

'The Unattainable Chronotope: Exile in Global Cinema,'  
Afterword to Prime, Rebecca (ed.) *Exile in Global Cinema*.  
London: Bloomsbury, 2014, pp. 303-310.

## The Unattainable Chronotope: Exile in Global Cinema

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- A Turkish poet in exile restlessly walks the wintry dunes of Eastern Frisia on Germany's North Sea coast. With him is the free-spirited German woman who loves him. Yet he cannot open up for her, he cannot be here and now. He always carries along the baggage of his sadness. In his mind, he lives somewhere else – in a place where he cannot be, in a place that may not even exist anymore. It is the image of this striking loner from Tevfik Baser's Farewell Stranger (1991) that circumscribes my notion of "exile."<sup>1</sup>

- But there is one other film I am also thinking about, Aditya Assarat's Hi-so (2010). In it, a young cosmopolitan Thai émigré actor has returned from America to be in a movie. The shoot is over, and he has come to Bangkok for a few days, staying in the apartment that was the site of his childhood. Yet the “home” he yearned to return is not welcoming or cosy. There is no one around. The building is scheduled for demolition. The apartment is nothing but a series of empty rooms where objects, once meaningful and prized, have gathered dust and seem impossible to relate to. Warm wind rush up and down hollow staircases. The actor seeks out his girlfriend's body in the dark, for a

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The protagonists in both these films are exilic in their own right: they are in exile because, each one in their own manner, they are not able to be where they imagine they need to be. They are present yet detached from their immediate surroundings. They reach out to people yet cannot connect. Their emotional lives stay suspended in perpetual longing for the unattainable. They fantasize about return yet know that return is not really possible.

Individuals, in general, may have an “innate capacity to transform overwhelming experiences” (Levine, 1997), yet these protagonists live in adjournment, in a state where fight or flight has been superseded by freezing -- the immobilising hyperarousal that stops them from getting on with their life. They may come from completely different cultural backgrounds and yet they are the same in their paralyzing experiencing of pain, grief, and dissociation.

The exilic feeling is trauma that one does not attempt to heal. But one also realises that the place of longing is idealised and perhaps no longer exists. It is, then, not about linking with a place and not about rewinding to a lost point in time, but about reconnecting with oneself, about healing from within.

Suppressed longing has contracted the muscles around the eyes and keeps the jaws tense. Bodies are perpetually vigilant. Exiles live with the feeling of being incomplete, of being a stranger everywhere, of being adrift.

They may be attractive and funny, laughing and making jokes, but it is all on the surface only. They reach out whilst remaining closed and know it is not possible to open up and relax. They are shut deep down within themselves and cannot connect. They fear intimacy.

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The exilic protagonist is displaced. He would feel equally terrible anywhere; he cannot embrace his surroundings – whether the bridges on the Seine in Fernando Solanas’ Tangos: The Exile of Gardel (1985) or the lonely North Sea beaches in Farewell Stranger – as these can be nothing but a backdrop to his seclusion.

It is this feeling of disassociation from the environment that gives the quality of the exilic landscape found in films; it is the protagonist’s inability to relate that gives any setting an eerie, alienated quality.

There is no need for the exilic landscape to be a panorama of desolation and ruins. It may be some large uninhabited apartment building, like the one in Hi-So. Or it may be the neon lights of Taipei, the “home” to which Yiu-fai returns at the end of Wong Kar-wai’s Happy Together (1997) – a place where he is as much a stranger as he was in Buenos Aires.

The women from Patrizio Guzman's Nostalgia for the Light (2010) have exiled themselves to Chile's Atacama desert, where they rummage in ceaseless effort to piece together the scattered body parts of their loved ones. They cannot possibly connect with the inhospitable terrain yet they remain confined within it, exiles in their own country.

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Exilic protagonists compulsively display discomfort with the proximate milieu – the rebellious couple from Tony Gatlif's Exiles (2004) are not happy in Paris, so they journey down to the Maghreb in search of an imaginary promised land, their ancestral "home." The Kurdish political emigres in Javier Corcuera's The Back of the World (2000) feel disoriented and foreign in their North European homes, filled with anxiety streaming from an idealised image of the unattainable homeland that they keep alive. Their restlessness is driven by underlying grief; their bodies "remember," again and again, the elusive trauma of displacement (Rothschild 2013). They live elsewhere, dissociated in body and mind from where they are at present.<sup>2</sup>

It is not possible to return; the choices are to keep wandering or make a commitment to the here and now. And they try to bond, often by being compulsively sexual and "acting out," engaging with other bodies as solution to solitude. But their relationships are damaged. It is always about "sleeping with strangers," as in Tsai Ming-liang's I Don't Want to Sleep Alone (2006).

Like other psychological conditions, exile has its own body language, which the cinema reveals. The exilic protagonist is always alone. In his walks on the beach, the loner in Farewell Stranger feels "like a dog" in his sense of physical and mental isolation (Kilb 1991). He is trying to relate to his surroundings but he cannot, as he

does not acknowledge what some have termed “the power of now”; he lives in his mind, in places and moments that are out of reach, far away. Even when surrounded by people – family, friends, lovers – he is elsewhere, living in a fantasy bond with other people and places.<sup>3</sup>

On arrival at the revered destination, the exilic protagonist may or may not realise that return and reconnecting are impossible. She is condemned to never belong, not even in the abode of her dreams.

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The traumatic dimension of exile takes on a whole new meaning in three new films, all re-enacted documentaries involving real family members of the filmmakers, who are themselves second generation Western-born exiled Palestinians. All three films chronicle displays of depression and obsessive disorders – aspects of exile that traditionally remain overlooked. In The Turtle’s Rage (2012) made in Germany by Pary El-Qalkili, the filmmaker follows around her Palestinian father, a charming but angry and inflexible man, and talks with him about her broken dreams and her alienated mother. In A World Not Ours (2012) made internationally by Danish-based Dubai-raised Mahdi Fleifel, the director features his grandfather, uncle, and close friend, all living at a refugee camp in Lebanon – each claustrophobic, mad, and frenzied in his own way. In My Father from Haifa (2009), the Zentropa-produced Danish documentary by Omar Shagrawi and featuring his Palestinian father, the suffocating distress that the old man emits puts strain on the filmmaker’s siblings. These second-generation Palestinians provide similar observations on the psychological effects of the exilic restlessness and suffering their parents live with and pass on to their spouses, children, and grandchildren. There is plenty of evidence

of impaired family relations, misery, melancholy, and hopelessness that affects everybody around.

In A World Not Ours, Mahdi Fleifel repeatedly uses a quote from Ben Gurion, one of Israel's founders: "The old will die and the young will forget," a statement made at the time of the original expulsion of the Palestinians. These new films, more than any other films made so far on the Palestinian topic, show that the persistent concern is not about the keys to the lost houses that the families still keep. It is more about staying exilic, about the unforgiving demand to not yield issued by the older to the younger generation (who do not necessarily see themselves as exiles but are under pressure to feel this way) and the resulting stress and frustration. Yes, "the old" will die. But will "the young" forget? The evidence put forth in these films suggests that the young are faced with a serious dilemma – to forget or not, to let go or withstand, to continue experiencing themselves as exiles or give up and live their lives.

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Using the concepts of "accented cinema" and "interstitiality," Hamid Naficy outlined a wider phenomenon of migrancy in filmmaking (2001); it was only in his early work, an ethnography of Iranian émigré television in Los Angeles, that the focus of his investigation was on exiled intellectuals (1993). I have also had the chance to observe, along the lines of Naficy's early inquiry, what happened to East European directors who left during the years of communism. Those who maintained the "exilic" stance could not continue working in the West and gradually perished, destroyed by engulfing bitterness. Those who remained in the public eye – people like Milos Forman, Roman Polanski, or Andrei Konchalovsky – thrived mainly because they were able to shed off the exilic baggage and open up to new topics, there and then.

The same is true for the trajectories of directors who fled adverse political circumstances – Chileans, Kurds, Bosnians. Many of the Iranians, now settled across North America and Europe, still maintain the “exilic” perspective.<sup>4</sup>

But not every displacement is exile. Migrating can mean many other things. What distinguishes the émigré, the forced or economic migrant, or the refugee from the “exile”? Could it be that the exilic condition brings about sadness and a feeling of an irreversible detachment, whereas migration can bring about celebratory excitement and the feeling of opening up?

The essays in this book talk of “home” and “homecoming,” of “return” and the “illusion of return,” of “longing and belonging” and “nostalgia,” but also of “stubborn cosmopolitanism” and “sleeping with strangers.” And they all show that it is not only about the loss of home, it is about the loss of an idea and connection, about withdrawing and closing within oneself. One can return “home,” as the protagonist in Hi-So does, and remain exiled whilst void rushes through all defenses. And one can be exiled without ever leaving home. Exile is the blurry sadness, the prevailing awareness of loss, dissociation and irreversible upset. It is the unattainable chronotope.

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Abschied vom falschen Paradies/Farewell to False Paradise (Tevfik Baser, West

Germany, 1989)

Chun gwong cha sit/Happy Together (Hong Kong, /Japan/South Korea Wong Kar

Wai, 1997)

La espalda del mundo/The Back of the World (Spain, Javier Corcuera, 2000)

El exilio de Gardel: Tangos/Tangos: The Exile of Gardel (France/Argentina,

Fernando Solanas, 1985)

Exils/ Exiles (France/Japan, Tony Gatlif, 2004)

Fra Haifa til Nørrebro/My Father from Haifa (Denmark, Omar Shagrawi, 2009)

Fu sheng/ Floating Life (Australia, Clara Law, 1996)

Hei yan quan/ I Don't Want to Sleep Alone (Malaysia/China/Taiwan/France/Austria,

Tsai Ming-liang, 2006)

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Schildkrötenwut/The Turtle's Rage, Pary El-Qalkili, Germany, 2012),

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## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Turkish-German director Tevfik Baser's two earlier films, 40 Square Meters Germany (1986) and Farewell to False Paradise (1991) also dealt with matters of isolation and alienation. By placing women in the centre of the narratives, however, the director explored more the difficulty in adapting and matters of patriarchy. It is only in this third film that he comes to touch on matters of exile.

<sup>2</sup> "As evidence of the central importance of dissociation in traumatic stress disorder has continued to accumulate, it has also become apparent that dissociation offers a window into consciousness, memory and the links between body and mind." (Herman, 1992: 240)

<sup>3</sup> The 'far flung family' is a phenomenon of a different order (Berghahn, 2013). Most sensitively depicted in Clara Law's Floating Life (1996), many of these dispersed families make an effort to stay connected, securing "face-time" either through dedicated family web-sites or through ephemeral contacts over Skype, as featured in a number of recent documentaries.

<sup>4</sup> Hossein Mahini, an exiled Iranian filmmaker living in Sweden, started the Exile Film Festival/ The World is My Home (<http://www.exilefilmfestival.com/>) in Gothenburg in 1993. The festival was originally focused on the work of exiled Iranians but has grown over the years and its 11<sup>th</sup> edition in 2013 featured 68 films from a variety of countries.