

AIDAN POWER

Mobilising the East: Some Notes on Robert Guédiguian's Le voyage en Arménie

The road, as Jack Kerouac wrote, is life. Evocative of mobility, encounter and freedom, both literal and figurative, the open road ahead is latent with promises of possibility, renewal and rebirth. A gateway to the future and an avenue from the past, the road and the metonymic connotations it elicits provides a unique platform for destabilising fixities such as time and space, place and belonging, identity and culture. An increasingly voluble number of arguments centered on the European road movie (and in particular the French iteration of the genre) are founded upon conceptualisations of the road as transnational signifier, as interstitial space, or as paradigmatic of the unstable binaries betwixt nations and people, colonisers and colonised. That many focus on French road movies is not surprising. France after all has a sustained history of colonial expansion, of strained race relations, of philosophical enquiry and rich cinematic depth. Furthermore, as a wave of filmmakers of mixed cultural background come to prominence in the manner of Tony Gatlif for example over recent years, with films that openly call into question conceptions of belonging itself, then it is only natural that critical and scholarly attention should follow. Gatlif's *Exils* (2004), like *Le voyage en Arménie* (Robert Guédiguian, 2006)¹ which I will look at here, presents a journey outward from France, undertaken by characters seeking to bridge gaps between their past, present and future. These journeys allow for the creation of a liminal space between nations, one where, to paraphrase Homi K. Bhabha the claims of people to be «representative provokes a crisis within the process of signification and discursive address»². It is here, on the road between nations, that characters' hyphenated identities deny them concrete notions of belonging while at the same time enabling them to reformulate their own conceptions of themselves. This has been documented elsewhere³ and in increasing detail, but what interests me here is what happens when such a film seeks to reconcile this process of discovery with pre-existing characteristics of a genre that in the words of Conn Holohan frequently privileges the white male, one where the «social structures that

¹ *Le Voyage en Arménie* (2006), directed by: Robert Guédiguian; produced by (in alphabetical order): Martin Adoyan (co-producer), Robert Guédiguian (producer), Taguhi Karapetyan (co-producer); written by (in alphabetical order): Ariane Ascaride, Marie Desplechin, Robert Guédiguian; starring (in credits order): Ariane Ascaride (Anna), Gérard Meylan (Yervanth), Chorik Grigorian (Schaké), Romen Avinian (Manouk), Simon Abkarian (Sarkis Arabian), Jalil Lespert (Simon), Marcel Bluwal (Barsam); original music by: Arto Tunçboyacıyan; cinematography by: Pierre Milon; editing by: Bernard Sasia; distributed by: Diaphana Films; release date: 28 June 2006 (France); running time: 125 minutes; country: French and Armenian.

² BHABHA (1994, 208).

³ See ELEFTheriotis (2010); LOSHITKY (2010).

confer this privilege are seldom subject to any sustained critique»⁴. An inherent danger in readings centred on identity is that when tangling with wider questions pertaining to nationality and/or postcolonial identity, one can gloss over the divisions evident within postcolonial communities themselves. In particular here, I am referring to class, wealth and access – less immediately identifiable traits than race or nationality in many instances perhaps, but factors that nonetheless sharply divide migrant communities as they do elsewhere. To do so, I will focus on Guédiguian's *Le voyage en Arménie*, a film that on the surface is paradigmatic of recent French road movies in its themes and concerns, yet when subjected to closer analysis can actually be read more effectively as a meditation on class and assumption, one where old world assumption and access propels the central protagonist more than any actual awakening of diasporic sentiment.

Accessing Mobility

The road movie certainly provides French society with an avenue through which the legacy of its colonial past can be unravelled, but within these questions lies scope for further analysis still. This is, after all, the genre and nation that gave us Jean-Luc Godard's *Weekend* (1967), a film granted narrative agency by a juddering disregard for the mores of late modern capitalism. *Weekend*'s critique is achieved in large part by its recurring evisceration of vehicles on French roads. Tellingly, when Godard signaled the end of cinema and with it bourgeois consumption in *Weekend*, he gave chilling effect to his vision by eradicating the safety features offered by the car. In a world notable for ever growing levels of consumption, where the ease of undertaking journeys was facilitated by advances in road networks and vehicles, cars «increasingly become places of contemporary dwellingness» the increased comfort of which could offset «long journey times and interminable delays»⁵. As Kristen Ross notes furthermore in *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture*, the rise of the automobile was instrumental in the reordering of French life in the twentieth century. She writes: «by the time the spatial organization of the city and its surroundings assured the reproduction of a way of life structured by the car, new, albeit degraded, myths had come to replace old ones of spatial liberty associated with speed, horsepower, and the open road»⁶. Films, like French culture in general, became increasingly centered on the motif of the car itself, Ross suggests, to the point that the ability to master automobility became synonymous with progress and mobility in the late twentieth century. Godard's targeting of the car then was well chosen. Redolent of capitalist exchange as exemplified by the extraordinary success

⁴ HOLOHAN (2011, 23).

⁵ URRY (2007, 24).

⁶ ROSS (1995, 54).

of Fordist models of consumption from the early twentieth century onward, the car, in addition to the roads it navigates, symbolises prosperity, freedom and status. Furthermore, it demarcates socially, being a highly visible indicator of wealth and individual achievement. In so doing, the connotations of car ownership and models speak to broader issues of status, above all perhaps, the ultimate arbiter of social separation: mobility. In this vein we may take note of the arguments put forth by Zygmunt Bauman, for whom the ability to move freely and access new environs is the defining characteristic of postmodernity, one that sharply polarises the relationship between those who can move and the many more denied such rights. For Bauman, «mobility climbs to the rank of the uppermost among the coveted values – and the freedom to move, perpetually a scarce and unequally distributed commodity, fast becomes the main stratifying factor of our late-modern or postmodern times»⁷. Mobility enables us to engage with the ordering of life, a process that allows us a cogent formula to test personal considerations against the parameters enforced by social frameworks. Mobility, whether it is understood in terms of movement from one geographical place to another or in relation to the sort of upward mobility that comes with the successful navigation of social circumstances, is perhaps never more salient than when it is impeded. Just as the failure of investment banks to circulate toxic stock triggered global crises in financial markets, for example, the inability of non-nationals (a marvelously stupid term that fails to account for there being more than one than nation, but one that is useful here insofar as it highlights the discrepancies inherent in cross-border relations) to navigate border checkpoints signifies on a macro scale. Access and integration, circulation and exchange: all of which point to larger questions about (post)modernity at large. That domestic policies such as border control for example have long been severed from feasible economic strategies in a globally driven market is but a crude fact by now, one brought home by the economic crisis that has shaken Europe to the core and outlined in some detail by Jürgen Habermas in *The Postnational Constellation*. Highlighting the futile gesture at the heart of once durable conceptions of nationhood, Habermas traces the impact of economic flows and migration patterns arguing that:

State borders are certainly not comparable with fortifications – despite neurotic surveillance by national defense forces. The example of traditional foreign trade policies is enough to show that national borders actually function as internally operated “floodgates”, meant to regulate the currents so that only the desired influxes (or outflows) are permitted⁸.

Therefore, while markets necessitate the unfettered flow of money, borders though salient barriers to the mobility of many, particularly the economically disenfranchised, signify the aspirational nature of nationhood in the face of globalization practices and the resultant matrix of

⁷ BAUMAN (1998, 2).

⁸ HABERMAS (2001, 67).

interdependency these practices bestow. One's ability to emulate money and cross borders unimpeded then, testifies also to status and prosperity insofar as certain passports are acceptable where others are not, a dividing line that frequently owes much to historical colonial and trade imbalances. In film studies as in other fields, mobility is frequently equated to social signification, identity and migration insofar as the ordering process will in turn be replicated onscreen in the aesthetic and productive choices made by filmmakers. Far from merely replicating these processes, however, cinema can of course circumvent them or, as in the case of travel cinema highlight their salience in our everyday lives. Mobility, in the words of Tim Cresswell and Deborah Dixon, can be thought of as «an element in the play of power and meaning within social and cultural networks of signification», one that can be used in film «as a strategic device that forces us to rethink conventional ideas about the spatiality of social life»⁹. Furthermore, as Yosefa Loshitzky writes: «cinema clearly utilizes issues related to ethno-religious diasporas, racism, and migrant culture in order to reflect, negotiate, and construct a new image of the 'Old World'»¹⁰. In the coming section I will explore these criterion to take a closer look at *Le voyage en Arménie* in relation to the road movie canon, firstly with reference to *Exils* and latterly I will attempt to locate the narrative within broader historical cinematic terms.

Setting Out

The 1990s saw a great increase of Western European films with or about travelling women. Many of these characters come from Eastern European countries in search of love and bread. Still very few are the middle-aged Western women who travel on their own¹¹.

My selection of *Le voyage en Arménie* for analysis here is not arbitrary, even though it is somewhat atypical of recent trends in French cinema. *Voyage* is a curious mixture of hyphenated transnational film and generic Western adventure narrative. On the one hand it conforms to conceptions of the postcolonial travel narrative (as the journey depicted encompasses a plane journey its source of enquiry is not limited to the road exclusively and so perhaps travel film is an equally applicable term to road movie), yet on the other it seems unable to divorce itself from colonial expansions eastward as seen in myriad Hollywood adventure films. Directed by the Franco-Armenian director Robert Guédiguian, *Voyage* charts the journey of Anna (played by the director's wife Ariane Ascaride), a Marseilles based cardiologist who is forced to follow her ill father to Armenia, the land of his birth. This journey is in direct opposition to the trend identified by Ewa Mazierska and Laura Rascaroli at the beginning of this section as it depicts the return journey of a socially successful expatriate woman to Eastern Europe. It is a return journey, but in showing

⁹ CRESSWELL – DIXON (2002, 4).

¹⁰ LOSHITKY (2010, 14).

¹¹ MAZIERSKA – RASCAROLI (2006, 179).

how successful its Diasporic Armenian character has become the film arguably risks patronising the native Armenians she encounters. In unraveling the mystery of her father's whereabouts, Anna nominally grows to develop a closer understanding of Armenia itself and in doing so, engages meaningfully for the first time with her Armenian ancestry, even if it will become clear that this engagement will be conducted through a strongly Francophone gaze.

Leading a contented and successful life in Marseille, Anna undertakes a journey to her ancestral homeland under duress and with much reluctance. Her career and family are in France; she is a well regarded cardiologist whose profession and middle-class lifestyle speak to the success of the second generation migrant, one whose parents paved the way for her integration into Western European society. Unlike Zano (Romain Duris) and Naima (Lubna Azabal) in Gatlif's *Exils*, Anna's is not a postcolonial heritage per se, as Armenia was never beholden to France. She does not cling to a dual identity, indeed it is clear from the opening scenes in the film that for her, Armenian heritage is almost anachronistic to her way of life for it can only muddy her conception of herself as a successful French woman. Yet, in other ways *Voyage* is emblematic of accented films that chart transnational voyages of discovery. As in *Exils* we follow a second-generation migrant who is prompted to visit the land of her forefathers for the first time by the absence of a parent. This journey will force her to reconsider her heritage and will awaken her to the paradox that as she moves closer to her Armenian background she will simultaneously slip between nationalities, feeling less French, yet not entirely Armenian as she does so. Nevertheless, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that Guédiguian has overplayed his hand and instead has succeeded mainly in differentiating between Anna and her fellow Armenians by resorting to semantically loaded representations.

Anna's life differs markedly from Zano and Naima insofar as she has negotiated the social ladder with considerable aplomb. She lives in a beautiful house overlooking the sea, drives a Mercedes jeep and oversees a successful practice. We first encounter her examining her father Barsam (Marcel Bluwal) who, lying on his back, naked from the waist up awaits her appraisal of his condition. When Anna refers to him by name, he remonstrates with her for not calling him "papa". The notion of patriarchy is particularly salient in the film, given that Anna's late mother is Italian – a far more accessible country for a French national – and thus any link she has with Armenia is through her father. He articulates this dissonance by later telling her: «you have a mother tongue. No-one talks about a father tongue». Armenia then, is quite literally a fatherland for Anna and the bewilderment she displays toward her father will be directed at his homeland in his absence.

Male Terrain?

Just as Anna's trip to Armenia is propelled by an absent father, her narrative also ties in with a recurrent tenet of the road movie itself, identified by Timothy Corrigan as a fixation with «the Oedipal centerpiece of classical narrative»¹². To journey outward is to leave a home, to rupture even temporarily the family. This is achieved here by Barsam's disappearance, even if he of course is ultimately returning home himself. This rupture between France and Armenia and where constitutes home is to the fore in the film, yet despite the presence of a director with Armenian heritage, the onscreen results are questionable. Instead of reconciling herself with her father's culture, Anna accedes to a version that she deems amenable. The strength of her characterisation serves as a counterpart to «a genre traditionally focused, almost exclusively, on men and the absence of women»¹³, yet while we could take comfort from such a character it is clear *Voyage* compensates for this by placing her within a tradition of male adventurers, so that her journey owes more to exoticised conceptions of a mythical east than it does to any real efforts to renegotiate the distance between Marseille and Yerevan.

While Corrigan's summation of the road movie as a predominantly male genre holds true with relation to the history of American cinema, Ewa Mazierska and Laura Rascaroli note that instances of female travelers in European road movies, while not abundant, are not completely uncommon either¹⁴. Prominent examples such as *Viaggio in Italia* (Roberto Rossellini, 1954), *L'avventura* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1960) and *Smultronstället* (Ingmar Bergman, 1957) all engage with female mobility in a European context. Notably, all three instances portray middle-class women for whom money is not a primary consideration, or at any rate does not seem to be a major factor in their journeys, suggesting that «female mobility in Western Europe was, for a long time, mainly a question of class»¹⁵. Anna's comfortable lifestyle is accentuated early in the film and is immediately set in opposition to that of her father, an effect that is achieved by illustrating her mobility in strongly coded terms. Navigating her sleek car through the streets of Marseilles, she moves from her opulent home replete with a yacht-filled marina in the background to her father's house near the docks. The camera tracks her movement from left to right or from west to east as relayed on a map as she arrives at Barsam's house, where the sea is still visible but in place of yachts stand cranes and dilapidated buildings. Further accentuating the discrepancy between daughter and father is the seeming lack of electricity in the house. Anna tries in vain to turn on the lights, but has to rely on daylight to illuminate the room. Her opening of a door enables sunlight to

¹² CORRIGAN (1994, 145).

¹³ *Ibid.* 143.

¹⁴ MAZIERSKA – RASCAROLI (2006, 178).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

stream into the room, revealing in the process a tree standing in the balcony outside. This visage in turn elicits an incongruous strain of non-diegetic traditional Armenian music. Devoid of electricity and full of mementos of the old country, the house, like the nation it signifies is set in opposition to the progressive, electrified, West. The tree and the music attest to nature and mystery respectively, thus signifying to the viewer the kind of adventure that lies in wait. In journeying to Armenia, Anna appropriates her father's culture for herself. Prior to leaving she inverts the parent/child relationship by announcing plaintively to her husband that: «I'm responsible, he's my father». True, we are granted access to Armenia, yet such access is tempered by its reliance on Anna as a guide; we see what she sees, encounter the unknown as she does and any attendant knowledge we may gain of the nation is linked directly to the figure of the French cardiologist. Virtually every scene of the film is granted agency by Anna's presence, at no point do we see Armenia exist on its own terms. Even when she is not in shot we witness her point of view. Furthermore, Guédiguian's use of familiar, even formulaic stylistic techniques in his direction of the film, techniques that include visual metaphors, map-inspired graphics and heavy-handed symbolism readily attests to tired modes of discerning East/West dialectics and undercuts the possibility of any genuinely balanced negotiation between cultures taking place.

Pacifying the East

While Anna's sex and affluence link her with *L'avventura*'s Claudia (Monica Vitti) or *Viaggio in Italia*'s Katherine Joyce (Ingrid Bergman), the depiction of her flight to Yerevan visually calls to mind an altogether different set of films, namely the *Indiana Jones* franchise. Eliding on a visual depiction of the flight, Guédiguian instead elects to represent the journey with an *Indiana Jones* like animation of a plane moving across a map. An exceptionally literal representation of cartography, the plane moves from West to East, charting the terrain that divides them. On the one hand this cinematic construct helps orientate the viewer, guiding her into unfamiliar terrain and serving to map the "unknown" and familiarise it to Western audiences. Indeed, the animation serves if nothing else to focus the mind of the viewer by highlighting the geographical remoteness of Armenia itself. Located to the east of Lebanon, Syria and the Black Sea and bordering Iran to the south, the map reinforces the distance from Yerevan to Marseille. In Western European terms it is remote, yet hardly obscure. Mazierska and Rascaroli attribute Armenia's isolation in part to its turbulent past and to «its history of many military invasions and attempts at colonisation»¹⁶. They continue:

During Soviet rule, Armenia was doubly marginalised: both within the Soviet Union and within Europe. Before the fall of the Berlin Wall virtually all political, economic and cultural

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 217.

exchanges between Armenia and the outside world were mediated by Moscow. Not surprisingly, many Europeans are not even aware that this country belongs to their continent¹⁷.

By utilising an onscreen map, *Voyage* seeks to make Armenia knowable to French audiences, yet it is inescapable that in so doing it speaks also to a consumption of terrain, a mapping that renders it relatable in the context of France and not in and of itself. Ella Shohat for example, notes that in exploratory adventures including «the *Indiana Jones* series, the camera relays the hero's dynamic movement across a passive, static space, gradually stripping the land of its 'enigma'» and here *Voyage* postulates a similar effect¹⁸. This suspicion is lent credence by Anna's subsequent experiences in Yerevan where she partakes in a series of *Indiana Jones*-like adventures before fleeing the attentions of nefarious locals and escaping to the countryside.

Whilst in Yerevan, Anna encounters Manouk (Romen Avinian) an elderly local man who acts as her chauffeur and Schaké (Chorik Grigorian) a manicurist and exotic dancer who attracts the attention of local criminals. Like Anna, Manouk and the criminals drive Mercedes vehicles, but in both cases the vehicles embody alternative and calculated modes of signification. Manouk's firstly is an ancient car, a dilapidated Soviet-era vehicle far removed from the chic model that we see Anna driving through the streets of Marseille. The car is quite literally falling apart and at different intervals Manouk pulls in to retrieve hubcaps and a bumper that fall onto the street. This is not at all insignificant. As Michael Atkinson has noted: «the structure of the car, designed both to conform to our bodies' shortcomings and powerfully extend them has become how we regard the world»¹⁹, a reality that serves to underline the discrepancy between Anna's Mercedes and Manouk's ailing vehicle. Manouk is absent-minded and unreliable, yet Anna plays the part of the benevolent employer and avails of his services, remaining at a spatial remove by sitting in the backseat as he drives. His mobility is subordinate to that of Anna's: he drives her across Yerevan in search of her father, stopping and starting the car at her behest. His unscheduled stops to retrieve pieces of the vehicle symbolises the stunted development of a country that Anna, the Western hero must navigate. On one such trip she encounters Schaké being bundled into a large Mercedes jeep (one not unlike her own) by armed men. In both cases, the cars are symbols of status (the men are dressed smartly in dark suits), yet the contrasting means of achieving such status palpably demonstrates a perceived ethical and political chasm between the respective countries. The jeep is fitted with blacked out windows – attesting to a desire on the part of the owner to camouflage its interior and the illicit practices it expedites. While Manouk cowers behind his car and Schaké helplessly screams for aid, Anna fearlessly takes action in a manner that her fellow doctor Henry Jones Junior

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ SHOCHAT (1991, 52).

¹⁹ ATKINSON (1994, 16).

would be proud of, shooting and wounding the men with a pistol before taking off with Schaké in their jeep. Pulling over in a side street, Anna orders Schaké out of the car, leaving the front doors of the vehicle open as they flee. In the background a handful of somewhat puzzled locals look at the vehicle that is now exposed, de-commissioned and relinquished of its sinister visage by the heroic visitor.

Parallel Journeys

Where Anna's journey is noteworthy for the positive impact she has on the lives of those she meets and grants agency to, it is true also that her own trip is facilitated by a Franco-Armenian of Turkish descent in Sarkis Arabian (Simon Abkarian). A direct counterpoint to Anna insofar as he travels regularly from Marseille to Yerevan, Sarkis fulfills a doubling function that Dimitris Eleftheriotis identifies as a recurring motif in *Exils*. On their journey from Paris to Algeria, Zano and Naima routinely encounter migrants venturing in the opposite direction. As Eleftheriotis notes, «Gatlif's use of relational movement places different types of contemporary mobility in comparative frames of reference»²⁰. One such encounter occurs when the couple spends the night with two young Arab siblings who are seeking to evade police detection. The following morning, as Zano and Naima walk past a patrol car unmolested, the siblings, desperate to avoid getting caught, cling to the underside of a lorry that drives past. The relationship between the four characters «maps out the difference between two kinds of mobility: the north-bound trajectory of the migrant workers and the opposite direction of the travelers, the soul searching, self-discovery purpose of one journey and the anxious desire to study and work that provides the motivation for the other»²¹. Zano and Naima's access to dual citizenship and resultant mobility is due to their parents making the same journey as the siblings and as such a level of mutual empathy exists between the four. They are fellow travellers even if historical circumstances mean that for two of them the act of crossing borders is equated to criminal activity. Anna instead, is openly hostile toward her double Sarkis whose family resides in France. Again his status is equated to the vehicle he owns when he boasts to Anna that one has «to work hard to get a car like this», all the more so because he has a chauffeur of his own to drive it. It is unclear, however, what kind of work Sarkis actually does and we gradually learn that the armed men that Anna confronts are part of his criminal enterprise, while the jeep she requisitions belongs to him. Tellingly, she is set in opposition to Sarkis from their first journey together when she does little to disguise her contempt for his wealth. When Sarkis protests that Armenia is unstable, having just recently been emancipated from Soviet rule, Anna decries his

²⁰ ELEFTHERIOTIS (2010, 125).

²¹ *Ibid.* 130.

attitude and informs him that she herself was a «militant communist» for twenty years. This claim jars with the lifestyle she enjoys in Marseille and frames her attitude to monetary circulation and status in Yerevan. As Sarkis points out, Anna never had to live under communist rule and so her political convictions are based on aspiration and not experience while her disdain for Sarkis' vocal endorsement of free market capitalism exposes the variance in standards she expects of herself and of the Armenians she encounters. Yet he too travels between nations. His children, like Anna's daughter are being brought up in France, presumably as French citizens. That he instead is making the inverse voyage and is evidently a success in capitalist terms seemingly works against him for though he has money like Anna, Sarkis' flaunting of it evidently strikes her as *nouveau riche*. Sarkis' response: «I'd have been a communist too if I'd been rich enough» exposes Anna's double standards for what they are and subsequently calls her motives into question.

Where *Exils* uses the doubling process to highlight the inequalities of monetary circulation, as well as the legacy of colonial subjugation, *Voyage* instead tacitly suggests that Armenian economic life is somehow tainted in and of itself. This doubling can be seen too in the figure of Simon (Jalil Lespert), a French born Franco-Armenian doctor who, it is implied, must compromise his ideals to work in Armenia. When asked about where he receives funding he is vague and his judgment is called to question when he shows Anna the local nightlife. Possessing the trappings of a modern city such as casinos, nightclubs and hotels, Yerevan is briefly depicted as offering familiar and homogenised attractions for Western tourists in addition to its more traditional landmarks. Anna, however, is not readily enchanted by what she sees, particularly when Simon takes her to a strip club, a misjudgment that earns her ire and tacitly suggests that he too is impure when set against her standards. Yerevan, replete with big city attractions and vices, fails to entice Anna and it is only when she relocates to the countryside (in a bid to avoid the attentions of the criminals she shot at) that she begins to gain a greater appreciation for Armenian life. Here she partakes in pastoral activities such as traditional dancing and outdoor dinners while reinstating her status as a forceful adventurer by giving her hosts a demonstration of her skills with a rifle. Having first rescued Schaké and articulated her disapproval of her second career as an exotic dancer, Anna now oversees her redemption, manifest in a burgeoning relationship with a young farmer. She ingratiates herself to the locals before finally locating and reconciling with her father.

This rustic, less developed Armenia demonstrably appeals to Anna. It is an environment that does not threaten her (literally with the absence of armed street gangs) or undermine her status as a distinguished French visitor. It allows her to conduct negotiations over her identity on her own terms enabling her to access a palatable conception of her heritage should she so desire. Furthermore, the resolution of her relationship with Barsam (coupled with her indulgence of

Manouk) tie in with the comparative comfort she comes to feel amongst the older generation of natives whose views on Armenian life do not threaten her nascent sense of nostalgia nor her predetermined viewpoints in relation to the region. Her reconciliation with Barsam occurs as he sits symbolically in the middle of a road that is reclaimed by nature, the overgrowth of weeds protruding up to her knees as she walks. He too it transpires is coming to the end of the road and he resolves to forsake treatment for his illness in order to spend his last days in Armenia.

Conclusion

Any analysis of transnational French travel cinema must first make allowances for the interstitial relationship between the national and the transnational, a relationship described by Hamid Naficy in his exposition of «accented» cinema as being «simultaneously local and global»²². For Naficy, such accented films comment upon Diaspora and transnationalism by «expressing, allegorizing, commenting upon, and critiquing the home and host societies and cultures and the deterritorialized conditions of the filmmakers»²³. Outward movements of this kind have led to multicultural societies such as France, yet the yearning for “home”, though constantly re-imagined, as seen in the work of Bhabha, Naficy and Bauman, remains a salient feature of postmodernity, particularly for those who are split between two homes and separate modes of belonging. By focusing on movement, the road movie provides a moving platform to articulate how this longing might manifest itself. In putting physical distance between protagonists and their homes, travelling loosens also the securities, familiarities and restrictions imposed by familiar environments, allowing opportunities to explore questions of identity. In the case of *Exils*, a sense of restlessness lingers over the closing credits as Naima and Zano struggle to reconcile the realities of their ancestral homes with their own hopes and expectations. Like in *Voyage*, we see only a brief glimpse of France, Gatlif instead electing to privilege the journey. A key difference instead, is how France is depicted in those respective opening scenes. Where Anna lives prosperously by the sea in Marseille, Zano and Naima reside in a nondescript banlieue towerblock, which stands in for Paris and France as a whole. Their naked bodies almost implore us to divest them with meaning; they are quite literally stripped bare. Unlike Anna, they do not have a determined sense of self when they set out. Nor have they reconciled their misgivings by the film’s end. Instead, their journey to Algeria will flesh out the contradictions of their postcolonial background through the places they encounter and their interactions with others, yet «despite their flirtation with nomadic identities their relation with actual marginalized people is affected and over-determined by social and economic historically-grounded structures of power»²⁴.

²² NAFICY (2001, 4).

²³ *Ibid.* 5.

²⁴ CAPUSSOTTI – ELLENA (2010, 235).

The tragedy of Naima and Zano's journey is that they struggle to adapt to either France or Algeria, «I feel like a foreigner from everywhere» the former opines having reached Algiers. In *Voyage* instead, Anna succeeds in remaining proudly French and accessing a form of Armenian heritage that is amenable to her. Her mobility has enabled her to bestride the nation and expose the flaws in others whose existence echoes hers. Ania Loomba notes that «we cannot appreciate the specific nature of diverse hybridities if we do not attend to the nuances of each of the cultures that come together or clash during the colonial encounter»²⁵, yet in *Voyage*, it is clear that a particular kind of Armenian culture is being privileged. This is not postcolonial in the true sense of the word because Armenia was never colonised by France. Instead, the imbalance owes more to economic discrepancies prevalent in late capitalism. The Armenia that Anna grows to accept by the film's conclusion is a rural one, notable for ancient religious sites, folk music and ceremonial dance, one that does not try to emulate other modern European nations, but is subsumed instead by the ghosts of the Armenian Genocide. While we witness many aspects of contemporary Armenia, the film's narrative agency is granted by Anna, however much her missing father may be her motivation for travelling. This, in part is a singular difficulty of the genre, one that Eleftheriotis articulates when he writes that «while the bodies of the travelers are over-invested with mobility and are vital in mediating and authenticating the travelling experience, those of the locals are expendable, meaningful only in relation to a movement that eludes them»²⁶. Due to her near omnipresence in the film, it is inevitable that all of Armenia will be mediated through Anna, all characters rendered static when set against the irresistible impetus she provides. By journey's end, Armenia is left in her wake, its traditions, complexities and politics relative only in the context of how its departing hero elects to conceive of them.

Aidan Power

Universität Bremen

Institut für Kunstwissenschaft und Kunstpädagogik

Raum B3890

Fachbereich 9

Enrique-Schmidt Str.

7 28359 Bremen

power@uni-bremen.de

²⁵ LOOMBA (1998, 151).

²⁶ ELEFThERIoTIS (2010, 123).

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