

The Construction a Migrant Hero: Representations of Immigration in *The Terminal*

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Abstract: *The Terminal* (2004), a story of a transformation of a legal traveler into an illegal migrant and a painful process of a migrant from rejection to acceptance, narrates Viktor Navorski's extraordinary journey and sheds light on experiences of millions of immigrants. Navorski, who had come to the United States for a trip, is forced to stay at the airport terminal for a long time due to political developments in his home country. In the study, the obstacles Navorski faces during his forced stay at the airport and his efforts to overcome them will be examined from the perspective of migration studies. The discriminating questions, bureaucracy, the language barrier and his state of "being in between" are the challenges Navorski tries to handle throughout the narration. In order to survive the unexpected migrant life, he manages to form a community and adapts into airport society while he gradually develops a sense of belonging. Navorski shares the fate of countless immigrants who have migrated but are unwelcome in their new country or unable to integrate into it, yet cannot return home. He feels anxiety and fear and, experiences a kind of trauma of rejection against the legitimized prejudices, stereotypes, beliefs and xenophobic approaches. This film serves as a fruitful platform for examining the migration conditions of the post 9/11 period of the US while offering a compelling narrative that interrogates and criticizes the political discourses of the era. Claiming that the film reverses the negative perceptions of immigrants, the study examines the particular barriers immigrants are subjected to and the strategies they develop to overcome them, focusing on Navorski's case in particular.

Keywords: *The Terminal*, language barrier, in betweenness, immigration, bureaucracy, sense of belonging

The Terminal, narrating the tragicomic and unusual story of a migrant called Viktor Navorski and touching upon the complex relationship between the United States and immigration, is a 2004 American film starring Tom Hanks (Viktor Navorski), Catherine Zeta-Jones (Amelia Warren) and Stanley Tucci (Frank Dixon) and directed by Steven Spielberg. Unaware of what just happened in his country, Navorski arrives at New York City's John F. Kennedy International Airport. However, because of the coup d'état, he can neither enter the US nor return his homeland and therefore has to live in the terminal for several months. The film was released just few years after the infamous 9/11 events which changed dramatically and completely the perspective on immigrants in the US. Claiming that the film reverses the negative perceptions of immigrants, the study examines the particular barriers immigrants are subjected to and the strategies they develop to overcome them, focusing on Navorski's case in particular.

It is proven in several studies that narrative formats like movies or series, which lead to parasocial interaction and identification with characters, may decrease attitudes of rejection toward immigrants (Müller, 2009; Chung & Slater, 2013; Igartua & Frutos, 2017). Throughout this study, how the portrayal of Navorski generates a kind identification with a migrant hero will be elaborated. *The Terminal* successfully reflects the psychology of Navorski who fights relentlessly against bureaucracy, a system of oppression for immigrants, while it shows in parallel the intricacy of migrant issues. The film, therefore, can be interpreted as a commentary upon the migration crisis, restrictive migrant policies and post 9/11 politics. Before analyzing the film, discussions about migration in general, migration in the US and the close interaction between cinema and migration is provided as a background of the study.

Introduction: The Phenomenon of Migration and Migration in Cinema

In the Introduction of *The Routledge Handbook of the Ethics of Immigration*, investigating the conflict between the right of states to control their borders and the right of people to search for a better life across those borders, Sahar Akhtar says:

Immigration remains one of the most pressing and complex issues of our time, shaping the lives of millions of people around the globe. It provokes important questions about human rights, state

sovereignty, cultural identity, and economic opportunities and growth. And it can promote or challenge our understanding of justice, equality, and freedom. (Akhtar, 2025, p.1)

Immigration affects not only the lives of immigrants, but also the lives of people in the country they migrate to. As seen clearly, it must be quite difficult to comment on immigration without considering the tension between desires of countries to control their borders and desires of individuals to immigrate. No matter how much developed countries want to keep their borders under control, legal and illegal immigrants continue to enter those countries one way or another. It is precisely at this point that one can see the confrontation between human rights and the rules imposed by states. The key element in migration, according to Valeria Marzocco who discusses about the right to migrate, is “the search for improved living conditions and the necessity to satisfy material needs, both as individuals and as a community.” (Marzocco, 2023, p.133) On the other hand, one can witness that in many countries, governments enforce strict immigration restrictions (Huemer, 2025, p.11). In order to understand the hardships Navorski experiences through the narration, it is essential to comprehend this clash thoroughly.

Tetsu Sakurai explains two phenomena that have come on the scene in the political and legal spheres, as the number of people who try to immigrate to developed countries has increased in recent decades:

On the one hand, there are liberal globalists asking for respect and the protection of the basic human rights of migrants and refugees and arguing for their civic and social integration into host societies. (...) On the other hand, there are growing calls for a tougher stance on immigration, and powerful populist politicians and governments have emerged in many developed countries in the last decade. (Sakurai, 2023, p.1)

One can infer that the subject of immigration gets stuck between those diverse spheres. The film analyzed in the study favors the first sphere by evoking respect for a migrant as the main character. Discussing open borders and limitations on migration, Hrishikesh Joshi argues that “there are many people who, if given the opportunity, would move across international borders to seek a better life, as they see it, elsewhere. However, they are stopped from doing so by a coercive system of border controls.” (Joshi, 2025, p.88) Navorski struggles with such kind of a coercive system to be able to enter the US.

James A.R Nafzinger explores two kinds of movement: “Sometimes the movement is voluntary. People move across borders for work, education, pleasure, curiosity, or family reasons. Migration also may be forced, as refugees flee across national borders for reasons of civil unrest, war, natural catastrophes, and famine.” (Nafzinger, 2009) Initially, Navorski’s migration was a voluntary one, but the political conditions in his home country and the political impasse in US border made his stay at the airport a forced one.

Under the themes of rights, the rule of law, equality, and justice; the hardships, suffering, and challenges faced by people immigrating from one country to another, coupled with the reluctance of states to accept those people within their borders, make the issue of immigration highly controversial. It is a necessity here to shift from general considerations about immigration to the case of immigration in the United States in order to grasp the film studied below.

Nancy Foner, who focuses how immigration has been transforming the United States, its impact on ethnic and racial diversity of American cities, towns, and suburbs as well as the economy of the country and its effect on popular culture, institutions, and values, expresses in *One Quarter of the Nation: Immigration and the Transformation of America* that America “was always peopled by immigrants, but it is only since the 1960s that the phrase “nation of immigrants” became commonly and popularly used to celebrate the United States.” (Foner, 2022, p.2) After Congress passed a statute that turned upside down the immigration laws of the US in 1965, tens of millions of new immigrants have started to come and transform the country in the following decades (Foner, 2022, p.1). As *The Terminal* focuses on a migrant’s predicaments and dilemmas in the nation of immigrants, it is essential to decode the relationship between the US and immigration. Viktor Navorski’s desperate attempts as a migrant who tries to enter the country of immigrants reflects well those predicaments and dilemmas.

Refugees and immigrants have kept the American nation and the government very busy especially since the World War II. Libby Garland argues that: “In the early postwar years, government officials, journalists, civic leaders and ethnic community organizations engaged in heated public debate about the nation’s stance toward refugees—in particular, toward the millions of European “displaced persons.”” (Garland, 2021)

The migrations that had continued since those years entered a new stage in 2001. The terror attacks of 9/11 have changed dramatically Americans’ perspective on immigrants. After these incidents, it was almost impossible for the political atmosphere not to change toward them. Some of these changes included “the sharp increase in anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies, including reaching record levels of deportations.” (Lackey, 2022, p.2) Studying the reproduction and reshaping of American popular culture after September 11, Guy Westwell states, in *Parallel Lines*, that “Within weeks, wide-ranging legislation was introduced in the US that dramatically expanded federal government power and endorsed widespread surveillance measures at home and abroad.” (Westwell, 2014, p.8)

John Tirman, scrutinizing the impacts of the attacks of September 11, 2001 on American policies such as global security, borders and immigration, expresses how it affected all immigrants:

The ferocious law-enforcement reaction to 9/11 overwhelmed Arab and Muslim communities. At the same time, other immigrants, legal or not, were affected, and most of those migrants are from Latin America, particularly Mexico. So the initial focus of attention, reflecting the ethnicity of the 9/11 attackers, actually affected a much broader swath of people in or hoping to enter the US. (Tirman, 2006)

It is obvious that there is a strong prejudice against almost all immigrants in *The Terminal* that can be easily observed in the attitudes and behaviors directed toward Navorski when he is not allowed to enter the country. Some of the changes Nafzinger enumerates are tighter border enforcement, restrictions on the civil liberties and due process of non-citizens, and a worrying rise in foreigner anxiety post 9/11 in the United States (Nafzinger, 2009).

All these developments and transitions would, of course, have political consequences. This is particularly evident among certain politicians and the parties they represent. In addition, it is well known that the media takes, in general, a negative stance toward immigrants. Eric Lackey argues in *The Immigrant Experience in Recent U.S. Cinema: A Discourse Analysis* that media focuses on negative images of immigrants especially in election seasons “to influence voters to support conservative, anti-immigrant candidates and causes.” (Lackey, 2022, p.23) Investigating how documentary film making approaches migration and refugees P. Stuart Robinson declares, in order to present the sharp contrast between movies and news in handling immigrants that “Daily news reports attest to a widespread xenophobic turn, routinely expressed in negative images of and attitudes towards migrants, whether blessed with the legitimacy of refugee status or otherwise.” (Robinson, 2019)

Even though America is racially and ethnically diverse society, fears, worries and anxieties toward immigrants still continue in this age of global mobility. 9/11 events, anti-immigrant politics, the role of media and news about immigrants all contribute to negative perceptions toward them. Immigrants are becoming a political tool and campaign materials for specific politicians. In such a period, this film had a certain potential to make a positive contribution against the unfavorable perceptions of immigrants.

Cinema, on the other hand, never remains indifferent to immigrants. Even since the introduction of silent films, immigrants have been a concern to cinema. Cristina Stanciu explores the intersection between cinema and new immigrants as: “The early twentieth century witnessed a heightened sense of nationalism and nativism precipitated by recent waves of European immigrants to the US, and leading to the campaign to Americanize the communities perceived as threats to American homogeneity.” (Stanciu, 2022) For this reason, cinema, as a popular form of mass culture, was used, as Stanciu states, to reform and educate the new arrivals, who caused “growing fears of “alienism” and a growing national(ist) panic” (Stanciu, 2022). One can observe that similar concerns have continued over a hundred years.

Giving examples of Thomas Edison's *Emigrants Landing at Ellis Island* (1903) David Griffith's *A Child of the Ghetto* (1910), and Charlie Chaplin's *The Immigrant* (1917), Elisa Bordin and Simone Francescato acknowledge that "migration is in fact at the core of the work of several founding fathers of cinema." (Bordin and Francescato, 2021) Stating that the emergence of cinema coincides with the phenomenon of world migrations Giorgio Bertellini explores how migration affected national cinemas and world's film culture:

In the early decades of the 20th century, it was North and South American cinema that most radically experienced the dynamics of transnational and intra-national mobility of mass populations. Far from pertaining only to the resettling movements of Europeans, the migrations to and within the Americas also involved Asian people, African Americans moving from the rural US South to northern urban centers, and native populations who found themselves "immigrants" in nations with newly drawn borders or were forced to retreat into inland deserts and marginal regions. (Bertellini, 2013, p.1504)

The Terminal serves as a fruitful platform for examining the migration conditions of the post 9/11 period of the US while offering a compelling narrative that interrogates and criticizes the political discourses of the era. After reviewing current immigration topics, the film will be analyzed in two sections: the obstacles Viktor Navorski faces and the ways he struggles against them.

The Multifaceted Obstacles Navorski Encounters

Immigrants face numerous obstacles and barriers while trying to enter a country as discussed above. Because of these formidable barriers, they will be unsettled in the new country they come to with countless hope, and they will live in fear and anxiety in the new destination. These barriers will not only constantly remind them that they are foreigners, but will also greatly complicate their integration into the new society.

The obstacles Viktor Navorski, the migrant hero, encounters during the film can be divided into two parts: external obstacles and internal obstacles. While the discriminating questions directed to him and the bureaucracy he has to overcome will be evaluated as external obstacles, the language barrier that makes it almost impossible for him to express his concerns and prevents him from communicating effectively with the authorities and his state of "being in between" will be regarded as internal obstacles.

Discriminatory and Exclusionary Questions

The Terminal addresses to, basically, discrimination toward immigrants, one of the most pressing challenges new arrivals to a foreign country frequently encounter. Certain questions heard at the beginning of the film provide clues about how the issue of migration is treated in the country that is the subject of the film. Navorski is also subjected to such questions that disturbs him greatly.

By unsettling and frightening them, the question "what is the purpose of your visit?" makes the visitors feel like outsiders because this question is not directed at the citizens of that country. It may be the very first moment migrants sense they will experience otherness and this can cause them develop complexes and senses of inferiority. Even though hearing this question multiple times at the beginning of the film makes the audience be sure that the setting is an airport, it actually reminds them that some people are in a foreign place and that they will have to be careful with every step they take. Creating an abstract and invisible wall between migrants and the target country, this question enables the viewers to realize, through the eyes of migrants, how troublesome it is to enter a foreign country. This question underscores not only the superiority of the questioner but also the inferiority of the questioned, because it is more of an interrogation than a question. The so-called interrogation may quite mean also accepting that the migrant is a potential guilty. Migrants are questioned even before entering the country, and if deemed unsuitable, whether stemming from their language or appearance, they are denied entry.

With the question of "how long will you be staying?" the viewers see that even the length of time a visitor can stay in this country is examined by the authorities at the airport. The psychology of migrants who answer this question can be like this: "I'm quite unwelcome in this country and I should

return to my own country as soon as possible.” This situation will significantly reduce the quality of the visitor’s time in this new place. Another question that also implies that the immigrant is not trusted and reliable is “Could I see your return ticket?” The thought that “you came to this country, but remember you will have to return to your country one day” is implanted in their subconscious. Immigrants exposed to these questions will not forget their migrant status.

Although these questions come, at first, funny for Navorski, when he gradually fails to understand the authorities, he begins to feel scared and intimidated. Realizing that he cannot easily achieve his goal, Navorski begins to wait for his fate desperately.

The Cold Face of Bureaucracy

Arguing the notion of free movement, Rainer Bauböck conceptualizes it as “the capacity of individuals to move their bodies in space as they intend without being obstructed.” (Bauböck, 2025, p.48) In free movement, interests and choices of individuals matter rather than of governments and there should be no oppression during the process of migration. Bauböck sees free movement as a fundamental condition of human life, arguing that “Being able to choose where to go is also an essential aspect of human freedom.” (Bauböck, 2025, p.48) However, bureaucracy stands in the way of all these issues and it is a huge obstacle for immigrants and their freedom, decisions, and choices.

Audiences understand even before Navorski that while he was flying to the US there was a military coup in his homeland. Therefore he can neither enter this country nor return to his own home. Frank Dixon explains this situation to Navorski as: “Your country has suspended all traveling privileges on passports issued by your government. And our State Department has revoked the visa that was going to allow you to enter the US.” (Spielberg, 2004) Therefore, he is forced to live as a kind of stateless person without an identity. Navorski is informed that the flights in and out of his country have been suspended. For the new government, as Dixon expresses, has closed all borders, he cannot use his visa in the US:

So, currently you are a citizen of nowhere. Now, we can’t process your new papers until the US recognizes your country’s new diplomatic reclassification. You don’t qualify for asylum, refugee status, temporary protective status, humanitarian parole, or non-immigration work travel. You don’t qualify for any of these. You are at this time simply.. unacceptable. (Spielberg, 2004)

The character Frank Dixon, Director of Customs and Border Protection at JFK, is the embodiment of bureaucracy, rules, and prejudice against immigrants. He awaits for the Field Commissioner position and he is portrayed as a schemer and opportunist character willing to do anything to get that promotion. His statement “I help people with their immigration problems” (Spielberg, 2004) is largely at conflict with his attitudes and behaviors toward Navorski, his ignoring him, and his eagerness to get rid of him as soon as possible.

Dixon forces Navorski to escape and break the rules by setting up a conspiracy and expresses him that: “at 12 o’clock today, the guards at those doors will leave their posts and their replacements are going to be five minutes late.” (Spielberg, 2004) And he adds: “America, for five minutes, is open.” (Spielberg, 2004) One can easily realize that “borders are political concepts” (Marzocco, 2023, p.144) from these scenes. Dixon’s whole effort is not to solve the problem, but to sweep it under the rug or pass it on to someone else: “In a few minutes, you’ll be somebody else’s problem.” (Spielberg, 2004) These speeches are clear examples of how bureaucracy can ruin the lives and expectations of migrants. Instead of helping the poor migrant, the authority prefers to turn a blind eye, and leave him to deal with his problems alone.

Negotiating crucial issues like the moral nature of borders, border control and the impacts of borders on immigrants, Joshua J. Kassner argues that “(...) despite the fact that borders often determine how well a person’s life goes, borders are, from an individual migrant’s perspective, largely arbitrary.” (Kassner, 2023, 74) This arbitrariness is reflected in all Dixon’s actions, representing a rigid bureaucracy that obstruct migrants’ lives.

Throughout the narrative, the greatest obstacle Navorski encounters is bureaucracy, which shows migrants no tolerance and, on the contrary, displays a hostile attitude toward them. *The Terminal* is proof that bureaucracy acts entirely on political motivations that prevent great amounts

of immigrants from entering the country. By applying anti-immigrant practices, bureaucracy plays a marginalizing and othering role in the film rather than an inclusive one. Behaving like the guardian of the airport, Frank Dixon abuses his power and ignores human dignity. The film depicts the struggle of a migrant against an institution that has seemingly declared war on migrants. The relationship between Dixon and Navorski seems to represent the relationship between the US and immigrants.

The Language Barrier

Combined with discriminatory and exclusionary questions and bureaucracy, the language barrier becomes insurmountable for Navorski. Unable to understand the question “What are you doing in the United States, Mr. Navorski?” (Spielberg, 2004) the hero looks around with a smile and repeats the basic English sentences he has memorized. His inability to understand the authorities does not seem to bother them who try solely to enforce bureaucracy, meanwhile Navorski remains unaware of what is happening around him. He cannot convey his feelings and his thoughts to them which exacerbates his current crisis. Thinking he is going to New York, he finds himself trapped at the airport. He realizes too late why he is unable to exit from here. Seeing his country on the news, he tries to deduce what is happening there only from the images of explosions and wars with his broken English.

Although the dialogue seen below makes the audience laugh, it actually reflects the tragic situation the migrant hero finds himself in very well. He cannot agree, in the very beginning, with the authorities on almost anything:

- Do you know anyone in New York?
- Yes.
- Who?
- Yes.
- Who?
- Yes.
- No, do you know anyone in New York?
- Yes.
- Who?
- Yes. (Spielberg, 2004)

It is clear that Navorski is an “outsider” in this new place, primarily because he speaks a different language. Not knowing the language of the country he just entered increases the problems he faces. Since he absolutely cannot establish effective communication with the authorities, he lacks the strength to overcome the barriers, and as a result, he finds himself utterly alone and powerless at the airport. Not only is the language barrier not tolerated by the authorities, but it also leads to him being looked down upon. Although he experiences discrimination, devaluation, distress, depression and discomfort, he never gives up the struggle. After long efforts, he learns the language of this country and adapts to his new life.

Neither Here Nor There: In Betweenness

Navorski is coming from the fictional Republic of Krakozhia: both the hero’s home and the source of his troubles which is a common dilemma of an immigrant. He seems very proud when he hears its name but cries bitterly when he understands what is happening there on TV screen where issues like the crisis, food and energy shortages and the political stability of Krakozhia are discussed through the pictures of bombing and gunfire.

Navorski does not want to apply for asylum, because he has a small business in New York, and as soon as he finishes it he will go back home. He came here for his father’s sake who lays down there. He will return to his country, but his country do not accept him, just like the US. He experiences

a feeling of being stuck in between, a typical immigrant sentiment. Dixon says him “You have no right to enter the US and I have no right to detain you. You have fallen through a crack in the system.” (Spielberg, 2004) His situation of forced stay makes him sense in betweenness, a notion that can be described as a weird situation in which although he is politically inadmissible for the US, he cannot return to his country and cannot enter the US because his visa has become invalid; and what is more neither he nor the authorities can do anything about it. He has, unexpectedly, become improper for both countries.

The box, “a can of Dry Roasted Peanuts”, he carries with him all the time actually represents his identity and his background; it is a promise to his father, a reminder of his task and a proof that he will eventually return. Even though the box is in the US now, it contains traces of his father; from another perspective, the box is from his country, but it contains American signatures. The narration reveals slowly why Navorski is here: Count Basie, Dizzy Gillespie, Thelonious Monk, Sonny Rollins, Art Blakey, Max Kaminsky, the famous jazz musicians, all wrote their names and send it to his father. All but one: Benny Golson Saxophone. Navorski came the US to take that missing signature for his father.

In one scene, Judge Thurman shows him the way to escape: “Beyond those doors is American soil.” (Spielberg, 2004) Being so close to America and yet so far away to it is his major crises and makes him feel in between. In another scene he is told that “America is closed.” and it means that all roads to freedom are blocked for this migrant. America is a country of free people, but now it is closed for once a legal traveler. It is like being in prison; he can neither touch the soil nor feel the fresh air.

Viktor Navorski shares the fate of countless immigrants who have migrated but are unwelcome in their new country or unable to integrate into it, yet cannot return home. He feels anxiety and fear and, experiences a kind of trauma of rejection against the legitimized prejudices, stereotypes, beliefs and xenophobic approaches. Deterioration of his psychology is perfectly reflected with situations where he feels in between.

Navorski Strives Hard: Adaptation, Integration and Sense of Belonging

Immigrants develop a set of survival strategies, most of which are universal, against the obstacles and barriers they encounter and the adversities they experience. Navorski also successfully implements some of these strategies. Although he is exposed to discriminatory and exclusionary attitudes and caught up in bureaucratic procedures, Navorski struggles to learn English in a relatively short time and gets rid of his state of in betweenness. He adapts, eventually and surprisingly, to the prevailing conditions of the airport by forming a community with people who share similar characteristics, integrating into the society where he resides and developing a sense of belonging to that place. These are the basic survival strategies Navorski employs during his extended and forced stay at the airport.

In all across the US, as Nancy Foner underlines, immigrants have been remaking communities and brought new ethnic, racial, and religious diversity and given rise to new ethnic neighborhoods (Foner, 2022, p.76). In the film, Navorski gradually befriends Joe Mulroy, an Afro-American worker, Enrique Cruz, a Latin American food deliverer and Gupta Rajan, an Indian janitor. Thanks to these friendships, he easily forms a community and overcomes many of his problems he had to face alone. By making friends with others who, like him, have immigrant backgrounds, he creates a more reliable and secure environment for himself. The strongest feature of this group is that none of them experience a loss of identity. This situation, in general, not only enables immigrants or people of immigrant background to be stronger when they come together, but also helps them adapt more easily to their new surroundings.

Michael Huemer reveals a misconception about immigrants as following “(...)the most popular argument for restriction cited the concern that immigrants would “steal American jobs”. The

vast majority of economists consider immigration overall beneficial to the domestic economy (...).” (Huemer, 2025, p.12) As seen, on the contrary to general belief, immigrants are beneficial to the society and economy of a certain country, in this case for the United States. In the film, migrants are portrayed as part of American society, contributing greatly to the airport community. Navorski, for instance, finds himself a whole bunch of things and works to do there instead of lazily waiting help from others.

Eric Lackey indicates that the twenty-first century films, featuring immigrants as central characters, “tend to represent them as complex individuals living meaningful lives while contributing to economic and social life in the United States” in spite of abundance negative news coverage and political discourses about immigrants (Lackey, 2022, p.1). Navorski and his friends are portrayed as characters with depth, rather than as typical immigrant stereotypes. They are all hardworking persons who do their jobs to the best of their ability. In short, during his forced stay at the airport Navorski’s community helps him in many things. That is quite significant because he knew nothing at the beginning and was utterly helpless. Thanks to the community he built, he learned a lot of new things and his life there became much easier.

The airport in the film, given its size, is as lively and dynamic as a city and life here continues at full swing: passengers, employees, managers, locals, and foreigners come and go day and night without ceasing. Navorski manages to cope with all this chaos and after forming a strong community he, with ease, integrates into this place. Although Navorski does not belong here and will plan to leave soon, he manages to make The International Transit Lounge his new home. He has food vouchers, prepaid calling card, an ID badge and a pager. Gate 67, where he stay for months, is an exceptional home for Navorski, a phenomena which is frequently seen with immigrants who are doomed to pursuit extraordinary lives.

Libby Garland, in analyzing the films *Illegal Entry* and *A Lady Without Passport*, says that both films “help chart a national shift toward an acceptance—however grudging and qualified—of the idea that refugees might be particularly deserving of sympathy and, at least when granted by benevolent authorities, of admission to the nation.” (Garland, 2021) Similar effects can be traced in *The Terminal*. When the taxi driver asks at the end of the film: “Where you want to go?” Navorski answers: “I am going home.” (Spielberg, 2004) After fulfilling his duty, keeping his promise to his father, he can now return to his homeland with peace of mind. To fulfill this promise, he lived like an immigrant for months. While showing the audience the difficulties of immigration, the film also conveyed the humanitarian side of a migrant. The fact that all the airport employees took Navorski’s side instead of Dixon’s and that he gained the friendship of all actually indicates how he has successfully integrated his new society.

Juan-José Igartua and Francisco J. Frutos, investigating the significance of films about immigration and attitudes toward immigrants, argue that “an effective way to improve attitudes towards the stigmatized group (cultural or ethnic minorities, immigrants, persons with a disability, etc.) is to foster empathy and perspective-taking with respect to a member of the stigmatized out-group.” (Igartua & Frutos, 2017) Particular films can be utilized for this purpose “by allowing audiences to feel empathy towards or to identify with the characters in them, and this would lead to attitudinal changes.” (Igartua & Frutos, 2017) In one of the most significant scenes of the film, Richard Salchak, the U.S. Customs and Border Protection Commissioner and Dixon’s superior warns him when Dixon treats Navorski hostile: “Sometimes you have to ignore the rules and concentrate on the people.” (Spielberg, 2004) This scene could perhaps be seen as the turning point of the film. The fact that the most authoritative figure there stands up for Navorski means that the main character is finally accepted and understood. Of course, this process was by no means easy. He integrated fully into the community, formed strong friendships, and began helping those in need. As in the most latest example, by helping someone who is trying to take his medication with him, he wins over everyone else’s hearts even though he earned Dixon’s hatred. In short, he quickly became an integral part of that community.

After adapting to the harsh living conditions at the airport and integration into the society, Navorski develops a sense of belonging here. Steven Scalet defines belonging in *Migration, Neighbourliness, and Belonging* as following: “What is it to belong in a community? First, belonging can be understood as a *psychological attitude*. To say that ‘I belong here’ can mean that I feel something: that living in a place is right for me (and nothing more is needed than having that feeling, to belong).” (Scalet, 2023, p.223; italics in original)

Navorski’s sense of belonging here continues until he leaves. One of the clearest signs of his feelings of attachment is that he falls in love with Amelia Warren, a flight attendant. He tries to find a job to take her out to dinner, and arranges a meal for her with his own limited resources. Although his efforts are not enough to make the woman feel attached to him, all of these are manifestations of his sense of belonging in terms of *psychological attitude* as cited above.

Another sign of Navorski’s belonging to this place is his commitment to following the rules to the fullest. Michael Huemer says that: “As it turns out, most studies find that both legal and illegal immigrants are *less* prone to commit crimes than the native-born population. Illegal immigrants are especially law abiding, committing half as many violent crimes and a quarter as many property crimes as native-born Americans.” (Huemer, 2025 p.13; italic in original) When Navorski does not break the rules Dixon is astonished: “Why doesn’t he walk out the doors? Why doesn’t he try to escape?” (Spielberg, 2004) Here, the airport authority is waiting for the rules to be broken by Navorski, while he, as a migrant, obeys the rules. This contradiction in the film helps the audience connect with the migrant hero and take his side. The film also presents a sympathetic image of immigrants to the audience who became paranoid about them after 9/11. It creates the perception that immigrants are not criminals or brutal nor want to harm America.

To overcome the obstacles and barriers Navorski forms a community with his migrants friends. Later on, he integrates into airport community and becomes one of them as he increasingly senses kind of belonging here. All these efforts made it easier for him to stay here. At the end of the film, the fact that all the terminal workers sympathize the migrant hero, as he is no more an outsider for them, conveys the film’s main message.

Conclusion

The Terminal, a story of a transformation of a legal traveler into an illegal migrant and a painful process of a migrant from rejection to acceptance, sheds light on experiences of millions of immigrants. They are made, as seen in the film, to feel themselves strangers and they clearly and easily understand this harsh reality even before entering the country. By denouncing xenophobia, Steven Spielberg, the director of the film, destroys several stereotypes and false perceptions about immigrants with the sympathetic character of Viktor Navorski who also destroys, in the film, the prejudices of the most of the airport authorities and workers. The fact that all the airport employees side with Navorski rather than the management of the airport along with the old man’s self-sacrifice stands as a victory for Navorski. For these reasons, the film has a great power to increase empathy toward immigrants. The contradiction between strictly adhering to the rules and understanding a person in crisis resolves at the end of the film. All these obstacles and difficulties argued above can evoke pity and empathy in the audience toward Navorski. In the US where immigration has become more and more problematic, and where the nation harbors prejudices against immigrants, this film can create a favorable environment for a more positive approach toward them.

Libby Garland concludes her essay as following: “The fate of migrants (...) rests in large part on the determination—in popular understanding, in media portrayals, in policy and law, in official hearings—of whether they are threatening invaders or people deserving of safe haven.” (Garland, 2021) Although Navorski’s fate is determined by the rigid bureaucracy, which is based on exclusion and therefore harshly criticized during the story, he never accepts the defeat and continues his struggle throughout the narration. He manages to find a home and a job even in a restricted conditions. Despite Dixon’s traps, he does not break the rules and tries to comply with all legal procedures. The migrant

hero has the moral ground and acts virtuously contrary to the authorities. In short, the film offers a compelling narrative that challenges the political discourses of the post 9/11 era by deconstructing negative images of immigrants.

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