or even family members about her motherhood. She remains temporary in the houses she cleans, in the house she resides, and even in her daughter's life whom she leaves behind. The temporariness of the houses can reflect the cleaners' struggle to find a balance between the spaces of labor and spaces of living. McKay (2011) describes the maid character in *The Maid* (2005) as a symbolic image of the 'politics of engagement and disengagement' between the nations. In *Toz Bezi* (2015) Nesrin and Hatun are not migrants from another country, but they are minorities in Istanbul and they are representations of engagement and disengagement in terms of ethnicity and also space. Their movements from one house to another for cleaning, their temporality is emphasized. In this way, cleaning becomes a politically and sociologically charged job.

Temporary stays in houses can also be observed in *Uzak İhtimal* (2009) where Musa moves to Istanbul for work and is assigned to a house and a job. Musa occupies a guest status in this assigned house; he neither owns the house nor knows how long he will stay. With another appointment, he might be living in another house. These temporary living conditions maintain his status as a guest. Similarly, Clara lives as a guest in the house where she works as a caregiver. When the elderly woman she cares for dies, Clara goes to Italy to be a nun. Clara does not leave by choice, but she lacks the means to belong either to the home or the city.

If houses are temporary, what is permanent in a migrant's life? The feeling of temporariness is not only reflected in these houses that lack a feeling of belonging, but also in the non-places they occupy, spaces devoid of personal attachment, history or memory. In the mentioned films, the protagonists are all unable to produce a memory in these non-places, unable to leave a mark in the houses they are guests. When they leave, it is as if they never existed there, as if the spaces themselves, much like the migrants, are simply passing through. These non-places mirror the fragility and impermanence of the migrant experience, where identity and belonging are elusive and transient.

Conclusion

Localization, as a process, is shaped by the city's ability to integrate or marginalize the newcomers, determining whether they can transform their temporary existence into permanence. In many cases, migrants are unable to fully localize, remaining in a state of liminality where they navigate between adaptation and exclusion. Nevertheless, within these challenging spaces, many demonstrate resilience, forming new connections and finding unexpected paths for belonging. The liminal spaces are not definite and everlasting, and with the redefinition of 'home' they can create an avenue for emancipation.

Robertson (1995) attempts to tackle the global-local problem with the concept of glocalization where contemporary locality is shaped by the interaction between global influences and local conditions. Glocalization also shapes the experience of migrants in Istanbul. The city absorbs global migration patterns and economic shifts, and the local structures determine how newcomers are accepted or rejected. For example, the demand for cheap labor in globalized urban economies means that many migrants are funneled into precarious jobs, reinforcing their marginal status. At the same time, global cultural flows influence how Istanbul's urban identity is constructed, often framing the city as a site of opportunity while masking the dynamics that may be exclusionary, preventing full integration. As Bauman (1998) suggests, glocalization reshapes the ways individuals relate to place, belonging, and identity. In Istanbul, this is evident in how non-places emerge as both products of global urbanization and local exclusion, reinforcing the instability of both the spaces and the people who inhabit them.

Istanbul, as a city of globalization and urban transformation, produces non-places that reflect and reinforce migrant instability. The city creates ample opportunities, alluring populations from different regions, yet it also creates spaces of loneliness. The city welcomes migrants looking for employment, a new place to call home, while it also generates spaces of exclusion in the fringes. There are various ways and states of being a migrant in the city, and in all cases, the city creates non-places for these migrants.

Istanbul has been an object of desire, which has also been depicted in the cinema. The urban allures attract rural migrants with dreams to have a better life. The selected films and documentaries set in Istanbul help visualize and critique the theoretical concepts by Appadurai (1990), Augé (1995), Sassen (2005) and Simone (2004). Appadurai's concept of ethnoscaples explains that migrants navigate urban spaces shaped beyond their control. In this sense, the urban spaces become unreliable and fragmented. Augé's concept of non-places can be seen in the depiction of transitional spaces, spaces of commerce and transportation, where the personal and community level histories and identities are erased and anonymity is created. Sassen's idea of 'global city' can be seen in the portrayal of Istanbul in the selected films and documentaries, where the city is central of the global and economic networks and the marginalized residents are pushed to live in the fringes in the city. Simone's idea of 'people as infrastructure' can be seen in the films where the residents are forming informal ways of

survival in the city, performing their everyday social and economic activities. These theoretical lenses are helpful in understanding the depiction of Istanbul as a city producing uncanny and unreliable non-places.

Istanbul, as an urban city, produces various non-places, such uncanny, dangerous and unreliable non-places for strangers, spaces for transition that are void of history, memory and identity for transitioners, and spaces that are normally places for the residents, but non-places for guests. Constantly living in non-places, unable to have a place to call home, the newcomers or migrants are turned to strangers, pushed from one unstable space to another in a relentless cycle. The films examined in this article reveal different lives shaped by the forces of urban life, localization, and exclusion. In the long term, cities are temporary, because the usage and the meaning of spaces change and evolve. No space remains permanent; its function shifts with time, history, and economic forces. These spaces, like the migrants who inhabit them, remain unrooted and impermanent. The city becomes a glocal hub that includes both the migrants and the locals while trying to reach the global expectations. In the long run, maybe we are all migrants, and all spaces are temporary.

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