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"Ode to Home": Constructing a Displaced Identity Through a Visual Language of Film

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“ODE TO HOME”: CONSTRUCTING A DISPLACED IDENTITY THROUGH A VISUAL
LANGUAGE OF FILM

by

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A Research Paper
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
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College of Mass Communications and Media Arts
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RESEARCH PAPER APPROVAL

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A Research Paper Submitted in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements

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AN ABSTRACT OF THE RESEARCH PAPER OF

AYGUL IDIYATULLINA, for the Master of Fine Arts degree in MASS COMMUNICATIONS AND MEDIA ARTS, presented on JUNE 28th, 2012 at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

TITLE: “ODE TO HOME”: CONSTRUCTING A DISPLACED IDENTITY THROUGH A VISUAL LANGUAGE OF FILM

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Wago Kreider

This paper accompanies the film “Ode to Home” that was screened on June 30th, 2012. Both the film and the paper deal with the subject of displacement from the native culture and home. My aim is to look at how physical displacement from the place of strong emotional value, such as homeland, can fragment a person’s identity and throw them into a reactionary search for ideal home and identity.

DEDICATION

This Research Paper is dedicated to my Grandparents: Rais, Shaukat, Dilyara, and Farida, my parents, Dzhaudat and Farida, and my brother Airat.

For everything that I have and do, I am always in debt to you.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Our postmodern literature, films, and media are filled with stories of exiles, most of them heroic and triumphant, with characters discovering new places and countries, taking on romantic road trips, and coming to amazing epiphanies and revelations. According to the literary critic George Steiner, the whole twentieth-century Western literature is a “literature by and about exiles, symbolizing the age of the refugee” (as quoted in Said, 2002, p. 137). While oftentimes notions of border-crossing and journey-taking are looked at romantically, there’s one thing that becomes very clear when you actually experience exile or immigration of any sort in real life: it is a very lonely journey. As Edward Said (2002) put it beautifully: “The achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever,” and to think of it only as “beneficially humanistic is to banalize its mutilations, the losses it inflicts on those who suffer them, the muteness with which it responds to any attempt to understand it as ‘good to us.’ (p. 138)

The purpose of my thesis film *Ode to Home* (English) or “*Өй Бәете*” (öy bāyete – Tatar) is to visually present these frustrations of homelessness and exile, not to romanticize them, but to accentuate the destructive and overbearing effects they have on a person’s identity. No matter how much happiness I found living far away from Russia and the many opportunities I am lucky to experience in the US, there’s always a reminder of the trade off – the distance between me and my family, the seed of my existence, my roots, and the perpetual feeling of partial identity, always searching for “Home” and wholeness.

During my MFA studies I’ve created a series of projects that deal with my displacement from home and my endless longing for it. *Ode to Home* differs as the most fictional and

structured of the films I've created. The film employs surrealistic imagery visualizing the main character's divided identity. Unlike my previous films, where I played my own characters, there's an actress, Marcela Angel, playing the title role. She is herself displaced from her home in Columbia. And I thought it was essential to have an actress that has gone through displacement, to play in a film that is borderline fiction and documentary. The underlying objectivity of using an actress to play the main part and writing a script for the film is, ultimately, my approach to illustrating a very personal subjective theme. This tension is present throughout the film in both the story and the medium it was created in. The generic narrative of displaced identity is injected with some very specific personal memories that emerge with home footage and voice over. In the process of making *Ode to Home*, I realized it is impossible for me to distance myself enough from this subject to create an objective film on displacement. The result is a hybrid experimental film that combines both objective and subjective form. *Ode to Home* is an experimental medley, mixing fictional and documentary footage, film and digital, personal objects of both the actress and the filmmaker (myself).

In the words of Allan Pred (1983), a "humanistic geographer," who studies social interaction and attachment to physical space in order to understand the human condition:

[A] place is never merely an object. It is always an object for a subject. It is seen, for each individual, as a center of meanings, intentions, or felt values; a focus of emotional or sentimental attachment; a locality of felt significance. Home does not become an issue until it is no longer there or is being lost. (p. 49)

Therefore, my immense interest in creating work about home and wanting to find a sense of home actually comes from displacement from it. I grew up in-between two continents. When I left my home, at fifteen, in addition to experiencing the standard identity crisis of adolescence, I

also went through a very alienating experience of growing up in a new culture. My identity fluctuated trying to adapt to the new country and language. And, as a result, when I visited home, I could not even fit in with my family and friends. They didn't understand me, just like the American kids at school could not understand my accented speech. I was experiencing a constant rift between my native Tatar culture, at the same time learning to adapt to the new one in the United States. My natural reactionary attitude lead me to be more nationalistic than I ever was growing up in Russia. Accentuating on my culture, while living outside of it, soon led to fragmentation of the self I once knew.

The struggle for a displaced person lies in a desire of the impossible – retaining the old self, perfectly connected to home, while adapting to a new environment and culture. The inability to express one's self in a new language, the clashing differences in traditions and lifestyle, or even the physical differences in location and surroundings for long periods of time, can take a striking toll on one's identity and in most cases glorify the place of childhood and growing up as a utopian ideal place of wholeness. I wanted the images to visually illustrate these non-audiovisual senses connected to exile, such as the inner fragmentation of identity and the search for the feeling of "home," as once experienced.

The film is presented as a visual *bayet*. *Bayet* is an ancient form of very specific type of Tatar poetry, described as a long-form poem about a tragic event or loss, often told from the dead person's or victim's perspective directed towards the survivors. In its two-line rhyme structure and length, as well as its tendency to re-tell a historical account or a journey, *bayet* is a very similar poetry style to an ode. An ode is usually characterized as a long form poem illustrating a journey or an individual, in a very praising or glorifying manner. When I picked the name *Oy Bayete* (Tatar) for my film, I decided that the translation *Ode to Home* would work just as well.

My film can be characterized as either a visual *bayet* or an ode. It is a lyrical re-telling of a character's journey to return or find her lost home and, thus, find her own self. The idea of home for the main character is brought in as a mournful sentiment, as a loss of the only place she felt as a whole, the center of her positive memories, similar to sorrowful retellings in *bayets*. And just as in classical odes, the main character in *Ode to Home* goes on a journey to find her home again. Home and the lost identity are represented as one and the same in the film. Thus, as she chases her fleeting and disappearing past self, she's chasing her rootedness to home, as it is just as fleeting and ghostly.

The naming of the film with a very culturally specific poetry type (*bayet*), as well as the voice over in Tatar, are the only elements that are culturally specific to myself in the film. I wanted to include my native language in the film about loss, because my biggest fear is to lose the language of my ancestors. With loss of home, language is the only thing that I have to keep and take with me on my journey.

In the next chapters I will give a formal and textual analysis of my film, specifying its genre and style, and the reasons for using a particular medium. I will also discuss my influences and methods in achieving visualization of an internal dialogue of displacement through film. I will conclude with self-realizations that this project led me to.

CHAPTER 2

THEORY AND STRUCTURE

My thesis consists of an experimental narrative short film, *Ode to Home* or *Öy Bayete* (Tatar) describing several stages of exiled identity. We witness a displaced character's alienation, reactionary attachment to memory and the utopian idea of home, resulting identity fragmentation, eventual homecoming, and a final realization. The film has a hybrid and fragmented structure, with interjections of memory and the past spliced within the present reality situations. In addition to that, it is marked with the use of surreal and symbolic imagery, self-inscribing voice over, and subtitles. The film also relies on the use of doubles to visually represent a divided identity of the main character. The film aims to show how a sudden displacement can fragment and disperse one's identity and lead one to a mad search for wholeness and rootedness. By exploring the concepts of home, nostalgia, and internal fragmentation, I also study my own loss of home and identity.

Genre

I believe my film can be identified as an example of the accented style cinema genre, discussed in Hamid Naficy's book *Accented Cinema* (2001). His research of exilic and diasporic films calls attention to the common elements and structures that represent the "accented style" genre. He often compares them to postmodern structures of feeling. In the age of globalization, the style of living in First World countries is now more distracted, mobile, and decentralized, in these aspects similar to the lifestyle of an immigrant or an exile. A nostalgic longing for the past grows stronger with each generation. However, Naficy (2001) states that while all accented films are to some extent postmodernist, not all postmodernist films are "exilically accented" (p. 27). Mainly because, he explains, accented filmmakers "usually posit the homeland as a grand and

deeply rooted referent, which stops the postmodernist play of signification” and detachment from the past (p. 27). For accented filmmakers, home is a sacred place, which cannot be played with or signified upon.

For a long time, I was hesitant to call myself an exilic artist, since I associated exile with unwanted, forceful leave of home, with no possibilities of a comeback. I came to the United States with my parents and there was no physical threat in coming back home. However, there was a financial one. For my middle-class family, this was a once in a lifetime opportunity to be able to live and work in a First World country. Each time we crossed the border to go back home, there was a chance we would not be able to return with our temporary visas. The closest people in Russia told me to not disregard the prospects in the United States and stay there, despite my strong longing to come home to them. According to Hamid Naficy (2001), exiles could also be those who voluntarily left their country of origin, but maintain a strong relationship to it. Such exilic filmmakers often, especially in the beginning stages of their displacement, define everything in their lives by relating it to their homeland and culture:

Although, they don’t return home, they maintain an intense desire to do so – a desire that is projected in potent return narratives in their films. In the meantime, they memorialize the homeland by fetishizing it in the form of cathected sounds, images, and chronotopes that are circulated intertextually in exilic popular culture.
(p. 12)

Naficy (2001) argues that exiles often experience an intensified sense of smell and hearing, catching aromas and phrases in their everyday mundane lives that activate private memories of home and can both deepen the feeling of displacement and create a bitter-sweet feeling of emplacement, by restoring forgotten connections (p. 28). He refers to them as

cathected sounds and images, as any object or sound that triggers a memory, or a brief notion of feeling home and happy. During the first half of *Ode to Home*, the main character Liya engulfs herself in memories and those cathected images and sounds. This is manifested in her action of sewing photographs together into a blanket and inhaling smells from a glass jar, immediately after which the film takes us inside memories of her past home and presents audio-visual details connected to it. However, this practice, while giving her pleasure experiencing a sense of home, simultaneously alienates her by reminding her about the lack of it. These images stem from personal experiences during my first years in the United States while the memories of home were still fresh in my mind. Sometimes, very unexpectedly, walking through a crowded street or working in a store, I would catch a familiar smell, hear a voice, or see a person reminding me of my grandfather, for example. It would grab hold of me, bringing me a warmth of memories of home and being there. But this jolt of vivid memories would leave just as fast as it occurred, making me only more aware of the foreign and different environment I was in at the moment.

I have lived in the United States on a temporary visa for more than ten years and most of that time I have spent wondering when and how will I come back home. I've maintained a strong connection to family and friends in Russia and tried to visit as much as I could. But I eventually realized, despite my hardest efforts, I will never experience home as I did growing up there and I will never feel as complete as I did then. I am now a visitor in my own homeland, skipping through lives of my family and friends, only there to witness snapshots of their lives, while they do not get to see any part of mine. It took me a long time to come to terms with living in-between. Many years I spent engulfed in nostalgia, idealizing my homeland and planning my return, hoping that it has stayed the same since I left. But as I returned each time, I found myself lost and re-learning the environment I once confidently knew. It never quite fulfilled or was able

to defragment me. Svetlana Boym (2001), who studies nostalgia as a human condition of the modern age, explains this notion beautifully:

Nostalgia (from *nostos* – return home, and *algia* – longing) is a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy. Nostalgic love can only survive in a long-distance relationship. A cinematic image of nostalgia is a double exposure, or a superimposition of two images – of home and abroad, past and present, dream and everyday life. The moment we try to force it into a single image, it breaks the frame or burns the surface. (p. xiv)

The realization of this sentiment is a milestone in rebuilding a displaced identity. The moment when homecoming fails to fulfill is the moment when a chance to build a new identity can finally emerge. My film *Ode to Home*, while illustrating the agonizing search for lost home and identity, ends with a slightly hopeful discovery of rebuilding a new identity after displacement. And the way it achieves that is by showing the eventual collapse of the character's utopian fantasy of home. Freed from nostalgia and the search for something that does not exist anymore, this might be the emancipating notion for a displaced character like Liya.

If I made this film about five years ago, this particular notion about homecoming might not have been there and might have had a more hopeful ending in terms of a possibility of self-fulfillment upon return. However, as I took longer to edit my thesis, it has changed and morphed with me to reflect my feelings of displacement. Naficy (2001) describes “accented cinema” as both “a cinema *of* exile and cinema *in* exile” (p. 8). This is why I feel *Ode to Home* fits perfectly under the genre that he has invented. I will use elements of his accented style to conduct an analysis of my film.

Structure

My film *Ode to Home*, has a complex hybrid structure, with a lot of emphasis on repetition, tactility of mediums, and color tonality. The narrative framework is engulfed under experimental surreal imagery, as well as my personal documentary footage, enforcing the play between objectivity and subjectivity in my thesis. There's a deliberate difference in shooting styles and mediums, one representing reality, and the other, a dream-like, surreal world that signifies the main character's internal journey. Let's call her character Liya. The "reality" scenes represent the present time and space where Liya is located. They achieve an illustration of Liya, who is lost, incomplete, and in transit. The scenes of dreamscapes or memories, on the other hand aim to illustrate her nostalgia for home and her idealization of the past, and, additionally, her fragmented identity, full of exilic fears of loosing the native language, culture, and sense of home.

From the beginning of the production, I decided to capture the present exilic "reality" of the character in a digital format, with static objective shots set up mostly on a tripod; while the memories and dreamscapes were shot on my father's old Lomo Aurora Super 8mm camera using a hand-held technique with a subjectively moving camera. The fact that the camera came from my homeland, and belonged to my father when he was my age, only made it more sentimental and obvious to use. These choices provide diverse tactile qualities to the different environments in the film and aid in storytelling. The scenes of present time are mostly stagnant, digitally crisp, and Liya often expresses very limited movement or emotion. In these shots, the framing of the actress is very calculated. The camera acts as a voyeur, observing Liya with a distanced gaze. Even in the close ups she appears dissociated and contemplative, either profiled, looking out of the window, or sleeping, never interacting with the viewer. She's very rarely shot in a wide

angle. Mostly, her body is segmented in medium shots or extreme close ups of her face, or body parts. The shots visually emphasize the main character's loneliness and alienation from her current surroundings. She's often framed facing a window, or a door, signaling her desire to escape. Other times, she crams herself into a suitcase, indicating her resentment towards the host environment and nostalgia for the home that the suitcase represents; or she observes her own reflection in a mirror, in a self-reflective contemplation on identity. The controlled compositions do not allow for freedom in her movement, be it due to self-restraint or physical obstacles.

In contrast to the deliberate style of the "reality" scenes, the remaining scenes involve dreamscapes and surreal encounters with Liya's alter egos, which are filmed in a subjective angle of view. When shooting these scenes, I rarely had a defined script or storyboards. It was a very experimental mode of production that translated into a more experimental footage, to represent Liya's internal journey. The physical texture of a Super8 film with its scratches, jitteriness, and uneven development, mixed in with a handheld visceral shooting style, allows the audience to "feel" the scenes, and physically illustrates notions of past and memory – fading, blurred, contrasted, fragmented, and ethereal. The Liya that we see in these scenes is also different, she is more active and daring, she makes the camera follow her, and several times confronts the audience's gaze, by staring directly at the camera. It is a very different dynamic compared to the voyeuristic look at "reality." This type of subjective framing suggests an active struggle of the character and illuminates the liveliness that Liya is longing for.

Unlike the partial shots of her in "reality," Liya's doubles are often shot in full figure and wide angles. This choice was made to contradict between the two realities, emphasize the distance between Liya's current and past identities, as well as to visually present the past identity as a whole figure, desirable and alluring for Liya to attain. In some instances of the dreams, the

camera moves subjectively, imitating Liya's POV, chasing after her double, enforcing her desperate search to find and complete herself. In all the shots of dreamscapes and memories, the double is located in some sort of an open or natural environment, be it a field, a forest, or a courtyard outside of the classroom. The double is always on the opposite side of a door or a window that stands between her and Liya.

In *Accented Cinema*, Naficy describes how for exilic filmmakers, homeland and the place of current residency have their own visual clues. He calls them "chronotopes" (Naficy, 2001, p. 152) The homeland imagery, or "open chronotopes," tend to emphasize boundlessness and timelessness of native surroundings, the utopian open landscape, showing longing for its nature, settings, and souvenirs. While the imagery of the place of exile, or "closed chronotopes," tend to have claustrophobic forms, with representations of temporality, confinement, and control (Naficy, 2001, pp. 152-153). In *Ode to Home* there is a sharp difference between the host space and the utopian homeland that we see in Liya's memories and fantasies. Her current reality, as Liya sees it, is bleak, alienating, and consists of tight spaces, walls, and doors. While the "home" that she dreams of and recollects in her memories is bright, sunny, and positioned in a natural environment of fields, forests, and a house that is surrounded by plants and trees. In her new environment, we often see her restrained inside a suitcase, sitting in a classroom, sleeping in an empty room, or looking out the window. We also often see her opening doors, but they always lead to another room and never to the outside. In contrast, at "home" Liya seems free, enjoying nature, smiling at the sun, interacting with her grandmother. So, ultimately, in this illustrated internal journey of Liya, and the way it is presented to the audience, her dreams and memories actually feel more real than the bland present "reality."

As the film progresses, it becomes clear that Liya is ultimately alienating herself, choosing to stay indoors, not answering the door knocks, encapsulated in her memories literally by squeezing herself into a suitcase and covering up with a blanket made of photographs. She's split between the two spaces. Although she's physically in a new host environment, her mind wanders the fields of the past. There are moments where Liya is visually split in the frame; for example, standing in front of a double window, the middle bar of which splits her visually in half, with an open window on each side. The other example is the repetitive scene of Liya laying in front of a mirror, in which her reflection often behaves differently than the "original," at times even absent.

The separate atmospheres of "reality" and "home" are also differentiated in post-production by color correction and editing. The "reality" is toned down in a cold bluish tint and the nostalgic past is saturated in vibrant tones. The segmented and interruptive editing clashes these two ambiances against each other. As the movie progresses, nearing homecoming, the assigned color dynamic starts to shift. As mentioned earlier, Liya's dreamscapes take a darker turn, aided with the color shift from vibrant to colder blues. Immediately after that, Liya transits to home, where her "reality" is finally painted in bright colors of nature, and the intercutting to memories and dreams stops. The "reality" and the dreamscape merge, showing Liya and her double confronting each other in one space, the natural open environment of a field, which previously has only appeared in Liya's dreams or nostalgic memories.

The film is heavily reliant on editing to express the non-visual internal sense of displacement. We do not stay in one location for too long, often cutting in and out and in-between dreams/unconscious and reality. This distracted style of editing hopes to visually echo the feeling of displacement and not being able to stay in one place for too long, and create a

slight anxiety in the audience. Just as they wish they could spend a little more time in one environment, the film cuts to a completely different space. There is also a heavy use of repetition in the edit. At times, very visually different scenes connect together with the use of familiar action. For example, the insertion of a Red Pin into a surface is an action that's repeated throughout the film, but each time the context and locations are slightly shifted or completely changed. The audience connects the images together by remembering the repeated action.

But the biggest repetitive cycle comes in with the use of the same key locations that circulate throughout the narrative: apartment space, brick house, green field, and classroom. If we look at the full structure of the film, we can break it apart into four main sections: displacement, emplacement, failure/loss, and homecoming. The cycle between the classroom and the apartment space, with interjections of the brick house, build up the first three sections. However, with each repetition something changes in these spaces to push the story forward. In the initial scenes, the displacement is signaled with the centralized visuals of a luggage in an empty apartment room, Liya's distracted attitude in a classroom, and the use of the luggage as her "safe" place in which she sleeps. The mood shifts, transitioning to the second part of emplacement, when Liya finally takes action in challenging her displacement by taking out the sewing machine from her luggage. She immerses herself in memories, sounds, and smells of home, as she makes herself a photo blanket. However, as we get to the third section of the film, the sounds and images signal of loss of something important. The environment of the perfect home, the brick house appearing earlier that Liya created in her nostalgic dreams, starts to destruct. This dynamic of loss is illustrated on different filmic levels: the tense soundtrack that grows with tension and culminates in a chaotic noise, the dark images of the grandmother in a cemetery, and dried plants and fallen trees surrounding the brick house, the anxious fast cuts, and

the voice over that says: “Under the ground,” replying to the question: “Where is your grandfather.” The panic and claustrophobic tension of displacement now intrudes inside Liya’s imagined homeland. This jolt of images effectively brings Liya to the final chapter in the film – the homecoming. This last chapter also breaks the repetitive cycle of locations from the first three parts. We are alerted to the shifting dynamic by deserted and empty key locations: classroom, apartment floor in front of a mirror, and the table with a sewing machine. For the first time, we do not see Liya in any of these spaces. Immediately after this, jolting footage of various transits is collaged together to abruptly end at the destination of the green field representing Liya’s home.

It took me several years to finish editing the film. Because it is an experimental narrative, the choice of editing determined the film’s story, intentions, and the outcome. Thus, throughout the years, as I traveled back and forth between home and the United States, and started my own family in the United States, my perspective on “Home” changed, and so did my edit. It became sort of a noxious practice I put myself through, throwing out old edits, creating new concoctions, going back, changing the ending, tossing it all out, etc. The segmented, replicated, layered, and heavily edited sequences on a timeline became a metaphor for my emotional state and for my sense of home at a given time. What I am presenting as my final thesis is a survivor of all the edits and re-edits that I decided I could live with.

These edited elements in the film represent my biggest fears as an exilic filmmaker – the home as being forgotten or no longer there, the death of relatives responsible for raising me, and the gradual loss of my native language. All of these culminate into one fearful question: will I recognize my homeland when I return, and more importantly, will my homeland recognize me?

Many Faces of Liya

Since *Ode to Home* talks about the fragmenting effect of displacement, I wanted to visually achieve that effect by using doubles of the main character appearing throughout the film. As we see her talking and interacting with her doubles, what we witness as a result is Liya's internal conversation and struggle with the divided self. In *Accented Cinema*, Hamid Naficy discusses the notion of doubling and duplicity that often appears in exilic films. He describes that this notion often appears in films about early phases of exile. He says that people in that state, as he calls them "luminars," are disturbed by the conflict between their inner identities and their outside bodies. Naficy (2001) speculates, "their insides may feel ambivalent and unstable as they shift and waver between multiple self-perceptions, identities, and cultures, while on the outside their bodies may give the impression of self-containment, stability and cohesiveness" (p. 274).

It is an old tradition in literature and filmmaking to illustrate a character's internal conflict by using doubles or doppelgängers. In literature, Russian writer Dostoyevsky is famous for implementing doppelgängers in his novels to illustrate one's battle between consciousness and desire. In film, such examples as Luis Buñuel's *That Obscure Object of Desire* (1977), Ingmar Bergman's *Persona* (1966), Krzysztof Kieslowski's *The Double Life of Veronique* (1991), Maya Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943), and the current *Fight Club* (1999) come to mind right away. In most cases, a different actor plays the double, often with a completely opposite personality than the main character, but we eventually find out that they are both different manifestations of one person's internal conflict. The use of doppelgängers is a great technique in illustrating one person's consciousness, where the different characters of the story embody the "little voices in the head" of that person.

Hamid Naficy uses exilic filmmaker Fernando E. Solanas' film *Tangos: Exile of Gardel* (1985), as a good example of the use of doubling in accented cinema. To dramatize the dividedness of exiled identity, the film has three leading characters literally disintegrating on screen after artistic failure or an exilic tension; each of them representing a dispersed identity of one person. Moreover, the main character repetitively seeks inspiration from his counterpart in Argentina, who is hinted to be imaginary. What is most intriguing to me, because of the similarity to my film, is that the two characters desire to complete each other by sending letters, talking on the phone, leaving messages in a suitcase; however, they never get a chance to meet one another, and thus never complete a whole person. In *Ode to Home* there are several doubles, played by the same actress, but differentiated by their dresses, and Liya tries to communicate with them in different ways throughout the film. However, she never fulfills her desire to interact physically with any of them.

What is interesting in Naficy's (2001) analysis of this divide, is that he states there is a "binary and unequal power relation between these two [characters], which favors the 'original' self at home as the authentic, authoring agent" (p. 273). This lopsided view, worshipping the identity that existed at home as the ultimate complete one, is what makes Solanas' and my film exilic. Although in *Ode to Home* we follow Liya in reality, as discussed before, her extensions in dreams and memories feel much more alive and desirable.

What differentiates my take on the double from the examples that are used in Naficy's book is that the same actress, who plays Liya, plays every one of the doubles as well. While in the films discussed in the book, the doubles are subtle manifestations of the protagonist's inner struggle, acted by different actors and portrayed as separate characters in the movie, in my film, it is very clear that we are seeing extensions of the same person. It does not try to trick us into

following different characters only to find out later on that they were all fractions of one. Liya and all her doubles, entirely played by Marcela Angel, are at the center of attention during the whole film. It is essentially a monologue, where each variation of the same person – is the same person, only differentiated by dress and attitude. The reason I decided to go with this route is to try to illustrate my confusion about my own identity. When I look at photographs of myself before I left Russia, I see a very different human being, one that I am not familiar with, but would love to reconnect with. I am looking at my own picture, my own body, but I do not feel myself. This is how I wanted to portray Liya. She is dreaming and remembering a person she used to be before displacement. The audience sees a difference in their look (hair, dress, attitude), but understands them to be one. That is why there is more impact when we see a scene where Liya's face is erased and she yells: "You forgot about me." Throughout the whole film we follow one person, played by the same actress (body), yet we still lose Liya's face and for a moment see a blank canvas instead, unknown, blurry, and forgotten. This is just like my photos of "forgotten Aygul" from the past.

I also feel that the use of the same actress to play all the parts helped me create a continuous daze of emotion. Although the edits quickly cut in and out of dreams and reality, the audience stays connected to the familiar protagonist, going through all the various journeys. Moreover, this type of doubling helps the film to achieve a surreal touch, especially in the scenes where Liya and a double confront each other in the same space.

Let's examine the doubles appearing in the film, to analyze this play of fragmented identities. Since one actress personifies all of them, the costuming plays a big role in differentiating between the characters. I chose for Liya in "reality" to wear bland and colorless clothing, and her beautiful curls are always tucked away tightly in a ponytail, to emphasize her

own restraint and alienation. The doubles, meanwhile, are represented wearing dresses and their hair is loose and free. There are in total three doubles appearing in the film along Liya, differentiated by their dresses: one in white, one in purple, and one in a yellow dress. They reoccur in her dreams and memories, as well as physically confronting her in her host milieu. Although they are all an extension of Liya's identity, each represents a different fragment of emotion connected to her exile.

The first double we see in the film is the double in a white dress. Let us name her Liya White. She embodies Liya's resistance in accepting a new home, and her agony and fear of losing her homeland. When we first see Liya White, she is chopping a tree with an axe, while her face is visibly erased. The next time we see her, she is running through the forest, and yet again we do not see her face. When later in the film we finally catch up with her and she turns around to face the audience, her eyes are erased and she yells out "You forgot about me!" This is the most active of all the doppelgängers, as she blatantly expresses her frustration of exile. For her, Liya is betraying herself and her family by abandoning her home. Her family and national roots are represented through trees and natural landscape, which she is seen both enjoying and destroying. The blank face of the double represents Liya's fluctuating new identity and how she cannot recollect her past self, she cannot remember who she used to be before she became displaced.

The second double wearing a purple dress, whom I refer to as Liya Purple, only appears in Liya's host environment. She illustrates a fragment of Liya's identity that feels trapped, because she cannot fully integrate herself into the new society. Liya Purple calls for Liya to exit the classroom and come outside, but Liya never leaves beyond the structure, only watching her own entrapment from the window, visualized by Liya Purple standing in the courtyard facing the

fenced wall. Ultimately, this double shows Liya's own alienation from the world that surrounds her. She chooses to be stuck in the web of nostalgia for her lost home and does not have a desire to accept the new space.

The third double existing in the film is differentiated by her bright yellow dress, Liya Yellow. She is most likely the identity that Liya seeks throughout the film, and whom the climactic scene in the field revolves around. Liya Yellow represents Liya prior to leaving her homeland, perfectly rooted with her family, stable, and complete. And in turn, Liya Yellow is what Liya hopes to find upon her grand return.

Through this double I tried to embody my own wish to meet myself at fifteen, before I knew any sort of displacement. I cannot shake off the idea of having a very different personality, one self-regarded as determined, confident, decisive, less misunderstood, and not so concerned with loss and nostalgia. The shock of displacement has consumed my thought process so much that I cannot even remember the self-assured girl I used to be. When I read my diaries from ten years ago, I could not connect to them, and not just because it is a diary of a naïve teenage girl, but because I simply do not know who that person is. And for the longest time I thought I would be able to remember *myself* by returning home and spending time with my family and friends who knew me back then; as if the "past me" was just sitting there and waiting for me to return and regain it.

In reflection of this, at the beginning of the film, we see the Liya Yellow, sitting in a bright green field, patiently waiting for Liya to return. The next time we see this double again, is in the final field scene, as Liya finally returns home and the search for the "original identity" comes to a conclusion. But as Liya gets closer, with no walls, windows, or doors standing in-between them, the double turns into a lifeless mannequin, never giving Liya the satisfaction of an

embrace with her past identity. Thus, indicating further that it is impossible for Liya to regain her past self, part of her has fragmented, part of her was lost, and her only way to move on is to create a new identity for herself. Ultimately, Liya Yellow was Liya's fantasy all along. This fantasy has grown out of her sorrow and longing for home and her complete identity.

Voice Over and Subtitles

In *Ode to Home*, I describe my character's home visually and there are no specific place markers or signs indicating what country Liya came from or where she is located now. Yet one film element stands out as an indicator of her, or more specifically, my own foreign roots – Tatar voice over and singing. Hamid Naficy (2001) writes that a major collective element of accented style is that “filmmakers are engaged in the performance of self” (p. 35). This is also connected to what I discussed in the introduction about making films to engage in a conversation with the self. I strongly believe that every film or animation I have produced helped me overcome and analyze a hard situation with creativity and a certain artistic distance that soothes faster than time. *Ode to Home* is a big testament to this practice, and it also took the longest to complete. After editing the images together, I felt that a major element was missing, even though the story was well contained in the sequences. It was missing my personal inscription.

Therefore I decided to bring out the authorship in the audio mix and the voice over, as well as in some home footage of my grandmother and home in Russia. The images I shot at home on my private observations blend in during mosaic imagery of Liya's memories, so as to not stand out from the rest. But the sound plays a bigger role in my self-inscription. To me, my identity is intensely connected to my native language – Tatar. My grandfather was a famous Tatar poet. As I grew older and more understanding of my surroundings, I realized that I grew up in a tiny part of Russia, where Tatars still speak their ancient language and can learn it in school.

Beyond the borders of my Republic of Tatarstan, Tatar language and culture is another minority group in the amalgam of all the “other” nations of Russia. Over the years I noticed more and more of my grandfather’s sadness towards the disappearance of his language, the language that he based his life and career around. This particular part of my family and culture’s history makes me more worried and paranoid about losing my language, especially now that I have a third language – English – to add to my everyday use. My previous short film *My Egaugnal* tackled specifically the issue of a multilingual identity. In it, I illustrated the intimate connection of inner identity to a native language, and how the personal emotions are usually channeled naturally with a native language. Alice Kaplan, writer and professor researching topics of foreignness, has created a genre “language memoir” to learn about the relation of language and identity. To her, each new language learned for communication is a “leap into a new persona” (Kaplan, 1994, p. 69). And in most cases, the native language connotes family and the intimate, while the second (or third) language signifies “language of public sphere” (Kaplan, 1994, p. 60).

In *Ode to Home* the voice over signifies the very inner and private conversation with my own self. That is why it could not have been in any language but my “family language” – Tatar. However, the silent language that appears only in the form of subtitles also represents the language of the public sphere – English. It is the language I learned to think in to be successful in a new country, however it also intrudes into my private thoughts and mixes in with my native language. Thus once again, this implies the loss of identity and the familiar.

Homecoming

Let’s consider a particular scene in *Ode to Home* that illustrates the most important notion of the film and exile that I wanted to explore – a displaced person’s dream of rebuilding his/her fragmented identity to its “original” state, by the only way he/she sees as valid –

returning home and emplacing his/her self back in it. Let's discuss the final field scene. This is the first time when we see our protagonist Liya let her hair loose and smile, as she reconnects with her friends and relatives in a field. The scene, however, looks very dreamy and is a big change from the "reality" that we have seen her in throughout the film. The camera moves subjectively, the colors are bright, and the scene is set in an open field. All of this contradicts the rules that applied to Liya's reality in all the previous scenes of the film – her shots were static, colors were cold, and she was always placed in a closed environment.

As I mentioned before, displaced persons who keep a strong bond with their home country often fetishize the lost home and dream to return to it. And since the native home is strongly tied to identity, displaced people fantasize about a grand return that will revive their lost and fragmented identity. Hamid Naficy (2001) writes about the importance of the homecoming dreams for exiles:

Return occupies a primary place in the minds of the exiles and a disproportionate amount of space in their films, for it is the dream of a glorious homecoming that structures exile. Without that dream, the exiles would be émigrés, expatriates, refugees, and ethnic subjects. (p. 229)

Liya's homecoming journey is presented as the climax of the film. There is a montage of plane flights and various transits signifying the long-awaited return, however there are also notes of warning that come with voice over and subtitles. We hear Liya answering "I don't remember" to the question "Where are the roads that lead you home?" This comes as a subtle prediction of what her homecoming will be like. She might be physically returning home, but internally, she is not going to find the home she has fantasized about during exile.

This final homecoming scene of my film describes the anxiety I felt and still feel each time I return home, especially during the first several years. During every single homecoming, I carefully observed my relatives and friends, asked them about memorable times together, listened to them tell stories involving me and recount phrases that I used to say, deeply smelled in the air of my childhood home, went through my diaries, retraced any bits of my past I could find, anything that would remind me of who I used to be. But I still could not quite remember. The feeling of what it is like to be “Home” seemed to lack something that was there before and is lost forever. Hamid Naficy (2001) describes this feeling of unfulfilled disappointment well:

Indeed, return is rarely the grand homecoming that many of them desire, for both the exiles and the homelands have in the meantime undergone unexpected or unwanted transformations. Consequently, the return home sometimes requires as profound an adjustment as the exilic relocation in the first place, thereby extending the exile into yet another realm. (p. 232)

Naficy uses Jonas Mekas’ film *Reminiscences of a Return to Lithuania* (1972) as an example of frustrations of a return home. As Mekas retraces his past, collecting documentary footage of his hometown and its people, he goes from feelings of extreme excitement to deep sadness. And in one poignant moment, while filming his friend and filmmaker Peter Kubelka, who didn’t emigrate from Lithuania, Mekas’ voice-over says: “I envied his peace, his being at home.” At this moment we know that even though Mekas has come back home, he still does not feel “at home.”

Liya’s return home in my thesis film also fails to produce a self-discovery or salvation for her displacement. The figure embodying her wholeness – Liya Yellow – falls apart to become a stiff mannequin. However, it concludes some sort of chapter in her life. I believe that after I

experienced the unfulfilling emotional return to my home, over and over, I realized that it was time for me to build a new hybrid identity, one that would respect the past, but would not be clinched to it. The film ends with heavy and sullen moments that reach no definitive resolution. For example the phrase: “You are a memory to them,” describing a painful thought of “I now exist only as a memory to my loved ones.” However, this is a necessary realization for a displaced person, and I believe it can push a person to connect with loved ones more often, as well as accept the inevitable distance between them in order to lead their own life, and not be stuck in the nostalgia for the lost home.

CHAPTER 3

INFLUENCES

There have been many influences that helped to shape this project. Early on, when I started developing the film, I planned on making it half animated and half filmed. So my main influences were Soviet animations. I grew up watching these slow paced, often metaphorical, and very visually tactile animations. When I think of my thesis film, two Soviet animations in particular come to mind as influential – the world famous *Hedgehog in the Fog* (1975) and the lesser known Ukrainian folk tale *Once Upon a Dog* (1982). Both of these ultimately discuss a sense of place in the world. The lost Hedgehog's journey to see his friend Bear is beautifully reflective and philosophical, revealing Hedgehog's fear of instability and his strong connection to his friend. In *Once Upon a Dog* (1982) an unlikely friendship with a wild wolf hinders Dog's instilled loyalty and belonging with humans. He starts to question the only home he knew, after his owners abandon him and he encounters unlikely help from a Wolf in the forest. These animations have influenced me since I was a child and taught me to appreciate metaphors in storytelling. They also carry the sense of sentimentality and subtle sadness that comes through in many Soviet films and animations, which influenced me greatly.

Another big stylistic inspiration for me is Mia Deren's experimental film *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943), which I learned about in my graduate studies. I was inspired by its surreal imagery and the subtle shifts between dream and reality. Deren's film is a great example of visualization of different manifestations of self, and the play between multiple identities. The effect of her imagery also heavily relies on creative editing, which is a big part of how my film works as well. The fragmenting, often non-linear editing calls for viewer interaction and evokes inner emotions of loss and nostalgia. The circular structure in my film is very reminiscent of

Meshes of the Afternoon (1943). In her film, the heroine is also stuck in an internal journey through repetitive locations and actions, more so compared to my film. Her scenes cut into each other very subtly with similar actions or irregular camera angles, confusing the audience to not differentiate between dream and reality. In my film however, that division is more evident, with differences in medium, color, special chronotopes, and dress. However, I believe my film is still able to achieve the similar meditative tone of sleepwalking and dreaming in reality, as in *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943).

I also have to list Michele Gondry's films and music videos as my visual inspiration. Once again, I am attracted to the use of visual metaphors in work that he creates. I also admire his low-tech approach to filmmaking, where he often opts for creative hand-made solutions, rather than a CGI manipulation. He often has a touch of a children's aesthetic, where film sets are not perfect, with visible human marks, and there is a slight sarcastic and fantastical tone to his films. I believe the sequences with the oversized red pushpin are the most influenced by this fantastical surreal aesthetic of a visual metaphor that I often see in Michel Gondry's films. I carved the pin out of foam and painted it. It was important for me to manufacture a symbol representing "Home" with my own hands.

As I mentioned earlier, my edit has changed a lot through the years I was making the film. During this time I saw several accented films that Hamid Naficy discussed in his book *Accented Cinema*. Examples of the ones that have influenced me during this time are movies by Atom Egoyan, Chris Marker, and Jonas Mekas. Also, reading the autobiographical memoir *Turnaround* by Milos Forman helped me connect to my own feelings of displacement and situate them more clearly by reading a biography and the thoughts of someone who has gone through the harshest kind of exile. Most of all it was inspiring to see how he channeled his experiences

into his films, without directly showing stories of exiles as Egoyan or Mekas often do in their movies.

Paintings by Frida Kahlo and her visual representation of duplicity have also been inspiring to me. I love how she uses color and dress detail to signal the inner state of her subjects. This symbolism also occurs in my film. The main character, Liya, is always seen wearing dull colors as well as pants and a bland shirt. While her doubles, representing her fragmented and past self, are shown in dresses, some colorful and patterned, pointing to their much richer and freer spirit.

Lastly, I want to note both of my grandfathers as a strong inner influence to create this project. As I experienced displacement in the United States, I connected closer to my grandfathers as an adult, relating to their own displacement during childhood. Both of them had to move away from their hometowns as young teenagers, one to search for career opportunities, the other for safety reasons. As many other Tatar kids, I grew up reading my grandfather, Shaukat Galiev's children's poetry. But only after I moved to the United States did I discover his more serious and somber poetry, talking about his longing for lost home and the pain of separation from a native place, to be piercingly familiar. At some point I even wanted to use one of his poems for the voice over in the film, but I decided that it needed my own autobiographical inscription.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSIONS

During my research I found two main ways in which identity is talked about. The classical perspective on identity is that it is ethnic, primal, given, and transmitted. While the postmodern perspective looks at identity as constructed, reinvented, and that it can be decoded anew. I feel that my view on identity, after much research and artistic exploration, has become mixed and oscillates in-between these two perspectives. I truly believe that my identity has been built up by my parents and grandparents, and all the closest people surrounding me back home. However, when I experienced an enormous shift in my surroundings, lifestyle, communication, in a form of displacement from home, my identity had to be re-invented. It might not have happened if I stayed in one place and grew up in Kazan, and continued living there. But in order to understand my own self, my sorrow, regrets, and in order to move forward with my present, I had no choice but to create a new hybrid identity. “Hybrid,” because it contains that ethnic primordial self that was given and embedded in me through my ancestors and culture, and that was shattered and re-constructed to create a more fluid identity, more adaptable, more open to change.

There might not be a clear conclusion or a resolution for the character at the end of *Ode to Home*, yet I believe it shows the beginning or hope for a re-birth of a new identity, one that will survive and succeed in a mobile and de-centralized mode of living. I believe that in order for this hybrid identity to emerge, the ethnic rooted identity has to be de-constructed first. The mannequin that Liya Yellow turns into during the final scene, represents that de-construction. This does not mean death or an end to the ethnic identity, Liya Yellow, but rather represents an

emptied vessel, which can be re-filled with a new self. Thus, we see Liya packing the mannequin to take with her in the suitcase.

The mannequin also illustrates the failed fantasy of wholeness that Liya has created. She thought that finding herself again would be as easy as returning home. However, judging by my own experience, it takes years, or maybe even a lifetime, to be able to find that comfort in self, after being displaced from everything that has built you up originally.

My artistic investigations into themes of displacement are really my investigations into self and identity. As Trinh T. Minh-ha put it: “every work I have realized was designed to transform my own consciousness” (Chen, 1992, 87). And as I look back at my films created at SIU, every one of them in some way has studied my displacement from home and specifically dealt with displacement from Russia and my family. This time, however, making *Ode to Home*, I forced myself to think of the subject more universally, examining the shared theme of exile and exiled identity, not specific to a country or a territory. As I look at it now, the ambiguity of locations and lack of specific cultural representations and comparisons might be a weakness in my film, since the audience is not clearly aware that the story is dealing with international displacement. There are only hints with the voice over. However, I hope that the audience will connect with the film on an emotional level and find similarities in internal identity processes, be it tied to displacement from a different country, or just a home a couple blocks away. More importantly, I hope it evokes feelings of “home,” where a person felt complete and whole.

I feel that my next set of work will research the new hybrid identity that has emerged after years of displacement. I have become aware how my view on it is constantly changing. While before, I used more negative terms to describe my situation, as “being out of place everywhere I go,” now I let myself experience it as a unique pleasure of “being able to live in

many places at once.” I enjoy every trip I take home, it rejuvenates me, and I can pretty much blend in with my surroundings and people after several days of adaptation. And while I live in the United States, I have learned how to blend in, but also use my difference to my advantage. However, there are, of course, those hopeless days, where I feel lost again and ready to destruct. In conclusion, the inspiration for my future aspirations is beautifully summed up in the poignant words of the twelfth-century monk Hugo of St. Victor:

It is, therefore, a source of great virtue for the practiced mind to learn bit by bit, first to change about invisible and transitory things, so that afterwards it may be able to leave them behind altogether. The man who finds his homeland sweet is still a tender beginner; he to whom every soil is as his native one is already strong; but he is perfect to whom the entire world is a foreign land (as quoted in Said, 2002, p. 147).

What Said points out about this quote, is that it is not about loosing rootedness or attachments in order to gain a “perfect” man status. It is about *working through* them and respecting the experience of the past (Said, 2002). Maybe I would not have mind to be a “tender beginner,” but the outcomes in my life resulted in me now wanting to experience this “perfectness,” even though it might be impossible, especially for someone who is really attached to the idea of home. I would like to step away from researching displaced identity in terms of its connectedness and longing to home. Rather, I would like to explore the other side of displacement – the resulting free-roaming detached identity.

I would like to thank my committee members, cast, and my family for making *Ode to Home* possible, and for helping me complete this chapter in my life.

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