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Hamid Naficy: An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking

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Introduction

IN JUNE 1995, while conducting research in Paris for this book, I attended a private screening of Mohsen Makhmalbaf's *A Time to Love* (*Nowbat-e Asheqi*, 1991) at MK2 Productions, which was considering the film for distribution. Made by the best-known new director to emerge since the revolution of 1979, the film had been banned in the director's home country, Iran, for its theme of love, in essence a ménage à trois. My friend Azadeh Kian and I were the only spectators in the comfortably appointed screening room. Perhaps partly to avoid the Iranian censors, Makhmalbaf had shot the film in Turkey, with all the dialogue in Turkish, a language I did not know beyond certain words. The film was subtitled, but in French, which at times passed too fast for my understanding, especially since I was trying to take notes. On these occasions, I would nudge Azadeh to translate for me. Reading the French subtitles, she would whisper the Persian translation into my ears. Trying to keep up with her translation and with the ongoing film and its subtitles, I was forced to take notes hurriedly in English and Persian, whichever served the moment best. Thus, watching this single film involved multiple acts of translation across four cultures and languages. This chain of linguistic and cultural signification pointed to the radical shift that has occurred in the globalization of cinema since my childhood. In those days, cinema screens were monopolized by the West, particularly by American films, and the Third World people were more consumers of these films than producers of their own narratives. But now people of the Third World are making and exhibiting films not only in their own countries but also increasingly across national boundaries, finding receptive audiences in Western film festivals and commercial theaters and on television. This book is centrally concerned with the films that postcolonial, Third World filmmakers have made in their Western sojourn since the 1960s, but several key Russian, European, Canadian, and American filmmakers in exile are also featured.

In an earlier work, I focused on the particularity of a specific group's televisual productions in exile, that of the Iranians in Los Angeles (Naficy 1993a). The present volume, on the other hand, seeks to identify and analyze the common features of the cinematic productions of a number of filmmakers from diverse originating and receiving countries. My contention is that although there is nothing common about exile and diaspora, deterritorialized peoples and their films share certain features, which in today's climate of lethal ethnic difference need to be considered, even emphasized. While stressing these features, the book continually engages with the specific histories of individuals and groups that engender divergent experiences, institutions, and modes of cultural production and consumption—hence the use of close-up sections throughout.

Significantly, what occurred in the MK2 screening room involved not only watching and listening but also reading, translating, and writing—all of which are part of the spectatorial activities and competencies that are needed for appreciating the works of these filmmakers, which I have termed “accented cinema.” This is by no means an established or cohesive cinema, since it has been in a state of preformation and emergence in disparate and dispersed pockets across the globe. It is, nevertheless, an increasingly significant cinematic formation in terms of its output, which reaches into the thousands, its variety of forms and diversity of cultures, which are staggering, and its social impact, which extends far beyond exilic and diasporic communities to include the general public as well. If the dominant cinema is considered universal and without accent, the films that diasporic and exilic subjects make are accented. As discussed in chapter 1, the accent emanates not so much from the accented speech of the diegetic characters as from the displacement of the filmmakers and their artisanal production modes. Although many of their films are authorial and autobiographical, I problematize both authorship and autobiography by positing that the filmmakers’ relationship to their films and to the authoring agency within them is not solely one of parentage but also one of performance. However, by putting the author back into authorship, I counter a prevalent postmodernist tendency, which either celebrates the death of the author or multiplies the authoring effect to the point of de-authoring the text. Accented filmmakers are not just textual structures or fictions within their films; they also are empirical subjects, situated in the interstices of cultures and film practices, who exist outside and prior to their films.

Another aspect of the accent is the style characterizing these films, whose components, discussed in various chapters and at various points throughout, are open-form and closed-form visual style; fragmented, multilingual, epistolary, self-reflexive, and critically juxtaposed narrative structure; amphibolic, doubled, crossed, and lost characters; subject matter and themes that involve journeying, historicity, identity, and displacement; dysphoric, euphoric, nostalgic, synaesthetic, liminal, and politicized structures of feeling; interstitial and collective modes of production; and inscription of the biographical, social, and cinematic (dis)location of the filmmakers.

Accented films are interstitial because they are created astride and in the interstices of social formations and cinematic practices. Consequently, they are simultaneously local and global, and they resonate against the prevailing cinematic production practices, at the same time that they benefit from them. As such, the best of the accented films signify and signify upon the conditions both of exile and diaspora and of cinema. They signify and signify upon exile and diaspora by expressing, allegorizing, commenting upon, and critiquing the home and host societies and cultures and the deterritorialized conditions of the filmmakers. They signify and signify upon cinematic traditions by means of their artisanal and collective production modes, their aesthetics and politics

of smallness and imperfection, and their narrative strategies that cross generic boundaries and undermine cinematic realism. Chapters 2 and 3 are devoted to an extensive examination of the accented production modes and their politics and aesthetics.

One of the most intriguing features of the films' narratives is their epistolarity, involving the use of the formal properties of letters and telephony to create and exchange meaning. Exile and epistolarity necessitate one another, for distance and absence drive them both. However, by addressing someone in an epistle, an illusion of presence is created that hovers in the text's interstices. As a result, address is not just a problem but the problematic of these films. Epistolarity is also counterhegemonic because it challenges the authority of the classic realist films and their omniscient narrator and narrative system by its multivocal, multiauthorial, calligraphic, and free indirect discourses. Chapter 4 examines these and other issues in the context of three main types of epistolary films: film-letters, telephonic epistles, and letter-films.

Despite the recent overcelebration of the extranational and extraterritorial cyber communities created by computer connectivity, interactivity, and bandwidth, and the popularization of the notions of travel, traveling aesthetics, and traveling identity, many accented films emphasize territoriality, rootedness, and geography. Because they are deterritorialized, these films are deeply concerned with territory and territoriality. Their preoccupation with place is expressed in their open and closed space-time (chronotopical) representations. That of the homeland tends to emphasize boundlessness and timelessness, and it is cathected by means of fetishization and nostalgic longing to the homeland's natural landscape, mountains, monuments, and souvenirs. The representation of life in exile and diaspora, on the other hand, tends to stress claustrophobia and temporality, and it is cathected to sites of confinement and control and to narratives of panic and pursuit. While the idyllic open structures of home emphasize continuity, these paranoid structures of exile underscore rupture. Significantly, the paranoid structures also serve the comforting and critical functions of embodying the exiles' protest against the fluid and hostile social conditions in which they find themselves. However, some accented films are freed from such territorial imperatives. These issues and films are explored extensively in chapters 5 and 6.

Then there are the important transitional and transnational places and spaces, such as borders, tunnels, seaports, airports, and hotels and vehicles of mobility, such as trains, buses, and suitcases, that are frequently inscribed in the accented films. I have chosen these places, spaces, and vehicles as privileged sites for my examination of journeys of and struggles over identity. Accented filmmakers are subject to momentous historical dynamism and to intense national longings for form. They cross many borders and engage in many deterritorializing and reterritorializing journeys, which take several forms, including home-seeking journeys, journeys of homelessness, and homecoming

journeys. However, these journeys are not just physical and territorial but are also deeply psychological and philosophical. Among the most important are journeys of identity, in the course of which old identities are sometimes shed and new ones refashioned. In the best of the accented films, identity is not a fixed essence but a process of becoming, even a performance of identity. Indeed, each accented film may be thought of as a performance of its author's identity. Because they are highly fluid, exilic and diasporic identities raise important questions about political agency and about the ethics of identity politics. These issues of journeying, border crossing, and identity crossing are investigated in chapter 7.

Although driven by the aesthetics of juxtaposition and by the binary structures that nostalgically repress, fetishize, and favorably compare there with here, then with now, home with exile, accented films in general derive their power not from purity and *refusal* but from impurity and *refusion*. The acts of signification, signifying upon, and refusion that are hinted at in this introduction constitute the "work" of the accented style. Importantly, the style not only signifies the endemic *dislocation* of our times in general and of these filmmaker in particular but also serves to *locate* the filmmakers as authors of their films and to some extent of their own destiny.

Accented films are in dialogue with the home and host societies and their respective national cinemas, as well as with audiences, many of whom are similarly transnational, whose desires, aspirations, and fears they express. However, displacement creates its own peculiar spectatorial environment that produces different demands and expectations, which are torqued not only by market forces but also by nationalist politics and by politics of ethnic representation. While the general public may prefer accented films that are entertaining and enlightening, sometimes at the expense of the integrity of the filmmakers' native culture, displaced communities often demand "authentic" and corrective representations. Such conflicting demands may "distort" the accented films, exposing them to criticism from all sides. Consequently, the accented style continually grapples with the politicized immediacy of the films and with their collective enunciation and reception—that is, with the manner in which politics infuses all aspects of their existence. The study of a transnational cultural phenomenon such as the accented cinema is always haunted by the particularity of its autochthonous cultures. Within every transnational culture beats the hearts of multiple displaced but situated cultures interacting with one another. By continually incorporating the novel aspects of these local cultures into the universal, the dominant society and cinema renew themselves and remain dominant. To resist total absorption, one may follow Deleuze and Guattari's advice and intensify capitalism's schizophrenic tendencies to such an extent that its integrity is threatened (Larsen 1991, xviii). Alternatively, one may create paranoid structures and citadel cultures of withdrawal or may engage in

rhizomatic group affiliations—vertical, horizontal, and transverse—across de-territorialized social formations. The dynamics of such incorporative and resistive strategies in accented cinema are discussed throughout.

Although accented cinema is unprecedented in its cultural and linguistic diversity and its global dispersion, it has had predecessors, and immigrants everywhere have been key players in the development of the literature and cinema of their adopted countries. Indeed, “foreigners and émigrés” have dominated the pinnacles of modern English literature (Eagleton 1970, 9) and of American cinema, which from the beginning was immigrant, transnational, and American all at the same time. Although the contribution of immigrants has continued throughout the century of cinema’s existence, its greatest impact in the United States was cyclical, rising with displacement of populations abroad or within the country. Two major immigration waves occurred in this century, the first peaking around 1915 and the second in the mid-1980s. These waves were markedly different from each other, and smaller-waves and countercurrents that involved national, religious, racial, and inter- and intraethnic differences and conflicts further complicated this picture.

The immigrants contributed to the American cinema as spectators and as producers. At the dawn of cinema, immigrants-as-spectators were important to the medium’s evolution from an artisanal enterprise to an industrial system; likewise, cinema played a crucial role in their transformation from immigrant to American (Ewen and Ewen 1982; Hansen 1991). This social transformation was intimately tied to a textual transformation of the audience. For the films gradually moved away from the primitive cinema’s conception of a collective “audience” to the classical cinema’s individually addressed “spectator,” who was thought to be “a singular, unified but potentially universal category” that transcended rooted categories of the immigrants. This facilitated the interpellation of spectators as a classless mass audience (Hansen 1991, 84–85).

The immigrants’ impact extended to their indispensable contribution to the production, distribution, and exhibition of the movies. The trajectory of their varied contributions in the United States is sketched briefly here. From cinema’s inception, émigré and ethnic filmmakers attempted to make films for their own specific audiences, with little sustained success or with mixed results. The most extended and successful efforts were Yiddish films that Jews made for the Jewish diaspora (Hoberman 1991a) and “race movies” that African-Americans made for African-Americans (Cripps 1988; Green 1993; Gaines 1993). However, the first generation of Jews and Jewish immigrants, primarily from Eastern Europe and Russia—dubbed the Hollywood “pioneers”—were instrumental in building the motion picture industry and the studio system (Gabler 1988). Between the two world wars, a second group of European immigrants and exiles, particularly from Germany and Austria, who had left

their homelands to advance professionally or to escape the Nazis, entered the American cinema. Working for the studios in various capacities, they proved to be pivotal in consolidating the studio system and in internationalizing the American cinema. Unlike the “pioneers,” these “émigrés” and “exiles” were not given to a totalizing image of assimilation, and they engaged in various performative strategies of camouflage in their films and self-fashioning in their lives (Elsaesser 1999). The poststudio “ethnics,” the children of Irish, Italian, and Jewish immigrants, contributed to the emergence of the New Hollywood postindustrial cinema. They produced quintessentially American films that were nonetheless suffused with manifest or submerged ethnicity. Since the 1960s, “identity” and “postcolonial” filmmakers have dealt with particularistic and minoritarian affiliations and with the dynamics of assimilation and resistance. Group affiliation and identity politics often take precedence over adherence to cinematic and generic categories. Thus, only in the best of their films (such as those of Spike Lee, Charles Burnett, Julie Dash, and Haile Gerima, among African-Americans) is there much experimentation and innovation in style and content.

Since the 1960s, we have been living in a rapidly globalizing world and media environment. Indeed, globalization is the norm against which people are now determining their individual and national identities (Hall 1996). Access to multiple channels and types of local and transnational media and the displacement of an unprecedented number of people have challenged our received notions of national culture and identity, national cinema and genre, authorial vision and style, and film reception and ethnography. In such a mediated world, imagination itself must be regarded as a social practice. As Arjun Appadurai notes, “The imagination is now central to all forms of agency, is itself a social fact, and is the key component of the new global order” (1996, 31). In this book, I direct attention to a new and critical imagination in the global media: an accented cinema of exile and diaspora and its embedded theory of criticism. This is both a cinema *of* exile and a cinema *in* exile. It concerns deterritorialization and is itself produced in the interstices of cultures and cinematic production practices. However, since it has not been made by cohesive, programmatic, or generic production practices backed by the studios, it is currently a category more of criticism than of production.

The close-up sections placed throughout the book offer case studies that are devoted to an extended analysis of a single film (such as Fernando Solanas’s *Tangos: Exile of Gardel*, 1985) or to the career of individual filmmakers (such as Atom Egoyan, Jonas Mekas, Mira Nair, and Miguel Littín), which contextualize their lives and times for a better understanding of their films. Sometimes the sections focus on a collective filming formation, examining less the specific films than the emergence, evolution, and impact of lines of forces on those formations. Examples are the sections on Asian Pacific American cin-

ema, *beur* cinema in France, black and Asian collectives in Britain, and Iranian filmmaking in Europe and the United States. Attention to the specificity and situatedness of each displaced filmmaker, community, or formation is an important safeguard against the temptation to engage in postmodernist discursive tourism or the positing of an all-encompassing grand Exile or great Diaspora—or a homogeneous Accented Cinema.