

Filming Exile: An Analysis of the Making of Colours of Exile

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Abstract:

The last few decades have seen an astonishing increase in the number of people displaced from their homelands due to wars, economic crises, political persecution, and or dictator-ran states. People of all ages, economic status and occupations, have been forced out of their countries and into new and paradoxical contexts where they are no longer in life-threatening situations, but at the same time they meet new and difficult challenges. Some of them have dealt with these challenges through their art.

As a filmmaker in exile myself, I feel compelled to use my craft to raise awareness about this subject and its personal and social struggles. I am not the first nor the only one in my position, as I have learned through my years in exile. Such was the genesis of *Colours of Exile*, a personal yet choral documentary film dealing with the experiences and thoughts of a wide array of Iranian artists in exile.

This thesis examines the making of *Colours of Exile*, while at the same time discussing the deep implications of the important concepts and social processes the film addresses. I explore the relationship between exile and the construction of identity, and also differentiate the several kinds of population movements, in order to delineate the specificities of exiles as opposed to migrants, refugees, and so on.

Moreover, I am interested in describing the effects and impact exile has on the creative work of filmmakers, both from a 'third person' perspective and examining how some of them have dealt with it in their lives and in their work. Finally, an important distinction will be made between what I call 'external' and 'internal' exile, as the two situations can be compared in many aspects, while carrying distinct connotations.

The conclusions will state the complex and paradoxical nature of exile, and summarise the ways in which exiles have adapted to the new situations while attempting to deal with the pain and tribulations it caused them.

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Introduction

0.1 Statement of the problem

For a heart anguished by exile, a stranger's gaze

becomes an arrow piercing through the eyes, at times

Massoud Sepand

(Cited in Karimi-Hakkak 1997: 362)

I wish I could claim to be in a unique position to describe what exile from the Iranian dictatorship feels like. I wish I were the only one to have been forced out of my own home country and away from my family and friends by the bigotry of modern-day tyrants. I wish my condition were rare, my anguish was temporary, and that the worst thing I should endure was, as the poet says, the stranger's gaze. Unfortunately, the Iranian diaspora comprises millions like me, scattered around the globe, present in the most improbable of places, just any one but the territory we love and miss.

My position is shared with millions, and while the majority of them have been silenced, lack the tools or appropriate platforms to speak out, or simply have chosen not to; a considerable number of them remain who have been vocal about their situations. They have voiced their concerns, spoken out about the oppression that the citizens face in Iran and about the challenges faced by those who have had to leave the country. They have done so through many outlets, frequently using creative and artistic media to express themselves.

Among such artistic expressions, several documentaries, many of which I will reference throughout this thesis, have been made on the topic of exile from Iran. So why another one? I can think of many reasons that would look well on paper: more people need to know about our struggle; I have a personal need to tell the story from my subjective point of view; my work will present a unique approach to a much-discussed topic; and so on.

However, only one of such excuses provides a reason to make a film and write a dissertation. Over the years since I left Iran, I have come to meet, know, and appreciate many people in a similar position. They helped me when I needed it the most, and they felt grateful when I tried to help them. I was blessed with wonderful friends, exciting acquaintances, and invaluable advice from other exiles. We shared experiences, long conversations, walks, and meals. I witnessed the selflessness and kindness in their hearts as some of my fellow exiles offered me everything when they had next to nothing. I learned so many things about life and about other's lives. Some of their life experiences were familiar to me, while others sounded to me almost too incredible to believe. In short, I have a responsibility towards all these people, my people. I cannot let the stories that were entrusted to me die in a restaurant chat, a Skype meeting, or a late-night talk. They deserve better, and honouring their trust is the real reason I set out to film *Colours of Exile* and write this thesis.

This responsibility partly explains the twofold nature of this work: a thesis *and* a film. Much has been written about practice-based research (Anderson & Tobin, 2012; Paulus, 2013; Black, 2019; Prokopic, 2021), and I am tempted to count myself among its practitioners, especially since I identify with the reasons argued by Ann Tobin¹ as well as her methods (Anderson & Tobin, 2012: 954), as I also relied heavily in my film's development journal when writing this thesis. However, taking into account what I expressed in the previous paragraphs, I think a more accurate description of the research conducted here as both practice-based and experience-based. Practice-based approaches are highly exploratory and experimental (Prokopic, 2013: 175) and aim at finding answers to research questions through practice, as theory itself is insufficient. In my case, however, I see filmmaking and academic writing as two integrated tools that potentially allow for tackling a single topic from different sides, resulting in a more ample understanding of the original problem. I disagree with Felicity Colman when she claims that "the film ends and the work of film theory begins" (Colman, 2014: 95). One of the aims of this thesis will be to prove that filmmaking and theorising go hand in hand, and also to highlight the importance of the documentary filmmaker's personal experience in the making of both the film and the thesis.

¹ Ann Tobin is a PhD screenwriter at the University of Leeds, whose dissertation is an exercise in practice-based research. Larra Anderson, her PhD supervisor, is listed in the article as co-writer.

Indeed, my involvement with my fellow exiles is deeply rooted in the way of life I have led in the past several years, and my preoccupations and theirs are one and the same. I came to understand that we all seek answers. Answers to straightforward questions that invariably begin with 'why' and 'when'. Why things happen, when did everything turned sideways, and when we will be able to return to Iran are among the most common. None of them have, unfortunately, straightforward answers. Some of the most intelligent persons I have met in my life are exiles, and even they shrug their shoulders when trying to come up with answers and solutions. I can only wonder how hard to understand exile must be for people who have not experienced it, who have never heard the name Evin², and people for whom censorship and persecution are far from being a daily preoccupation in their lives.

For these reasons, I believe that any film on this subject would inevitably leave out important aspects, being but a minuscule part of the puzzle that is life in exile. Consequently, my contribution to the discussion will lack that level of ambition but pretends to make up for it with a multiple perspective that encompasses different media.

Not every medium is fit for telling every story. The failure of too many attempts to translate a written novel into a movie is an eloquent testament to this simple fact. Similarly, not every form of expression allows for expressing the same thoughts and occurrences. Philosopher Theodor Adorno has famously posited that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" (1983: 34). Indeed, how would one speak of the unspeakable? How do you name the unnamable? But poetry, barbaric or otherwise, can still be written today. What Adorno points out is simply that it cannot deal with any subject, and one could argue that no form of expression is fit for dealing with every subject in existence.

Werner Herzog is notorious for his reluctance to write proper scripts for his films, and his answer is that written language can never account for what happens before a film camera, for what can be achieved in the editing room, or for what actors can do. And the accomplished New York photographer Diane Arbus believed that she could not control or predict what any photograph would really show when developed. In fact, she used to claim

² While this name may signify nothing to most readers, in Iran it is synonym with terror. Evin is the neighbourhood where Tehran's most infamous prison is located, and the forced destination of most political prisoners in the country. This is where, for instance, filmmaker Hossein Rajabian was imprisoned in October 2013 on counts of "insulting the sacred" and "propaganda against the state" (Amnesty International 2020)

that photographs revealed truths about the soul of the people depicted (Gross 2012: 55). These examples serve as reminders of the limitations and possibilities of each medium.

I made *Colours of Exile* because I needed to entice an emotional response . However, the more I investigated, the further the scope of the research I did during the pre-production stage went, the more I convinced myself that there were messages I could transmit for which film was not the most adequate medium.

Education occupies a significant place in my community. It is a source of pride for our families and ourselves and a highly valued asset. Over the years, I learned that this is not the case in most countries, and indeed, university studies seem to be at odds with artistic aspirations for many people. I am grateful that this is not the case in Iran or the United Kingdom. Pursuing a postgraduate course on film is not the surrender of my artistic career but an exciting addition, which has modelled the way I think about art in general and film in particular.

Thus, a project that initially was nothing but an attempt at expressing several frustrations related to my being away from my home country grew to become something else. I started by recording footage in the intimacy of my home, trying to forget the camera's existence, going about my daily routine as I would on any ordinary day. At the same time, I became interested in direct cinema's fly-on-the-wall approach, and from my research, I began to understand its applications in documentary cinema. My academic interests and artistic aspirations became materially tangled and mutually encouraging. The more I learned about documentary film theory, the more an idea of the film I wanted to make became tangible as I gathered tools and ideas. Furthermore, the more I interacted with colleagues, friends, and the exiles I interviewed for my film, the more I felt drawn to conducting extensive research on the various forms and problems of exile.

As I explained, each medium has its own affordances and possibilities; both aspects of this project would have had to complement the other. It is not a question of ambition but of honouring the subject, which is very important to me as it makes a considerable part of my identity.

Identity is, in fact, one of the main concepts that I explore in this thesis. It interests me not only how it is constructed but how it changes over time. Interestingly, and quite

unexpectedly (although, looking backwards, I do not think I should have felt surprised at all), identity was one of the topics that appeared the most during interviews. Coincidences like these contributed to my convincing that my original plan was viable and adequate.

In short, the idea was to offer the opinions of the experts as well as the subjective experiences of the exiles themselves while having both sources of scholarship discuss with each other. I believe both have a piece of the truth and while people tend to be rooted in their own subjective point of view, academic research often looks for the broad picture and thus complements said view. Considering all of this, the fact that each medium serves specific purposes and messages, and the necessity of developing a multivocal approach to the question of this thesis, I decided to divide the work into two: a film and a dissertation.

This thesis results from a long and comprehensive research aimed at describing the history and development of the tools and strategies used in documentary cinema. Documentary filmmakers in the 21st century are standing on the shoulders of giants, as over the past century, the 'creative' part in 'the creative treatment of actuality' has been greatly developed. The plasticity and variability of the strategies used in documentary filmmaking made me realise that relying on only one style of filmmaking (direct cinema or *cinéma vérité*, for example) would leave out essential tools that I could benefit from. Such was one of the most critical apportions the academic research made to the artistic side of this project. At the same time, it would mean nothing to gather this kind of knowledge just for the sake of it without putting it into practice creatively. The poet T. S. Eliot begins his poem *The Rock*, with the following statements:

Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?

Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?

(Eliot 2014[1934]: 1)

I adhere to these questions. It is not only the knowledge of academic books that I seek to transmit primarily, but also the wisdom of those who must endure the exile situation every day of their lives. These are complementary, and I believe this work would be incomplete without either one of them.

0.2 Research and Work Methodology

For the part of the research specifically contained in this thesis, I have adopted a classical approach to social sciences research (Mouton & Marais 1988), and begun by compiling a literature review. This preliminary groundwork pointed me toward more questions that needed answers, and what followed was a delimitation of several restricted topics into which I would place the sources I already gathered and find new ones.

Only when this process was finished was I aware of how broad and spanning this research was. This, in turn, only strengthened my resolve to divide the sources into several small, manageable categories. Many of the topics to cover were suggested to me by peers, fellow exiles, and by my supervisor, and these suggestions have greatly improved the final product. They also helped me decide on the thesis structure, which I will describe in the following section of this Introduction.

Data collection implied not only access to secondary written sources, but getting acquainted with the films on the subject (Mouton & Marais 1988: 75); being this a film studies thesis, I did not want to focus barely on documentary films or just on films from Iran, and indeed, it will become evident from the list of referenced films at the end of the thesis that I used as wide a perspective as possible. Perhaps the most challenging stage of the development of this thesis was finding the films (and finding them with subtitles), and many times, I had to rely on my memories of said films. In such cases, I clearly state it to avoid unintended falsities. I was familiar, of course, with many of the Iranian films I used for this thesis, but I was surprised to see how many appeared just at the time I was writing it. Such is the case of Sreemoyee Singh's *And, Toward Happy Alleys* (2023) and Saleh Kashef's short film *And How Miserable is the Home of Evil* (2023), which I did not reference in the thesis, but which left a profound and enduring impression in me.

As I will argue later in Chapter 2.1, among the paramount preoccupations of a filmmaker that aims at making a documentary film are the ethical aspects of working with real people and situations in actuality. Furthermore, my personal acquaintance and in many cases emotional involvement with the subjects of *Colours of Exile* made me especially concerned with the ethics of filmmaking. For these reasons, my ethical approach throughout the making of *Colours of Exile* was rooted primarily in responsibility,

transparency, and respect for everyone involved, which includes not only the interviewees but also my family, the crew and my editor. Given the sensitive nature of the film's themes, I sought to ensure that all ethical considerations were met, in an attempt at protecting the well-being, dignity, and safety of everyone who contributed to the project.

In every interview, efforts were made so that all interviewees fully understood the purpose of the film, how their stories would be presented, and where the film might be screened. I provided clear explanations of the creative vision, the themes I was exploring, and how their contributions would fit into the larger narrative. It would not be an understatement to say that some of them even influenced the final product through their constant feedback, especially Mr. Mohsen Makhmalbaf. It was essential to me that each participant gave informed consent, ensuring they were comfortable with the questions asked and the footage used. They all had been sent an online consent form to sign electronically to ensure their approval has been digitally recorded. I will discuss this topic further in Chapter 2.2.

Overall, my ethical approach was guided by principles of respect, consent, security, and integrity. I prioritized the well-being of my participants, the safety of my crew, and the truthful yet sensitive representation of the themes in the film. While the process posed many challenges, I remained committed to ethical filmmaking practices, ensuring that the film was created in a way that honoured the trust and contributions of everyone involved. I arrange several meetings with the participant before we start filming, and because I knew and was friend with most of them, I did not let that friendship be misused, and I tried to be as forthcoming as possible regarding all the aspects in the film that involved them, so we had several meeting before we started the film.

0.3 Research Structure

As a filmmaker in exile, I feel compelled to use my craft to raise awareness about this subject and its existential and social struggles. I am not the first nor the only one in my position, and this chapter will investigate the literature regarding not only filmmaking and other types of creative practices in exile, but also about exile itself. Despite being short, the questions that will guide the research contained in these pages do not admit short, straightforward answers:

What is exile?

What does it do to a person?

Regarding the first question, I will explore the relationship between exile and identity construction (Hall 1990). I will also differentiate the several kinds of population movements so that I am able to delineate the specificities of exiles as opposed to migrants, refugees, and so on (Said 2000). As to the second question, I am interested in describing the effects and impact of exile on the creative work of artists and filmmakers, both from a detached and general perspective, and examining how some of them have specifically dealt with it in their lives and work. Finally, an important distinction will be made between what I call 'external' and 'internal' exile, as the two situations can be compared in many aspects while carrying distinct connotations.

Scholarship dealing with the displacement of people is often focused on particular cases (Abu-Lughod 1988; Berg 1996; Palacios 2015). Few scholars have dealt with the question of exile as a whole (Chambers 1994; Brah 1996; Naficy 1999; Said 2000). This is why my first step towards researching the topic was devising a research plan. This plan needs to be in accordance with one's initial aim. In my case, it was two-fold. Accordingly, this thesis is comprised of two extensive chapters, preceded by this Introduction and followed by a Conclusion where a balance will be made of the results and questions posed by the work.

I debated for a long time whether to put the chapter on documentary film before or after the one on exile and its research. I asked myself: Am I first and foremost an exile and

secondly a filmmaker, or just the opposite? Moreover, I found this to be a surprisingly difficult question to answer. Would I be in exile had I not desired to make films without the interference of the totalitarian state? Were I not in exile myself, would I have thought of filming *Colours of Exile*? It became clear that both aspects are inextricably linked, and I could not decide which one to set before the other.

In addition to what is said above, it should be pointed out that this Introduction pretends to present the problem this entire project deals with, describing especially what my reasons for embarking on it were and still are. It should also serve as a guide to reading the thesis, thanks to its general and specific structure description. The Introduction will also clearly state the main questions that drove the entire research, as well as its academic and subjective aims. Finally, it will describe the methods and approaches used in the research process that culminated in the manuscript of this thesis.

Chapter One deals with the scholarship on and about the various forms of displacement. Although I present a historical background of the migrant question, it goes back barely to the 20th century to strictly keep to the relevant information. Enlarging this book with discussions about, say, the Babylonian deportation practices is beyond the scope of this research. On the contrary, Chapter One starts with a discussion on the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (UNHCR 1951), both because it offers a relevant historical background to the migration processes after the Second World War and because it serves as a starting point for discussing the different categories of displaced populations.

Such distinctions are necessary, considering the enormous variation in the social and economic situations of refugees, exiles (temporary and permanent), migrants and expatriates. Each of these populations has different needs, backgrounds, and reasons, which are discussed in the chapter (Said 2000; Edwards 2015). However, they also have one considerable unifying factor: the fact that they all were more or less forced into leaving behind their home countries. Things like wars, economic crises, unemployment, political unrest, censorship, dictatorships, and persecution are common factors that make people consider exile a life path. Problems to conceptualise the different categories are also pointed out (Triandafyllidou 2016).

Once it is clear what we mean by 'exile', a discussion is presented about the status of exiles and how the scholarship sees them, attention is drawn to Edward Said's definition of exile as a "discontinuous state of being" (2000: 177), and ties are drawn between this perspective and that of the post-colonial studies. Next, we present our own approach to the subject, which relies heavily on the approach to identity construction as developed by Stuart Hall (1990) and the school of social constructivism (Allen 2005). Hall's view of identity understands it as a relational concept, not something that is set in stone once and for all. At the same time, an individual's identity is created both by their background and actions and by how others perceive them. The relationship between exile and memory (Berg 1996) and between exile and filmmaking (Naficy 2001) are explored as well.

Chapter Two is structured around two questions. The first of such questions, 'What is exile?' was mainly dealt with in Chapter One and revisited at the beginning of Chapter Two. The second one, 'What does it do to a person?' is approached in the second half of the chapter. Here, attention is drawn to some case studies, especially from the art and cinema world, such as the exile of filmmakers from Chile and Argentina (Schumann 1979; Pick 1987; Palacios 2015). Of course, a significant part of the discussion revolves around artists born in Iran or to Iranian exiles. Their lives, the difficulties they might have encountered, and their work are discussed thoroughly. This part is indebted to the extensive work of Hamid Naficy (1999; 2001), which refers to Iranian exile cinema, including the discussion of a categorisation made by him that I found helpful when describing the films I discuss in this thesis.

Another vital source of information is the interviews I conducted when making *Colours of Exile*. It is the direct accounts of people who suffer the fate of exile which help paint a picture of what exactly exile does to a person. Chapter Two deals with the question of the medium used to transmit their stories. There, I present an account of how I understand documentary film, but also how others understood it throughout history. As it will be clear, I adhere to the very classic idea of documentary as the 'creative treatment of actuality' (Grierson 1933), first proposed by John Grierson a century ago. In fact, many of the conceptions that I discuss in Chapter Two have been known for a considerable time. Some 20th-century developments, for instance, in the sound department, have been instrumental in finding new ways of communicating actuality. Such is the case with *cinéma vérité*, which

was mostly made possible by the invention of portable, synchronous sound recorders and the development of smaller and portable 16mm cameras. In this sense, Jean Rouch's contribution to the craft of documentary filmmaking cannot be overstated. I will discuss *cinéma vérité* (Van Cauwenberge 2013) and direct cinema (Haleff 1964; Leacock 1986) extensively, clearly stating their origin and differences, as well as the possibilities for filmmaking in contemporary times. More recent developments such as the so-called 'cinema of the self' (Lebow 2012) will also be discussed. Following the categorisation made by Bill Nichols (2001), a discussion on other styles of documentary filmmaking is in order as well, mainly in view of possible strategies for depicting exile in an engaging, truthful way.

The next topic will be exile in film, how it has been depicted in the past, by whom, and what lessons are there to learn from those who preceded me (Hiltunen 2019). Of course, exile is not the only topic displaced people can make art about, so a considerable part of Chapter Two will be devoted to overviewing artists' work in exile.

Finally, an even more considerable part of Chapter Two is devoted to the making of *Colours of Exile*. The strategies used will be laid out, as well as the main inspirations I used for this film. These are my own and the lessons learned from artists' experiences in exile.

As a filmmaker, I learned that the final cut of a film always contains barely a minute part of the actual footage gathered during pre-production and the one obtained during the shooting. An interesting example comes from Argentinian documentary filmmaker Manuel Abramovich's *Blue Boy* (2019). This short film resulted from a year-long investigation he conducted inside the male prostitute scene in Berlin. He recorded hundreds of hours of footage, mainly utilising the fly-on-the-wall approach, as well as audio and video interviews with patrons and workers (sexual and otherwise) in a Berlin bar called Blue Boy. In the end, what is seen in the film are only six still-camera shots of the male prostituted, but they do not move or talk to the camera. The short film is comprised exclusively of their recorded reactions to hearing their own interviews.

Abramovich's may be an extreme example of a very frugal way of filmmaking. However, it shows to what extent the original ideas, footage, and shots are mostly discarded or implied. For this reason, I needed to complement *Colours of Exile* with a lengthy discussion of the motivations, fears, expectations, and work that went into its

making. Here, I approach it from a theoretical point of view and mainly from the aesthetic and directorial choices, which I explain in detail. Things like why I chose to have my daughters as characters in the film, how my daughters and I felt at the moment, how I came up with the TV box section, my approach regarding archive footage, and what the camper van scenes meant are explained. Also, I delve deeper into the more technical details, like what cameras and lenses I used and why, the reasons behind some of the shots, the lighting, and the music and sound design.

A separate section is dedicated to the editing process, which is crucial in making a documentary film. It is in the editing room where films are made or broken, and indeed, several different versions of *Colours of Exile* were tested before arriving at a definitive edition with which I could feel satisfied.

This thesis is completed with a conclusion summarising the research findings that went into its making and evaluates whether the original questions were answered, and the aims met.

0.4 Research Questions and Aims

I have already discussed the initial questions in previous sections of this *Introduction*. These have become guides not only at the beginning of the research but also when organising and laying out the information. Through asking them, I sought to describe what exile is and what it does to the people who experience it. They were also the motivating questions behind *Colours of Exile*. These are comprehensive questions, and rightly so, for the answers are also broad. Just as there is not a single experience of displacement (and one could easily argue that there are as many experiences as people displaced), there is no single, simple way of answering the questions posed here.

When writing a scholarly work of this kind, it is essential to not lose sight of its scope and possibilities. To begin with, this thesis intends to do something other than solve the problems it deals with. It can never aspire to effectively solve the issue of exile. However, it can and hopefully will contribute to an educated discussion on the subject, bringing important opinions and testimonies to the outstanding debates (Cf. Triandafyllidou 2016; Berger 2016). It will succeed in its aims if it accurately paints a comprehensive picture of the situation of artists from Iran in exile, transmits the challenges they face and their daily struggles. Filmmaking has taught me that the way one tells stories is as important as the story being told (Thompson 2003), so clarity in writing and an engaging style are among this thesis's foremost aims.

Finally, as I have explained earlier, one of the main objectives is to assess critically the directorial choices in *Colours of Exile* and explain in detail the debates behind them. I do not wish to 'explain' my movie, rather I wanted to offer a particular insight into what went into the making of this film. This will be done in a comprehensive way, starting from more general appreciations such as my own views on documentary cinema, to my inspirations and theoretical points of departure, and finally describing in detail why I chose to shoot and show certain things in a certain way. The latter will showcase the processes behind the choices made in the shooting and editing of the film, from the pre-production phase to post-production. This is the objective mainly of Chapter Two, but in the discussion, it will unify the concepts developed in Chapter One with the techniques introduced in Chapter Two. In this sense, the structure of the thesis was calculated to be able to deal with each specific

question separately but to also integrate all of its discussions and concepts into a coherent proposal.

Chapter 1 - Filmmaking in Exile – Literature Review

1.1 What is Exile?

I don't repent.

It's as if my heart flows

on the other side of time.

Poem by Forugh Farrakhzad (2010: 47)

Two questions occupy the heart of this thesis. First, the question: What is exile? And secondly, what does it do to a person? While there is, as we shall see in the following sections, considerable scholarship and academic studies regarding the first question, the second one is much more subjective, and therefore has not one straightforward answer, but many. Exile is, as Edward Said has put it, “strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience” (2000: 173). Cinema is very much indebted to exile (Berger 2016) and in fact exile is a recurrent topic in this medium (I will return to this topic in section 1.3.3). This may be due to the very nature of cinema, especially regarding what André Bazin described as a “mummy complex”: cinema’s ability to keep the past alive, allowing for the re-living of moments, people, and places that are long gone (Bazin 1960: 4). Alain Resnais also liked to point out how cinema both shapes and preserves memory (Harcourt 1973), especially, as we will see in Chapter 2, when what one remembers does not exist anymore.

Primo Levi has rightly pointed out that some of the difficulties with explaining traumatic experiences stem from the fact that those who have experienced them often lack the ability to talk about them (1959). In the case of European concentration camps, “where man is alone and where the struggle for life is reduced to its primordial mechanisms” (Levi 1959: 101), Levi finds an important distinction between those who endure the torment and probably have had more luck (the ‘saved’), and those who let themselves rapidly descend

into madness and death (the 'drowned'). The drowned are probably those better fit to talk about life in the camps, because they have seen and felt the worst of it, but unfortunately, they are either mad or dead. Exile may be, in Said's words, "a discontinuous state of being" (2000: 177), but those who are in exile are still not dead. They have their own voices, albeit in many cases that is all they have.

Both *Colours of Exile* and this critical analysis are primarily aimed at bringing the voices of those in exile into the foreground. It is my hope that between the two media (moving image and written words) the two questions posed at the beginning of this section can be addressed. It is not just a matter of presenting information, but an attempt at really grasping every social and personal aspect that comes with the condition of exile, a task with many difficulties attached.

This is because the question of exile is inextricably entwined with that of identity. One cannot explain the former without dealing with the latter. And identity is in itself an extremely complex construct. It has traditionally been thought of as the specific set of given characteristics that a person is endowed with from birth, such as their name, nationality, hair colour, race, gender, family name, etc. However, this perspective has long been critiqued by scholars. Instead, from the second half of the 20th century onwards, scholars have started to define identity as a social construct (Berger and Luckmann 1966). This trend of 'social constructionism' (Allen 2005) has two possible interpretations, depending on how this construction is made: either as a 'positive' ascription of individuality traits made by others (Goffman 1968), or as a negative construction of the collective or individual self in opposition to others, that is, one is what the others are not (Zizek 1993).

In this sense, Goffman tends to put emphasis on the social aspect of identity construction, understanding it as a long process spanning generations and involving whole communities that constantly reflect and debate on their past, present and future. As such, identities are negotiated and change over the years. Instead, Zizek takes a Marxist approach, which in turn owes much to the Hegelian concept of dialectics. When the original thesis is a statement about a group's identity, as Zizek implies, it is the negative antithesis the one to determine the outcome of the struggle. In his words, "the positive meaning is

expressed by the negative judgement and the negative meaning by the indefinite judgement” (Zizek 1993: 59), which is a quite complex way of implying that the outside judgement of others is what gives identity its positive traits. What a people is, is what the others are not. Both conceptions of identity consider it a relatively fixed set of traits.

This is, of course, an oversimplification of a deeply complex and informed reflection by the Slovenian philosopher. Zizek draws heavily from the field of psychology, with Freud and Lacan as his most perennial sources. Thus, he acknowledges that self, and self-identity, are not exactly a monolithic entity, but are affected by a fundamental “split” (Zizek 1993: 206). Such is the classic distinction between the conscious self and the unconscious, that is, the rational awareness and the uncontrollable desires. However, to him the most powerful force that is involved in the process of identity making comes always from outside. Identity is formed through the dialectical relationship with an external Other, which can be, but not only, a father or a mother or even an ethnicity or ideology. Ideology, indeed, plays a big part in the process of identity making as Zizek understands it. Zizek claims that “the fascinating image of the Other gives a body to our own innermost split, to what is ‘in us more than ourselves’ and thus prevents us from achieving full identity with ourselves” (1993: 206). Identity in Zizek’s work is not barely conscious or unconscious, but there is also deeply rooted in one’s society (Zizek 1993: 208), and here ideology plays an important role in its making. In societal identity, the figure of the Other is replaced almost always by an Enemy (Zizek 1993: 209). And here, again, as in the individual identities of each member of said society, one’s identity *is* what the Other/Enemy *is not*.

But as Stuart Hall points out, cultural identity has less to do with *being* than with *becoming* (Hall 1990: 223). This means that the construction of one’s identity is a process that is never set or finished but is continuously shaped by the experiences and events of one’s life, and also the places and people that are part of it. We will understand the concept of identity, as well as exile, from a relational point of view in this thesis.

The concept of identity as a negative construct, as Zizek understands it, can be explained not only by the Marxist framework but also by the influence of post-colonial studies (Césaire 1955, Fanon 1961, Said 1978) and the dependency theory (Rodney 1972, Amin 1976, Cardoso and Faletto 1979), both very popular frameworks of thought in the 1960s and 1970s. These scholars understood world economy as a zero-sum game, where

the Global South' underdevelopment was seen as the flip side of the Global North countries' development. The greater wealth of the latter is mostly explained by the extraction of said wealth from underdeveloped countries. In this sense, the peripheral countries' identity is tied to the developed traits of the central countries. The same applied to people's identities, as we will shortly see (section 1.2). As such, exile was defined as an in-between condition (Naficy 1993: 11), a blurred identity that was neither that of the place of origin or that of the destination: "the condition of exile involves the idea of a separation and distancing from either a literal homeland or from a cultural and ethnic origin" (Ashcroft et al. 1998: 92). While at first this definition could appear as accurate and objective, I would like to return to it in the following sections to show to what extent concepts such as "homeland" and "cultural origin" are problematic.

The question of belonging, either to a supposed land of origin or to a certain cultural background, has also been put to the test by scholars like Benedict Anderson, who has proposed the concept of 'imagined communities' (1983) to explain how cultures and nations are constructed. Notice that, again, we are speaking of constructs and not essences. There is nothing essential about the concept 'Iran', and despite that, there is a general idea among Iranian people in exile of what Iran is and what it means to them. It is a construct, yes, but a collective one.

Also collective are the memories of past times at the homeland, and the dreams of a return to it. Exile means nothing without the possibility, however remote, of returning. Hence the failure of 'assimilation' policies because they required all ties with the homeland to be severed (Glazer 1993: 124). Exiled people are never fully assimilated, nor they remain completely attached to their places of origin. Richard White's idea of a 'middle ground' (1991) is useful because it explains how a new mesh of social relations is created in certain situations, one which cannot be explained by the existence of the homeland or the guest country, and that is also not a hybrid (Bhabha 1994), a mestizo (Gruzinski 2002) or an in-between (Naficy, 1993). It has a status and a set of characteristics of its own. These characteristics will be explored in the following sections.

So far, I have deliberately avoided offering a plain definition of what exile is. While it was certainly a possibility, to search previous scholarship on the subject, extracting and comparing different definitions and picking (or developing) the best one, I found that a

multiple approach is better suited to the task. As representations of exile are relational, changing, and always-in-the-making, the 'definition' that I use in this chapter will be slowly pieced together, section by section. Now that all the main concepts I will be working with have been laid out, it is time to look into the research on this specific topic.

1.2 Previous Research

The poem that inaugurates this chapter, by the famous Iranian poet Forugh Farrokhzad, speaks of being at once away and at home. There is perhaps no other organ in our body that is more ‘present’ than the heart: it sits at the centre of our chest, and it pumps blood non-stop to keep the organism alive. Yet the poet feels it far away, as she says, “on the other side of time”. Trinh T. Minh-Ha, the Vietnamese filmmaker, seems to share the thoughts on what home means to her, as she expresses:

Today, when I’m asked where home is for me, I am struck by how far
away it is; and yet, home is nowhere else but right here, at the edge of
this body of mine. Their land is my land, their country is my country
(Minh-Ha 2011: 12).

Migrants, people in exile, and generally any person who for one reason or another finds themselves away from their place of origin often feel such contradiction. And even when one stays in one’s homeland, as we will see in section 1.3.4, under certain circumstances it is possible to feel that nostalgia (literally, pining for home). Nobel Prize laureate Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio, who has lived in many countries, has claimed multiple times that the only nation he belongs to is the French language. In an interview with *Label* magazine, he said the following:

I grew up telling myself that there was a somewhere else which
embodied my true homeland (...) One day I would go there, and I would
know what it was. So in France I always thought of myself a little bit of an
'outsider.' On the other hand, I love the French language, which is
perhaps my true country! But thinking of France as a nation, I must say I
have rarely identified with its priorities (...) (CNN 2008)

These testimonies seem at first to confirm the postulates of post-colonial theory, to whom every displaced person subsists in an in-between, what Homi Bhabha calls the ‘Third Space of enunciation’ (1994: 37). This contested space produces an “international culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture’s hybridity” (Bhabha 1994: 38). The problem I see with this proposal is that cultures are still seen as entities with closed boundaries, and so new

cultures can only emerge from the hybridisation of two already existing cultures. This criticism, I believe, also applies to the similar concept of 'mestizo culture', popularised by Serge Gruzinski at the beginning of this century (2002). I cannot help but thinking, within their theoretical framework, that my daughters and myself would be considered as belonging to two different cultures for I was born in Iran, and they are British nationals.

Instead, I tend to adhere to a more malleable concept of 'home' and 'culture' (Cf. Bachelard 1994[1958]; Lumsden 1999; Naficy 1999), one that takes into account moving or 'fuzzy' boundaries', and that allows for cultural change to happen constantly. This conception of a home is often associated to the so-called 'soft spaces' (Allmendinger et al. 2015), informal and non-exclusive territories that are often moveable or governed by multiple people and institutions (Allmendinger et al. 2015: 4). In section 1.3.4, we will speak largely about the apparent paradox that faced Jafar Panahi when, even staying at his 'home', he did not feel it that way because he was banned from practicing his art. The ability to work and pursue artistic projects is a key element of 'home', and it has nothing to do with a given place or land.

But what is home, then? In his *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard states that "the house we were born in is more than an embodiment of home, it is also an embodiment of dreams" (Bachelard 1994[1958]: 15). Which means that it is an imaginary concept just as it is a real place on earth. In the same vein, Hamid Naficy states, "home is any place, it is temporary, and it is moveable; it can be built, rebuilt, and carried in memory and by acts of imagination". (Naficy 1999: 194). Finally, David Lumsden wrote: "Home is not fixedly placed, rather, home is where one best knows oneself, where best means most even if not always happiness (...)" (Lumsden 1999: 31). As we can see, these authors tend to make the concept of 'home' more nuanced, not just a fixed place in the world but a fluid construct that can be transported at will. The actual experiences of people in exile, however, show that this is not always the case. Most of the people interviewed in *Colours of Exile* agree in that it is not so easy to feel 'at home' wherever they are, and that they would rather be in their homeland, Iran. That is, if the present circumstances regarding censorship and dictatorship changed.

About the topic of pain associated to the loss of one's homeland, Janet Abu-Lughod states:

all movement from a native place (in the sense of a physical and social place in which one was formed) to some other physical and or social place causes some rift, some loss, some discontinuity in the state of one's being. All migration from one culture to another creates some marginality and involves an often-painful adjustment process whenever the migrant attempts, with greater or lesser success, to combine identities that do not necessarily fit together (Abu-Lughod 1988: 19).

Both Abu-Lughod and Edward Said's writings refer prominently to the Palestinian experience. This is the reason the latter defined exile as a "condition of terminal loss" (Said 2000: 173). But from a broad perspective, one could argue that suffering does not necessarily come with migration in all cases. Moreover, exile and migration are also factors in the creation of new cultural and artistic forms, and they generate new ways of relationship between people. Despite its shortcomings, exile is formative in the lives of millions of people in the world. In fact, Benedict Anderson has called exile "the mother of nationality" (quoted in Naficy 1999: 19), implying that nations are not pre-existing and unchangeable, and neither is identity.

Edward Said has written, on the formative power of exile situations:

What could be more intransigent than the conflict between Zionist Jews and Arab Palestinians? Palestinians feel that the proverbial people of exile, the Jews, have turned them into exiles. But the Palestinians also know that their own sense of national identity has been nourished in the exile milieu, where everyone not a blood-brother or sister is an enemy, where every sympathiser is an agent of some unfriendly power, and where the slightest deviation from the accepted group line is an act of the rankest treachery and disloyalty (Said 2000: 178).

Among the new cultural forms that have often developed in situations of displacement, either voluntary or forced, are manifestations of art. Cinema is a particularly prolific field for this type of manifestation, and several scholars have dealt with the topic.

In evaluating the scholarship on exile cinema studies, it becomes clear that certain areas have been much more extensively researched than others. It is the case of South

American exile cinema (Campo 2013), particularly Chilean exile cinema (Schumann 1979; Pick 1987; Palacios 2015; Palacios and Donoso Pinto 2017); but also, Palestinian exile cinema (Bresheeth, 2002; Tawil, 2005; Dabashi, 2006). Although this perception can be debated, I would place Iran into this category, fundamentally thanks to the extensive works of Hamid Naficy (1993; 1999; 2001).

Although there are general works available (e.g. Atkinson 2008), they are mostly concerned with specific cases of filmmakers such as Fritz Lang (Kaes 2003), Luis Buñuel (Ripley 2017), and Roman Polanski (Marciniak 2000). On the other end of the spectrum are studies also general in scope but that veer away from the biographic towards more 'social' aspects (e.g. Everett 2004). Such social aspects are the construction of national identity and a true 'exilic' identity. In the following sections I would like to delve deeper into the literature associated with all the topics we have been discussing, and especially with the less discussed of the relationship between exile and cinema.

1.3 Literature Review

1.3.1 Migration, Exile, Refuge: Differences and Similarities:

Edward Said has made important distinctions regarding the status of different classes of displaced individuals and groups:

Although it is true that anyone prevented from returning home is an exile, some distinctions can be made among exiles, refugees, expatriates, and émigrés. Exile originated in the age-old practice of banishment. Once banished, the exile lives an anomalous and miserable life, with the stigma of being an outsider. Refugees, on the other hand, are a creation of the twentieth-century state. The word “refuge” has become a political one, suggesting large herds of innocent and bewildered people requiring urgent international assistance, whereas “exile” carries with it, I think, a touch of solitude and spirituality. (Said 2000: 181)

This quote has three visible merits: first, it relates the displacement of people to political and historical categories; second, it shows how displacements can be both individual and collective; and third, it distinguished between the status of exiles, refugees, expatriates, and migrant workers. In this section we will deal with each of these topics and categories, as well as with one not mentioned by Said but equally important, the diaspora.

Furthermore, a historical example can be helpful to understand the complexity of global human movement. Janet L. Abu-Lughod claims that Palestinians are, since the 1948 Nakba, ‘exiles at home’, rather than refugees. In her words:

refugee status is a temporary transition state between one place of settlement and another and a temporary phenomenon affecting only the cohort that actually experiences the act of displacement. Exile to the Palestinians, however, is neither transitional nor transitory; it is an inherited state (Abu-Lughod 1988: 63).

When Abu-Lughod wrote that statement, she was referring to the fact that even those Palestinians that had not been ethnically cleansed in 1947-49 and had managed to stay within historic Palestine, lived under occupation and under the constant threat of house demolition and dispossession. Since October 2023, when Israel launched a full-scale war

against the Gaza Strip, about 1.9 million people had been forcefully displaced due to the invasion (UNRWA 2024), and the situation has only worsened in the first few months of 2024.

The point made by Abu-Lughod is that, even before the current genocide in Palestine, most Palestinian nationals born in the last 76 years had been born away from their homeland, as it was already occupied by the State of Israel³. So, what would distinguish their condition from other migrants? Walden Bello warns that “migrants are not obsessed nomads seeking the emerald cities... they are refugees fleeing the wasteland that has been created by the economic equivalent of scorched earth strategy” (Cited in Naficy 1999: 194). However, this supposes an oversimplification of two completely different categories and forces us to problematise the concept of a refugee.

The United Nations General Assembly adopted in 1948 the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, whose Article 14 recognises the right of people to seek asylum from persecution in other countries. In 1951, a Refugee Convention was held in Geneva, in order to build upon the statements in Article 14 of the 1948 *Declaration*. In Article 1 of the 1951 Convention, it is stated that the refugee status applies to any person who

owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it (UNHCR 1951).

The Convention clearly states the possible reasons for leaving the country but says nothing about the manner in which the refugees find themselves out of it. It does however place special emphasis on their inability to return to their place of origin (Goodwin-Gill

³ In one recent film, *Hemshej* (Julieta Lande, 2023), the director and protagonist accidentally finds out that the money she and her Jewish classmates had been sending since elementary school for “planting trees in Israel”, were actually funding the creation of forests where Palestinian dwellings had been bulldozed by the Israeli government. This is a powerful moment of realisation in the film, where everything she was taught and stood for was violently shaken and disputed.

2014: 38). They may or may not have been forced to flee the country, but they are certain to be forced to remain away.

Thus, the UNHCR *Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees* (1951) stipulates that the first important distinction regarding the status of displaced individuals is whether they are forced into that situation or are voluntarily and transitorily away from their homeland⁴. But from all we have discussed so far, such broad definition would not differentiate between exiles and refugees. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees elaborates on the definition when it distinguishes between refugees and migrants:

Refugees are persons fleeing armed conflict or persecution (...) Their situation is often so perilous and intolerable that they cross national borders to seek safety in nearby countries, and thus become internationally recognized as "refugees" with access to assistance from States, UNHCR, and other organizations (...) Migrants choose to move not because of a direct threat of persecution or death, but mainly to improve their lives by finding work, or in some cases for education, family reunion, or other reasons. Unlike refugees who cannot safely return home, migrants face no such impediment to return. If they choose to return home, they will continue to receive the protection of their government (Edwards 2015).

These definitions, more precise than the 1951 ones, are still oversimplifications of a complex reality. And furthermore, where does this leave exiles? They are people who, in some cases, did not face risk of death if they stayed. What they were exposed to was censorship, incarceration, harassment and persecution, and (in the case of artists) an impossibility to pursue an artistic career. In section 1.3.2, we will see the traumatic impact exile has on people at length. An impact that the definitions just quoted do not capture in its entirety.

An alternative interpretation of the international law is proposed by Guy Goodwin-Gill:

⁴ It should be mentioned that Iran did not actively participate in the 1951 Convention, but instead was represented by observers (UNHCR 1951: 6).

The refugee must be 'outside' his or her country of origin and having crossed an international frontier is an intrinsic part of the quality of refugee, understood in the international legal sense. However, it is not necessary to have fled by reason of fear of persecution, or even actually to have been persecuted. (Goodwin-Gill 2014: 38).

Goodwin-Gill is right in pointing out that, as long as we do not look into the reasons one has for crossing the boundaries of one's country, the status of refugees, migrants, and exiles is indistinguishable. But as Anna Triandafyllidou recognises,

It is not simple to distinguish between voluntary and forced migration, and hence, to neatly categorise migrants and asylum seekers. Motivations of international movement are mixed, and a variety of factors play a role within them including efforts to improve one's economic situation and livelihood and the search for protection in case of war, insecurity, or outright persecution (...) even refugees fleeing persecution maintain a certain degree of agency (...) nonetheless, this does not mean that their migration is voluntary (Triandafyllidou 2016: 18)

Liza Schuster further develops this observation, when she proposes to "think of migration as a continuum" (Schuster 2016: 298) between the purely forced migrants and the completely free ones. Schuster used Afghani immigrants and refugees as an example to show how mixed motivations and blurred situations that exist on the ground are difficult to codify and put into neat boxes of migration and asylum-seeking policies conceived in Europe and North America.

So, once we have admitted the lack of a clear-cut border between the different categories in terms of reasons for leaving, the possibilities of return jump to the foreground as definitive factors. As Stuart Hall points out, "when people in exile choose to leave, they might never be able to go back home, they may never see their hometown again, and they may live as a stranger for the rest of their lives" (1987: 44). This quote is crucial for our investigation, because Hall highlights a fact that cannot be ignored: While the decision of leaving is many times personal and individual (one might say, voluntary), the ability to

return is more often than not decided by factors migrants and exiles cannot control. Such factors are mostly political and historical.

Maggie O'Neil and Tony Spybey point to some historical factors that make people migrate:

In global terms, war, ethnic cleansing, economic migration, natural disasters and environmental catastrophes have shaped the contours of what has come to be known as the 'refugee problem' or 'refugee crisis'. Forced migration reflects global conflict and socio-economic and political crises." (O'Neill and Spybey 2003: 7).

These situations have become ever more common from the 1980s on, thanks again to the specific historical processes of our times. These can be summarised under the notion of 'neoliberalisation of capitalism' (Wacquant 2012). Loïc Wacquant defines the modern neoliberal state, which has been in place for the last 40 years, as "an articulation of state, market and citizenship that harnesses the first to impose the stamp of the second onto the third" (Wacquant 2012: 66). The states have become the militant wing of the 'free market', and entire populations have been increasingly marginalised just because they do not fit in the market scheme decided by a handful of corporate behemoths. This state of things has converted the whole world into a place prone to displacements of populations and forced migrations. It is no surprise, then, that Holocaust survivor, Rabbi Hugo Gryn, described the 20th century as "an extraordinary period of movement and upheaval (...) [that] will be known not only as a century of great wars, but as the century of the refugee" (quoted in Kushner and Knox 1999: 1).

Recent Iranian history is the perfect example of how political circumstances influence the movement of populations across borders. Migratory flows have not been constant, but mirror dramatically the historical events inside the country. There have been four main migratory waves in the last fifty years: The first one went from 1978 to 1988, with a peak in 1984 (Vahabi 2016: 476). At first, it was comprised mostly of royalists, but after the Islamic Revolution in 1979 it became a massive movement of different kinds of people, although mostly from the middle classes. In 1984, the government created the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (MCIG), the state organism in charge of censoring films and other art

forms. Regarding the second wave Vahabi points out, “with the end of the war against Iraq, in 1988, and the death of Khomeini in 1989, reasons for migrating diversified, becoming social, intellectual and cultural” (2016: 477). The third wave occurred during the presidency of Mohammad Khatami, with a peak right after the riots at the University of Tehran, in the summer of 1999 (BBC 2010). This migration is characterised by being mainly for economic reasons (Kelly 2017), and not political persecution, which somewhat dwindled during these years. However, the latest migration wave, which started around 2009 and is ongoing, is “largely linked to the protest movement of June 2009 which was severely reprimanded by the regime who attacked progressive forces from the civil society” (Vahabi 2016: 480). This movement was barely a reaction to the heavy censorship imposed by the regime of Ahmadinejad (Atwood 2012: 39). Despite the departure of Ahmadinejad from power, the repression continues to this day. For a measure of the extent reached by censorship in contemporary Iran, it is useful to point out that Reporters Without Borders currently rank Iran in the position 177 out of 180 countries regarding freedom of speech inside the country (RSF 2023). Only Vietnam, China, and North Korea have lower scores.

It is telling that Ziba Mir-Hosseini (2001) recognises the same milestones when discussing the relationship between Iranian cinema and the state. She also makes an interesting claim: “In the absence of a free press, cinema came to provide a kind of social critique” (Mir-Hosseini 2001). In effect, film has the advantage of not having to necessarily ‘tell the truth’ or ‘speak bluntly’. One of the best examples of this are the films in which Jafar Panahi casted children as the main protagonists (e.g. *The White Balloon*, 1995, and *The Mirror*, 1997). These films dealt with grown-up problems, but from a detached, highly metaphorical perspective, so as to avoid catching the attention of the MCIG.

Other filmmakers preferred not to be limited by censorship and chose freedom to tell their stories above the possibility to film in Iran. As a consequence, a diaspora of Iranian artists in exile slowly formed in different parts of the world during the last forty years. This is because people tend to go, when they have the opportunity to choose, where they have contacts. Also, and equally importantly, they tend to go where they can speak their own language (See section 1.3.2). The word ‘diaspora’ implies the inclusion of individuals from different social groups, occupations, social classes, religions, political views, age brackets and interests into a single category defined solely by the country they have collectively

abandoned. This is often accompanied by a sense of belonging, a notion of being among a group of people that even in their heterogeneity represent a nation, and it is in this sense that Hamid Naficy distinguishes between 'diasporic films' and 'exilic' ones:

diasporic movements can be classified according to their motivating factors. Like the exiles, people in diaspora have an identity in their homeland before their departure, and their diasporic identity is constructed in resonance with this prior identity. However, unlike the exile, which may be individualistic or collective, diaspora is necessarily collective, in both its origination and its destination. (Naficy 2001: 14)

Naficy argues that, as a result, diasporic filmmakers tend to be less centred than exiles on their relationship with the homeland, and more on the craft itself, as true representatives of what Iranian film is. As we will see later (section 1.3.3) this does not imply that diasporic filmmakers have more success or reach better results than exiled filmmakers. At the same time (again, we will see this in section 1.3.3), exiled filmmakers are not necessarily self-referencing, but rather have a wide array of topics to base their films.

I would like to end by citing Hamid Naficy again, who summarises the discussions in this section: "Diaspora, exile, and ethnicity are not steady states; rather, they are fluid processes that under certain circumstances may transform into one another and beyond" (2001: 17). Those states are constructed by oneself just as they are constructed by others (those who stayed in the homeland, and those who already lived in the host country), and even political and historical circumstances.

1.3.2 Exile and creativity: Film and filmmakers in exile.

As contemporary Iranian Artist, Shirin Neshat, explains,

We are fighting two battles on different grounds, being critical of the West; the perception of the West about our identity, about the image that is constructed about us, about our women, our politics, our religion, the other battle is our regime, our government (...) My art became slightly more critical, my knife became sharper, and I fell into a life of exile. (Neshat 2010).

Exiles are shaped by their condition just as their creative practice is, and this has to do not only with the new setting in which they develop their career, but with their unavoidable connection to the homeland. A word I would use to describe the people I interviewed when making *Colours of Exile* is 'nostalgic', and this seems to be the common currency among exiles. Halleh Ghorashi, for instance, testifies: "Once in exile, I felt as if I had entered an empty space where neither present nor future mattered; the only thing that mattered was the past" (2001: 3). The exile is deprived of the homeland, the setting of times past, regardless of whether those times had been happy or not. The attachment to one's place of origin is enormous, and so is the need to bridge the distance between oneself and the homeland. As Nancy Berg explains, the loss of home creates the desire to regain it, whether through return or recollection. (Berg 1996: 4).

Nostalgia is inevitable and omnipresent, but it is seen as one of the lesser harmful consequences of exile. In the next few paragraphs, I will turn my attention to the different ways in which exile affects the lives and work of those who have experienced it.

The main hindrances most migrants encounter when relocating abroad are the language barrier, as well as differences regarding the ethical framework and traditions. We have already discussed the failure of 'assimilation' policies that ignore these important differences. This failure leads to different economic, mental, social, and even cultural complications for both the immigrant and the target society. Hence, many immigrants experience a deep sense of loss and nostalgia. As a result, they grapple with the thought of going back to their home country. Ebrahim Golestan, an author and filmmaker who left his native Iran for the UK in 1978, offers an exemplary situation. In my interview with him,

Golestan tried hard to pretend that immigration was meaningless to him and reiterated that he does not see himself as a person in exile. He highlighted the freedom he enjoyed expressing himself, and the recognition of others. But a different story emerged when a close friend of his, Mahdi Yazdani Khoram, was interviewed for a documentary. He told the director that Golestan would often use Google Maps to look up certain locations in Iran, just to revisit some childhood memories. Even though the artists in exile have created a new life for them, they always remain attached to the homeland in some way or another.

A similar story is that of Jafar Panahi, who spoke to an interviewer after the Fajr festival in 2007:

I want everybody to know that we are the sand at the bottom of the stream. We stay where we are and those who have violently seized our dwelling and think that they have thrown us into exile are doomed to go away like the stream, they too will flow away. The secret of our success is that we have not severed our connection with this land and the people who live in it (Rahbaran 2012: 6).

These are brave words, and one would expect the person who said them to be well prepared for the nuisances of censorship and filming in Iran. And in a way he is, considering he continues to find ways to make films to this day (see his *No Bears*, 2022, for an excellent example of this). But as he admitted to Sreemoyee Singh, the director of *And, Toward Happy Alleys* (2023), when the dictatorship prohibited him to make films, he entertained the thought of taking his own life. This does not diminish Panahi's bravery but rather highlights the fact that one cannot be oblivious neither to censorship nor to exile. Both have deep consequences in one's life and work. This is why Hamid Naficy (2001) considers all films created in exile to contain signs and symbols of the filmmaker's past life and memories, even when they did not intend to put them there. In the same interview, Panahi explains this: "Through our films we see, show and process the problems in our society. However, where these films lead us – that we cannot know" (Rahbaran 2012: 5).

One particular problem about continuing to make films under an oppressive regime is self-censorship. That is, when filmmakers tend to make 'tame' or senseless films just to please censors and not be banned. As Argentinian director Fernando Solanas says:

the apparent lack of logic in the repression merely serves to make it more effective: self-repression and self-censorship are the most efficient policemen. Since everyone understands the unwritten rules of the game, nobody — unless they wanted to commit suicide — would dream of making a film which denounced the situation in the country (Solanas 1980: 25).

He is describing the situation in his country during the 1976-1983 dictatorship, when making a forbidden film equalled suicide, and making permitted films was almost collaborating with the military regime. The only option serious filmmakers had was to go into exile, which brought a whole array of problems of its own.

People who leave their homeland put their identity at risk. There is always some loss involved, uncertainty as to the new cultural patterns and society, and a forced change of life. Hamid Naficy clearly identifies these issues: “The migrant community wants to adapt the exiles into its cultural and social norms, immigrant identity is challenged by this desire and migrants face the loss of emotional, security and traditional habits.” (1993: 150).

In his novel *A Thousand Rooms of Dream and Fear*, Afghan writer and filmmaker Atiq Rahimi vividly conveys the experience of someone forced to begin life again in exile. William Kingsbury comments: “Rahimi pays particular attention to the anguish and confusion caused by the loss of one’s sense of personal identity. It is also clear that Rahimi is similarly interested in the aspects of such a loss; in particular, the opportunity for re-examining inherited understandings about who we are.” (Kingsbury 2017: 1).

Exiles suffer particularly the loss of their language. Each individual’s experience of the world is constructed primarily through language, and both the impossibility of speaking one’s own language and the need to speak the local one of the host countries, are often traumatic. As Magda Stroinska (2003) points out, language can impact human beings from birth and childhood and shape their identity. She argues that the “language or languages with which we grow up are the factory in identity construction. They take an active part in shaping our individual vision of the world and are the medium of our interaction with people around us” (Stroinska 2003: 95). One could say, as Irish writer Iain Crichton Smith implies, that language makes one’s life: “I imagine those who lose their language dying in

the same way as the language dies, spiritless, without pride” (cited in Sinclair 1996: 137). In summary, as one scholar puts it, “given that individuals often have strong emotional attachment to their native languages or dialects, being exiled from one’s native language may be psychologically devastating” (Oha 2008: 82).

On the other hand, acquiring a language can be a way of being closer to new people. In the already mentioned documentary *And, Toward Happy Alleys*, young director Sreemoyee Singh narrates how she struggled to learn Persian in order to better understand the films she loved, those of Abbas Kiarostami, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, and others. In one particularly powerful scene of the film, she sings to a group of men who look mesmerised at both her voice and the fact that she sings, as Iranian women are not allowed to sing in public since the Islamic Revolution. This fact is telling because, as we have already seen, to not be able to communicate in one’s own language can have devastating effects on an individual. In this sense, not being able to sing in one’s language is a hugely oppressive form of internal exile. I will return to this idea in section 1.3.4.

My own experience confirms the view of the scholars and artists cited here, as I am forced to write this thesis in a language that I do not fully feel my own. The constant exercise of perhaps thinking in one language, and communicating in another, causes permanent duplicity in the immigrant’s expression and manner. This duplicity often leads to identity problems in the immigrant. As Hurtado and others argue, “shifts in reference groups [after relocation into a different country] have an outcome in social comparisons that either promote acceptance of devalued social categorizations or in feelings of discontent about one’s social identity” (Hurtado et al. 1994: 148). This means that, in the process of getting adjusted to the new experience and/or assimilated into the new society, migrants get further away from their previous culture until they move completely out of it to resolve this identity crisis. Many exiles try hard to keep in touch with their previous identity, which withdrawal is quite painful. However, the necessities of daily life abroad makes them try to adapt, drawing further away from their cultural roots, a process that almost invariably leads to identity crisis. In the words of Hamid Naficy, “people in exile belong to nowhere, they are here and there; they are not themselves anymore; they pretend to be a new person” (Naficy 1993: 11). And while I do agree as to the culture shock produced in exiles, I see this crisis more as a (rather painful) process of relational identity

construction rather than a complete loss of identity. However, as Stroinska points out, “the individual’s identity and language are strongly related and loss of one’s language could be seen as a loss of identity” (Stroinska 2003: 95). This does not mean it is a loss of identity, just that it *appears* so.

One scholar unravels how our sense of place and identity is realised as we move through a myriad of languages, worlds and histories. He defines it as follows:

Language is not primarily a means of communication; it is, above all, a means of cultural construction in which our very selves and sense are constituted (...) those who choose and those who have to or are forced to start a new life in a new place must learn and get into the habit of existing between different worlds, histories and memories, their identity is going to be challenged by a new life, we all know that there are great difficulty and impossibility when exile happens and when someone’s identity goes at risk (Chambers 1994: 22).

As we have already seen, exile is inexorably tied to the homeland and to the possibility of return. However, the frustrating elusiveness of return makes it more potent. Moreover, it is not just a matter of physically going back to the homeland but, as Salman Rushdie claimed, it is “a dream of a glorious return” (Cited in Naficy 1993: 17). This has been a particularly recurrent theme in the interviews I made for *Colours of Exile*. The feeling of homesickness varies for each person, as well as the form in which they express it, however one can identify a series of shared effects. In exile people tend to miss everything from their previous life, even the smallest things that they had not previously paid much attention to, or did not consciously think about before. Entering a new country with unfamiliar routines, culture, and behaviour patterns, is trying. But it is also rewarding in its own right, as is proven by the large number of works of art produced by artists in exile. Regarding cinema, one must not look further than the extraordinary films Andrei Tarkovsky made as an asylum seeker out of Russia, *Nostalghia* (1983) and *The Sacrifice* (1986).

Being in exile always has advantages and disadvantages. Despite leaving the homeland, and living in a new place as a stranger, leaving all memories behind and having to build new memories in a new place, exile can also have advantages for filmmakers or

writers. It can make them become more creative as they have to work more intensively, harder and creatively, as a foreigner in a new place.

There is a great example, which worth examining here about creativity in exile, and that is Israeli author, Aharon Applefeld, who achieved tremendous creative success and international acclaim in the 57 years following displacement. He was driven away from home in 1941 at the age of eight and a half. He states:

What does a child of eight and a half remember? Almost nothing, but miraculously, that almost nothing has nourished me for years. Not a day passes when I'm not at home. In my adopted country of Israel, I have written thirty books that draw directly or indirectly upon the (Ukrainian) village of my childhood, whose name is found only on ordnance maps. That 'almost nothing' is the well from which I draw and draw, and there seems that there is no end to its waters (cited in Lumsden 1999: 36).

His main source of inspiration were the traumatic events related to his exile, which happened when he was barely eight and a half years old, and he is not alone in that, as many artists draw on their own exile when making art. This is exactly what Arash Riahi did for his documentary film *Exile family movie* (2005), although, as he admits in the film, he did not intend to make a film out of the images he captured. They were filmed primarily for personal and family archive. At some point, however, Riahi understood that his own experiences were shared by others enduring displacement, so he decided to make a film for a wider audience.

Similarly, I have resorted to old footage from my own archives in the making of *Colours of Exile*. Originally, I had no intentions of including them in the film, as they were only intended to be filmed for family purposes, and I was under the impression that they would be hardly interesting for anyone outside my family. However, upon reviewing the footage, I understood that there are more there than just family memories. There are recordings of a long-lost past, of all the things I, and many others as well, have left behind when going into exile. Among this found-footage, there is a recording of myself directing a short film, twenty years ago, which are useful for comparing back-to-back with my current situation. Also, hidden within a Mini Dv I had converted to digital, there was a twenty-

minute videotape shot by my brothers, in which we are all happily sitting and talking, oblivious to what the future would bring. Not knowing that moments like those would never happen again, because of the political situation in the country and our diverging paths in life. That recorded moment was much more than a happy memory for us, when seen from the present it becomes a tell-tale of the historical evolution of Iran. I believe this footage has the power of adding more layers to the film, as well as conveying the deep meanings which I wanted to transmit to the audience.

This inclusion of archive footage features prominently in the work of Iranian artist and filmmaker based in Los Angeles Gelare Koshgozaran. In 2021 she made a short film titled *Memories of Loitering*, in which she uses footage from the past in Iran as well as the present in the United States. The main topic of the short film is a phone conversation she had with her grandmother, who still lived in Tehran. As she grew old and lost her memory and grasp of reality, she became repetitive when asking questions such as “when are you coming home” or “when are you going to come visit grandma”, which are almost impossible things for an exile. In a recent interview with the artist, she explains that “For many of us, ‘home’ is inseparable from violence, and is very much formed by it. My projects often begin with the sense of recognising a sense of home in situations and sites of violence” (Something Curated, 2023).

Another visual artist that we have mentioned, Shirin Neshat, has built her latest exhibition, *The Fury*, around the theme of separation but it also refers to how such experiences are even worse when you are a woman.

Neshat’s photographs and video installations “reference female political prisoners in the Islamic Republic’s regime in Iran. Subjected to torture, sexual assault, and rape while imprisoned, many of these women commit suicide after being released” (Saul, 2023). This is an important topic and cannot be overlooked when describing the impact of exile on people. To paraphrase the title of the latest documentary film by Mina Keshavarz, the experience of women in exile can be accurately described as *The Art of Living in Danger* (2020).

An Iranian woman living in the Netherlands, Halleh Ghorashi, has extensively researched the situation of Iranian women in exile, specifically in the Netherlands and Los

Angeles, California. Her objective was to describe how Iranian women position themselves in the countries they live in at present, in an effort to understand how these women's position differ from one country to the other. Her findings showed that Iranian women activists tended to mingle better in the United States than in the Netherlands (Ghorashi 2003: 63), and the experiences were completely differences in the two countries:

Once in a new country, all the women interviewed started to build a new life. These women, who were robbed of their future in their homeland, hoped to build a better life and a secure future in their new country. The stories of the past of these women were, in general, quite similar. The years of temporary freedom between 1979-1981 were narrated as years of empowerment and high ideals. Also, the years of suppression after 1981 were narrated as years of horror and disempowerment. The impression the stories left behind was that the power of politics of those years in Iran was so dominant that it overshadowed the differences among the women. In spite of the differences in their particular experiences, they were all as easily overwhelmed by the power of freedom as they were soon enough harshly disillusioned by the power of suppression (Ghorashi 2003: 66).

During Ghorashi's research, she discovered Iranian women were subjected to underestimation and disparagement by males in the Netherlands. Women "who because of their political activism had enjoyed a prestigious status as intellectuals in Iran, felt that they were treated here as if they were stupid and backward" (Ghorashi 1997: 292). As Haideh Moghissi points out, "displacement and distance from one's native land, and the sense of banishment from ahistorical location, heritage and culture associated with diasporic existence, often provide the necessary ingredients to perpetuate gender power structures and patriarchal relations and ideologies" (Moghissi 1999: 207). There is considerable prejudice, mostly in European countries, against the position of women in Iran, which is thought of as much worse than it actually is. As a result, they felt frustrated and excluded (Ghorashi 1997: 293). One woman named Sara expresses this discrimination bitterly, when she says:

Whatever I do, I remain a foreigner here. Maybe I thought five years ago like: 'Ah, I will remain a foreigner all my life here, they will never let us

inside their circles'. But now I do not want to become Dutch. I am happy that I have become so conscious about myself. I realise now that I am a person who has travelled and migrated and has come here and stayed. But the main reason that I want to go to Iran is that I cannot forget about the past. Unfortunately, I cannot put it in a closet and lock it. When I smell a flower, then tears rush into my eyes. I remember the past, but a past that does not exist anymore. I see that there is no yard, no flowerpot, no space to live, but I want to be there. My existence relates to there. (Ghorashi 2003: 69).

As we will see in Chapter 2.6, the impossibility of "locking the past inside a closet" is addressed in *Colours of Exile* in a poetic way, as the protagonist carries a TV box around which contains memories of his past.

1.3.3 Exile and its relationship with filmmaking

When Victor Hugo called exile a “long dream of home” (in Simpson 1995: 1), he alluded to the paradox of living in two places: there, and here. His collected works in English translation, published under the title of *The Essential Victor Hugo* (2004), divide his writings into three parts: Before the exile, during the exile, and after the exile. This editorial choice goes to show just how deep a rift in one’s life is produced by the condition of exile. In this section I will explore the impact of exile on the works and lives of artists, especially filmmakers.

Regarding this impact, Iranian filmmaker Bahman Ghobadi wrote in 2021 a now famous letter to the Academy, describing at first his reasons (and many others’) for leaving Iran:

I – Bahman Ghobadi – as a member of Oscar academy – would like to address the concern of many filmmakers around the world, including me. We are filmmakers away from our home countries while we are still identified based on the countries we come from. I as an Iranian cannot live in my own country because of the Islamic regime of Iran. I have to live in exile just because I demanded my rights and freedom of speech. This is the case for many filmmakers around the world; these people cannot return to their home countries for different reasons and they have no other choice but to live in foreign countries (Pedersen and Tapp 2021).

Ghobadi mentions the difficult situations of Jafar Panahi and Mohammad Rasoulof and shows that, along with the political and cultural problems outlined in the previous sections, there are a series of particular hurdles that have to do with the specificities of the film industry. Such specificities put him in an uncomfortable and paradoxical place, as he explains:

Despite being amember of Oscar Academy, due to my current condition, countries such as Iran and Turkey will not introduce me as their representatives (...) The only thing I can do is to hope that a government will appreciate my art and introduce it to the academy (...).

I am sure that there are other filmmakers who have to suffer like me. Therefore, it would be great if we could have one representative from exiled artists (...) There could be a refugee team of filmmakers; they can have their works viewed by a jury and eventually one movie can be chosen from the refugee team. This not only provides a great opportunity for these filmmakers to have their works watched on an international level, but also raises awareness about their condition and the reasons why they are not living in their native countries. Such artists can gain a lot of publicity, which will provide them with more opportunities and financial support (Pedersen and Tapp 2021).

Ghobadi's request for a 'refugee team' to compete for awards and in festivals seems very appropriate, considering the large number of filmmakers in his position. Some of them we have already mentioned, and some will be discussed in this section. Although answering this question exceeds the aims of this thesis, one could wonder how representative of 'Iranian cinema' are the films produced in the country, conceived under strict censorship and self-censorship, and why would cinema produced outside the borders by Iranian exiles be considered any different from them. Of course, exile filmmakers are not completely helpless and have often found ways to work around the limitations of exile (the example of Tarkovsky is again helpful here), but the limitations still exist.

It is useful to recall, as Doris Berger (2016) rightly points out, that the film industry as a whole is extremely indebted to exiles and émigrés. Prior to the influx of refugees from Nazi-occupied Europe, there had been two waves of immigration that had an effect on the American movie business. Between 1880s and 1920s, around two million Jewish immigrants arrived in the US. The American film industry was largely founded by this generation. Most of the future studio moguls were of Eastern and Central European Jewish descent: Adolph Zukor (Paramount) and William Fox (Fox) from Hungary, Louis B. Mayer (MGM) from Russia, the Warner brothers from Poland, and Carl Laemmle (Universal) from Germany (Berger 2016: 81).

Critics around the world have praised the work of people in exile. And indeed, some filmmakers thrived abroad, like the already mentioned Andrei Tarkovsky, who despite being a political exile, managed to receive funding to make very successful films in his Italian exile.

Another case is that of Ana Lily Amirpour, who received incredible praise for her debut feature film, *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (2014). This film's language is Persian, but it was produced in the United States, and she herself is a migrant but not an exile, as she was born in the United Kingdom. Her film then is hard to categorise, especially taking into account expanded conceptions of exile such as that of Abu-Lughod. Despite her life experience in the United States, she made the conscious choice to connect with her Iranian origins (Cf. Abu-Lughod 1988 and its discussion above).

A different situation is that of Jonas Mekas, the filmmaker and poet who left his native Lithuania in 1944, in the midst of the Second World War. Mekas and his brother had to spend four years in European camps for displaced persons before landing in the United States. Twenty-seven years later, when he was able to return, something most exiles only dream about, he filmed his acclaimed (and justly so) *Reminiscences of a Voyage to Lithuania* (1972). He explained his feelings of fragmentation in the following manner:

Everything that I believed in shook to the foundations, all my idealism, and my faith in the goodness of man and progress of man, all was shattered. Somehow, I managed to keep myself together. But really, I wasn't one piece any longer; I was one thousand painful pieces... and I wasn't surprised when, upon my arrival in New York, I found others who as I felt. There were poets, and filmmakers, and painters, people who were also walking like one thousand painful pieces (quoted in Naficy 2001:12).

It is now commonplace to celebrate the merits of 'Accented Cinema' (Naficy 2001; 2002), for example the stunning films by Amir Naderi *Manhattan by Numbers* (1993) and *A, B, C... Manhattan* (1997), but as Hamid Naficy admits, it is "by no means an established or cohesive cinema" (Naficy 2002: 16) and it is all too common to forget the people who were not so fortunate or simply could not adapt to filming in host countries. One must not forget the struggle and pain that are contained in the production of these films.

Indeed, working in strange countries and under trying conditions as an exilic filmmaker is not easy. This is why Shohini Chaudhuri uses the category "cinema of constraints" (2020), when referring to the work of Arab filmmakers especially in exile. Chaudhuri explains that, while most scholarship deals exclusively with problems relating to

censorship, other constraints should be considered as equally imposing. Rising costs of filming, for instance, are a pressing issue, as most filmmakers write their own scripts, and they take multiple roles in their project so they can reduce costs (Chaudhuri 2020: 5).

Due to the issues just mentioned, it is not uncommon for filmmaker exiles to not be able to make films for several years. As an example, Iranian director Parviz Sayyad migrated to the United States shortly after the 1979 Revolution and became somewhat well-known for his acting career. Once he was established, he could make his first film, *The Mission* (1983). Four years later, he was able to film and release his second film, *Checkpoint* (1987). This happened even though he was already part of the filmmaking industry of the country. The already mentioned Amir Naderi, although he moved to the United States in 1986, only managed to release his first film in exile seven years later.

Naficy is right in pointing out that each individual experience can vary greatly. Some filmmakers claim to not have experienced the hindrances others face daily. Some of them even consider themselves as something else than an immigrant, like Mehdi Charef: “I don’t have a desire to be labelled immigrant filmmaker, I’m a filmmaker, that’s all” (cited in Naficy 2001: 37), or Merzak Allouache who has said: “I’m a filmmaker in transit, not an émigré. A filmmaker, who wants to make films where they can be made. My own dream is to say that I’m someone who just makes films” (cited in Naficy 2001: 37). Tunisian filmmaker Moufida Talati says: “I have never had any interference from French producers. There is a sense of debt, the French need to see what the people they colonized can do, what our culture is like.” It should be pointed out that what Talati acknowledges as ‘debt’ is known in social sciences as ‘white guilt’ (Swim and Miller 1999) and is considered a by-product of colonialism. It is common for filmmakers to see their creativity impaired by the pressures of exile. In one of our regular conversations, Mohsen Makhmalbaf reflected:

while I’m here in the UK or some other European countries, I hardly write anything, but as soon as I travel to countries such as Afghanistan or Armenia, I write many things, which can be due to the closeness of society and culture of those countries to the culture that I come from, and I am familiar with (personal communication).

Makhmalbaf, who has a deep understanding of the traditions and culture of his society, made films such as *Hello Cinema* (1995), *A moment of Innocence* (1996), and *Gabbeh* (1996), in his native Iran that introduced him to the world. However, when he left his country, he was unable to keep the common culture and language and the high quality of scenes in his works because he simply was not at his home anymore. The new country's traditions vary more than he could have imagined, and the upheaval of paradigm shift affects his ideology, a process which is visible in his films. It may be argued that, despite having made several films in exile, these have not found the same reception as his previous work had among viewers. As Elżbieta Wiącek (2020) explains, "not all the consequences of internationalisation are positive – to be successful in a transnational environment he has to face much larger competition and the capitalist market" (2020: 80).

The opposite case, of a filmmaker who has thrived and found an audience and good critiques in the exile, is that of Sohrab Shahid-Saless, a well-known filmmaker whose films were routinely censored by state officials in Iran. He exiled himself in Germany as a result. There, he was very prolific, directing 13 feature length films during his two decades in Germany (Naficy 2002: 26). His first film in Germany (and third one in his career), *Far From Home* (1975), was developed a short time after arriving in the country and was about the lives of migrant Turkish workers in Germany. Shahid-Saless was integrated into German society as an artist, becoming a part of the local cultural scene, but this does not mean everything was easy for him. He had learnt German as a student in Vienna (Langford, 2016), so that did not suppose an obstacle for him, and he also had a knowledge of life in Europe. Even then, one of his closest friends, Farshad Zahedi, tells about him that

Sohrab would start constantly writing just as he got up every day. After finishing his writing, he would call different companies to perform his works. He took some letters from the companies containing their approval to work for them and make that film. Then he would take the letter to the department of employment to get permission and deliver it to the residential department afterwards. It was a disaster! The German society at that time, that is, both artistic and non-artistic society, intellectuals and non-intellectuals, was not receptive. The truth is that Sohrab Shahid-Saless

had problems with even renting somewhere to live because he was a foreigner (Cited in Safarian 2017)

As a filmmaker in exile it is not easy to adapt to the local film industry, which has certain expectations about the type of cinema Middle Easterns should be making:

When Middle Eastern art is brought to the West, it is usually viewed under the lens of cultural otherness, including stereotypes of Islam and Arabs such as oppressed and victimised women (...) This affects the narratives and images that get endorsed for public circulation. The appeal of stories about Islamic terrorism means there is less interest in other topics, which distorts public perceptions and serves political agendas (Chaudhuri 2020: 6).

Financial instability makes it very unlikely that new exiles, especially young ones, have time to work on their own films. The costs of living forces exiles to work other jobs in order to survive. In this sense, one can understand the difference in production cost between cinema and other forms of art. My short film *The Postman* (2018) is illustrative in this sense. It tells the story of an Iranian poet who emigrated to the UK and works as a postal worker. He claims to enjoy the job, since it lets him exercise daily, and it also helps him with his poetry. The protagonist writes wherever and whenever, he just needs his mind, a pen, and a paper. Evidently, producing a film needs much more than that.

On the other hand, Linda Nochlin argues that once in exile, visual artists seem to be in a better position than writers, as the visual world loses less in translation. In her own words,

For the writers, exile and the loss of native language may be devastating, depriving the subject of access to the living world (...) for artists, on the whole, exile, at least insofar as the work is concerned, seems to be less traumatic. While some art is, indeed, site specific, visual language, on the whole, is far more transportable than the verbal kind (Nochlin 1996: 317).

It is clear that the exile situation is challenging for everyone, even when the nature of such challenges varies from person to person and from career to career. Both writers and

(audio)visual artists have to endure additional difficulties when they are in exile, compared to artists who are allowed to stay in their home country. Which is not to say that those who stay enjoy any privileges. In the following section, I will address the issue of what happens to artists who are allowed to stay in their homeland but under the threat of censorship or jail if they so much as shoot a film or write something prohibited to them by the state. But before that, I want to look into another problem faced by exile artists regarding creativity: the limited (or not) topics about which they are expected to make films.

For once, the type of stories filmmakers tell whilst in exile can be hugely affected by the filmmaker's situation, and their mood. It is also true that every audience has their own cultural patterns, so that spectators in a certain country expect films from their country to belong to certain genres or speak of certain topics. But, what about exilic filmmakers? We have seen that Said considered exile as a "discontinuous state of being" (2000: 177), meaning that people in exile are a strange mixture of different cultures, as well as having a culture of their own. But how would they communicate with local audiences? Are the exilic filmmakers trying to make films about their original culture? Are they accepted as filmmakers in the exile? How does it feel writing in or for a second language?

Perhaps the person who has studied this topic the most is Hamid Naficy, who distinguishes six thematic categories in which most exile films fall. One thing Naficy points out is the general difficulty to appeal to mainstream audiences (Naficy 2001: 19), which is attributed to the cultural differences with the local community.

The first category is the 'cinema of denial', "physically located in exile, it was mentally situated at home, and it largely disavowed the fact of exile" (Naficy 2002: 27). The best example of this is *The Mission*, by Parviz Sayyad. While it takes place in the United States, it is largely concerned with the politics of Iran. A second category is the 'cinema of panic and pursuit' (Naficy 2002: 27), and its main topics are persecution or stalking of the main characters. *The Mission* is also a valid example of this, and so is Hassan Ildari's *Face of the Enemy* (1989). The third category is 'cinema of transition', and focuses on characters who try to obtain passports, visas and train tickets to either escape their home country or get into a third country. In this case, it is interesting to see that Naficy's categories stand the test of time, as this is exactly the case of the fictitious film Jafar Panahi's character films in his recent *No Bears* (2022). The fourth category, 'liminal cinema', "was both physically and

mentally located in the host country and its narrative was centred on the life and clash of cultures in exile" (Naficy 2002: 28). Again, the already mentioned video installations of Shirin Neshat definitely fall into this category. Naficy reserves the fifth category, 'transnational cinema', for Iranians who for one reason or another "transcended national belonging" (Naficy 2002: 28). Such is the case of Sohrab Shahid Sales, and although she was not born in Iran but is of Iranian descent, Ana Lily Amirpour. Finally, but of no less importance, we find the 'cinema of return', which is where most documentaries fall. We can mention *In Defense of People* (Rafigh Pooya, 1981), *Journal from Iran* (Persheh Sadegh Vaziri, 1986), *Exile Family Movie* (Arash Riahi, 2005), and perhaps *Colours of Exile* might belong to this category too.

Exile Family Movie tells the story of Arash Riahi, his siblings, his uncle and aunt, who fled Iran in 1983 and have since lived in Austria. The story is told mostly through family footage, as it was the main form of communication between the part of the family who lived in Austria and those who remained in Iran. Video tapes that were sent back and forth acted as a bridge over the gaping wound that is exile. The film shows many times how, as we have discussed earlier, distance is relative. While in Austria the family was relatively close to Iran, travelling to and back the homeland was impossible. In voiceover, the director stresses the fact that it was much easier for their relatives who lived across the ocean in Dallas, Texas, to visit them in Austria than it was for their relatives in Iran. In fact, at one point the director visits the Kurd hills where he had crossed the border when fleeing Iran, and he calls his father to tell him exactly that, that he was barely one hour car ride away from him. To this, his father reacts terrified, asking him to please stay away from the Iranian border, because of the dangers it presents to him. His father warns him: "Don't go too close to the border, it's too dangerous there. And come (sic) back to Austria as soon as you can". Being so close to his son does not make him glad, but rather (or perhaps also) reminds him of the dangers posed by the Iranian police and military. Another point is made about the difficulties that arose from the cultural differences in the country of destination. When, finally, his grandparents are able to visit Austria, Riahi points out that his parents and the younger family members could not make that voyage "because the Austrian authorities were afraid that they would like it there too much". Which is not only a measure against illegal immigration, but a clear misunderstanding of the importance of family gatherings for

Iranian culture. Finally, I would like to point out the decision of the director to narrate the film entirely in German language, which as we have seen (and it will be an important topic in Chapter 2) is a strange choice, given the importance the mother tongue has for exiles.

As we can see, five of the six categories are concerned primarily with specific experiences derived from exile. This does not mean exile filmmakers repeat themselves, or that their creativity is impaired. It simply highlights the fact that we have something to say and we want to use our art for transmitting our experiences.

1.3.4 External and Internal exile.

The exilic experience is likened to that of other filmmakers who are either forced to stay in Iran or chose to do so, at the cost of abandoning their cinema career or continuing it under the strict vigilance of the MCIG. I call the latter an ‘internal exile’, in order to relate it to exile outside of Iran, and as we will shortly see, it is quite a pressing and actual matter.

In 2023, Iranian director Mohammad Rasoulof was scheduled to participate in the Cannes Film Festival as a member of the jury, but “he was not allowed by Iranian authorities to leave the country to be a member of the Un Certain Regard jury. No reason was provided” (Vivarelli 2023). The authorities have persecuted him for decades, and in 2011 he was sentenced to six years of prison and was banned for making films in his own country for twenty years.

At the same time, *The Guardian* announced that “Film-maker Jafar Panahi leaves Iran for the first time in 14 years” (The Guardian 2023), as his travel ban was lifted. He served a sentence in Evin Prison and was released last February after going on a hunger strike. He had been banned from making films in his country as well. His latest film, *No Bears* (2022), addresses precisely this issue. Another filmmaker in this situation is Mostafa al-Ahmad, who was detained at the same time as Rasoulof.

No Bears is a fiction about Panahi himself as he directs a film shot on location in Turkey... from Iran. This style of meta-narrative works perfectly, as Panahi plays himself, the main character and a director who makes a film in a small Turkish village next to Iran’s border. The film challenges the concepts of proximity and distance. In his case, he cannot leave the country and has to control the crew exclusively via voice chats, phone calls, and video conferencing computer applications. This is expressed beautifully in a scene where his phone loses signal, and he is forced to come out in the middle of the night to find a spot where he had better reception. Preoccupied with this small problem, he inadvertently steps over the border line that separates Iran from Turkey, which is pointed out by a colleague of his. His colleague asks him if he had done this because he wanted to leave Iran and stay out of the country, to which Panahi reacts horrified, taking a few steps back to return inside Iran. He claims at this point that no, he did not want to leave Iran and would never even think of doing that. “Why would I do that? All my life is in Iran”, he informs the other person.

The apparent paradox of being persecuted in one's own country and not only being banned from leaving it, but also refusing to do so illegally, has similarities with another one, pointed out by Hamid Naficy. When looking at the work of women directors in Iran, he notices that, despite what one may suppose at first glance, there have been considerably more women directors after the Revolution than before it. And this, he claims, "in a patriarchal and traditional society, which is highly suspicious of the corruptive influence of cinema on women and of women on cinema" (Naficy, 2000: 561). According to him, this is explained both by an exercise in modesty that is imposed to crew and films, and by a practice of "veiling" certain things that would not appeal to the authorities. The latter is what allowed women like Rakhshan Banietemad to thrive in the Post-Revolutionary Iranian film industry (Naficy, 2000: 568).

Naficy, who as we have seen has done extensive work on exile and displacement, explains that internal exile is quite common in oppressive regimes: "If internal exile were to be defined as isolation, alienation, deprivation of means of production and communication, exclusion from public life, then many intellectuals, women, artists, religious, and political figures, and even entire communities have suffered from it with their own countries" (Naficy 1999: 199). As Chilean exile Helia López Zarzosa recalls, "my political exile started long before I was forced to leave my country (...) one can become an exile even while remaining on one's own soil" (López Zarzosa 1998: 189). This was due to her being allowed by the dictatorship of General Pinochet to remain a teacher at her university but being prohibited to actually teach classes (López Zarzosa 1998: 190). She felt there was no point in that, because in the meantime the government destroyed all traces of independent thought at the universities, and she could not do anything about it.

Indeed, it is possible to be in exile and yet to still be at home. Sometimes home can be a place of exile, when you live in your home but in banishment. In some countries the government can ban people from certain activities, for reasons either political or otherwise. This can be a form of abuse on the citizens, by denying their rights. These people are faced with the conundrum of either leaving their country (legally or illegally), or staying and fighting for their rights, which results in their internal exile.

Jafar Panahi is perhaps the most prominent case of an internally exiled filmmaker in Iran. He is an example, too, of how to adapt to these situations. He has been prosecuted for

assembly and colluding with the intention to commit crimes against the government. He was handed a six-year jail sentence and a twenty-year ban on making any films and any other activities as well as leaving the country. He has developed his own way of filmmaking and has used the forced internal exile in creative ways, as in his iconic *This is Not a Film* (2011) where he plays with the prohibition imposed upon him of making films for twenty years. It is, however, a dangerous game, which has since then earned him more jail time and other punishments from the government. In 2015, he became a taxi driver for *Taxi*, and a similar strategy involving mostly shots inside cars was used in his 2018 *3 Faces*. Like Rasoulouf a few years later, he was not allowed to travel to Cannes to attend the festival, so her daughter received his award for Best Screenplay.

Jafar Panahi prefers not to think of himself as an exile, but as a free person who still lives in his country, surrounded by friends and family and an array of things he would miss if he left. He had a very clear message in his 2007 interview with Shiva Rahbaran, talking about his situation:

Social problems nudge us constantly. Our reactions to and preoccupations with these 'nudges' are our films. Through our films we see, show and process the problems in our society. However, where these films lead us.... That we cannot know. I am not in exile in my country amongst my people. From the viewpoint of the regime that rules here, I might be in exile. During the last Fajr Film Festival [2006] they had placed me in the section reserved for guests, not for filmmakers, jurors and critics. They had thrown me into a meaningless corner of the festival. They thought they had thrown me into exile. I answered them as follows: 'When somebody invites you to their house, the rules of courtesy dictate that you thank those who think of themselves as the owners of the house for their kind invitation. Ladies and Gentlemen, although I feel like a stranger in this festival, I am not a stranger in this place. They [threw] me into exile, but I am the one who belongs to this place. They have no right to do this to me.' (Rahbaran 2012: 10).

Other Iranian filmmakers have faced and still face similar situations. In light of both the past and present situation in Iran, many renowned writers, filmmakers and artists have felt and feel that they live in a sort of exile within their own country. There are several

examples of artists who, after leaving Iran, have then lived in exile for the rest of their lives. A few examples are the writer Sadeg Hedayat (1903-1951) and filmmakers such as Ebrahim Golestan (1922) and Sohrab Shahid Sales (1943-1998) .

Judith N. Shklar (1993) believes exiles are made by internal laws and by governments. In Shklar's work, internal exile is more harmful than the external one, as the former exile themselves without moving, by escaping into themselves. She highlights:

Exiles are often created by governments that betray their citizens.

Governments also frequently abuse residents under their jurisdiction by denying them membership in the polity and other rights, not as a matter of legal punishment but because they belong to a group that is thought to be inherently unfit for inclusion (Shklar 1993: 181).

A different kind of harm comes to those who manage to return to their home country, sometimes many years after, as discussed with Jonas Mekas' *Reminiscences...* About her return to Chile after the dictatorship had ended, Helia López Zarzosa wrote:

I arrived to Chile with my whole family in March 1992. I entered the society as a returnee, my husband as an immigrant (who was not use to the bizarre Chilean bureaucracy) and my children as 'forced immigrants'. I took advantage of some of the benefits from the newly created National Bureau of return however, the difficulties I encountered were as much social as cultural and practical (López Zarzosa 1998: 194).

She knew she was returning to a country that was very different from the one she had left, but the shock was enormous anyway. Marmora and Gurrieri (1988) have extensively researched this phenomenon, of how the country of origin, 'home', can evolve during the exile's absence. López Zarzosa continues:

Return is not to the idealised home, but merely to our country of origin. This can be seen in the difficulties in adjustment. The growing distance between everyday lives at home and in the host country cannot be measured in exile. 'Exile' and 'home' evolve separately; we as refugees are experiencing changes and transformations outside home, while our

compatriots at home are doing likewise. When I returned the contrast between those changes was sharp. After the initial period of joy, the difficulties started (1998: 194).

This is because the exiles are not the only ones to suffer extreme transformations. The countries themselves undergo dramatic change, especially when (as in Chile) a fierce dictatorship is imposed on a previously democratic country. One documentary film that beautifully deals with this nostalgia that often takes hold of exiled people upon returning is *Absence of Me* (Melina Terribili, 2018). It is a documentary film about the exile and return of Alfredo Zitarrosa, a famed Uruguayan who was blacklisted by the dictatorship in 1976 and forced to leave lest he be murdered or tortured by the military. He returned to Uruguay in 1984, but after a small period of bliss he understood this was not the same Uruguay he had left, and felt incredible sadness, aggravated by the fact that he had no place left to yearn for. In the same year *Absence of Me* was released, Turkish director Nuri Bilge Ceylan released *The Wild Pear Tree* (2018), which deals with how things have changed during one's exile. In this case, it is a fiction and the returning character had left his village to study in a city.

People in exile, both external or internal, often start to develop nostalgic feelings towards the past. When one cannot feel at home in a new context, one tries to create an imaginary homeland for which to yearn. If one is abroad, one craves to be at the homeland at that precise moment. For one in internal exile, it will be not a place, but a time in the past when things were right in the country. Sometimes, however, it is best not to reach that place of dreams, for it will undoubtedly be quite different from the idealised, imaginary homeland we exiles carry within our hearts. This is what happened to Mithra Zahedy, an Iranian theatre director who appears in *Colours of Exile*. She mustered the courage to return, after 35 years of exile in Germany, only to find out how little she recognised her own home country as hers. We will return to her case in Chapter 2.

1.4 Conclusion

I have tried to outline different aspects of the exilic experience, both from a scholarly point of view as well as by delving into the testimonies of people in exile, who sometimes are one and the same. It could be argued, in fact, that anyone who has not experienced displacement will find it hard to write about it. This does not mean that their approach is not valid, and indeed there are valuable scholarly reflections on the topic of exile made by non-exiles, but the view of someone who has experienced it will necessarily be different.

Exile is not, as some authors argue (Said 2000: 173), a complete loss of identity. It is a powerful, enriching process that has profound, long-term impact in artistic work. It is painful, it is traumatic, but I have made the argument that it is also formative. We have seen different cases, both of artists who thrived outside their home countries, and those who found it almost impossible to reach their goals. Cinema, one could argue, is especially challenging in this sense due to its costs, the amount of people any given project needs to involve, and the specificities of the film industries in each country. However, there are excellent examples of exilic filmmaking (Cf. Naficy 2001; 2002) and taking into account the growing number of filmmakers in exile, it could be expected (or more likely, desired) that in the future it will have specific categories in film festivals.

From my research, I found the task of drawing definitions deceptively easy. There are simply no clean-cut differences between refugees, migrants, exiles, etc. We have looked into the different reasons to leave the country, and whether the flight was forced or voluntary. However, it is hard to pinpoint exactly to which extent one is voluntarily leaving their homeland. One thing is certain: the exile status is relational, ever-changing, difficult to define. This does not mean, to any extent, that these categories are one and the same. Simply, that even when one can immediately differentiate between an exile, a migrant, and a refugee, trying to force a definition upon those categories is of no use.

Every person displaced from their homeland faces challenges on a daily basis that are directly related to their displacement. We have listed and discussed some of them, such as the difficulties to get into the film industry without contacts or knowledge of its specificities; the need to communicate in a foreign language, with the resulting loss of one's own language; the frequent necessity to work odd jobs to sustain oneself and one's family,

preventing people from having enough time to pursue a film career, etc. Despite all this, we have verified that fortunately people in exile continue, after all, to make films. And many of them are quite good.

Finally, we have discussed what happens when exile happens within the borders of the homeland. Several filmmakers and other artists are faced with this internal exile at the moment in Iran. Jafar Panahi is an example of how this obstacle can be overcome, but his case also shows the limits the dictatorship imposes on internal exiles. Once he, and others, crossed that threshold, a season at Evin is inevitable. Worse still, their films find it increasing difficulties to reach the screens.

The topic of internal exile should be definitely researched more thoroughly. As it is an ongoing problem, it is expected that the near future will bring new information and possibilities for research. When I started writing this chapter, Jafar Panahi was in jail and Mohamad Rasoulof was free. Now that I am finishing it, it is the other way around. For this reason, I only superficially addressed the subject, although it definitely deserves to be discussed further. Such discussion, however, exceeds the scope of this thesis, as *Colours of Exile* deals almost exclusively with external exile. During his interview, Afshin Naghouni confessed that his exile in Britain was not exactly unprecedented, as he had been frequently displaced inside Iran, due to war and turmoil.

Chapter 2 - *Colours of Exile* in the making. A critical reflection of filming (in) exile

2.0 Introduction

My friend and mentor Mohsen Makhmalbaf once told me that before even thinking of making a film, I should ask myself a simple question: ‘Why do you want to make this particular film?’ He stressed the word *you*, meaning that I should ask myself why it should be *me* making the film, instead of someone else. What was it that I, with my own point of view and my distinctive formation, would be able to contribute to the chosen topic that no one else could?

Documentary filmmaker Viktor Kossakovsky’s first rule for directing is: “Don’t film if you can live without filming” (Kossakovsky 2012). I therefore asked myself: is it vital that I, and no other, tell the story of Iranian artists in exile? It is, after all, *my* story - an individual of Iranian origin in a country different from my ancestors’, currently pursuing a career in filmmaking. That I had made the right decision to go ahead with this production was confirmed while shooting the film, as it became a progressively more intimate experience for me. Reflecting on the intimacy of these experiences, I decided that the style of filming would be performative, reflexive, and would include at least some first-person sequences.

Bill Nichols explains differences between documentary and fiction from a purely formal point of view: “fictional style conveys a distinct, imaginary world, whereas documentary style or voice reveals a distinct form of engagement with the historical world” (Nichols 2001: 44). However, this is just a superficial statement that does not explore the implications of this distinction. In this, more profound sense, the difference between documentary and fiction lies in the fact that the documentary filmmaker is endowed with a *moral responsibility* towards the people and events they depict (Plantinga 2007: 50). This is especially true for this project, as my compatriots and I have undergone considerable ordeals because of our status as expatriates.

The idea for *Colours of Exile* was born out of this context. An important question I have been grappling with is what is lost, and what can be gained (if anything), from exile? In order to tell this story, I began by interviewing a number of immigrant Iranian artists, either in person, via Zoom, or on the phone. Participants gave vivid, sometimes harrowing

testimonies. Their focus was on the obstacles and trials they had gone through after leaving their country of origin, and the ties they preserved with a country that for some only exists in their imagination.

However, as valuable as the interviews may be as documents (Nichols 2001: 38), they hardly constitute a documentary by themselves. For this reason, I devised a series of strategies meant to effectively convey meanings that cannot be “taught” or simply “described”. I will be dealing extensively with such strategies in the following sections.

My documentary is not informative in scope, but can nonetheless be described as educational. It has the ambition to show the impact of exile on people and the hurdles that need to be overcome when trying to live and develop their forms of art, far away from their country, their (many times fragmented) families, and the world they know. Aside from raising awareness, it is also a personal effort to understand the processes I have been through and to find ways to transmit that to my daughters. As Patricia Aufderheide reminds us, “Documentaries are part of the media that help us understand our world and our role in it, that shapes us as public actors” (2007:5). As we will see in the present chapter, every decision and choice I made have been calculated for maximum honesty. Honesty towards the audience, the participants and their stories, but also towards myself and my family.

This chapter discusses the making of *Colours of Exile* from a technical point of view, but also its genesis and the directorial decisions regarding my methods and approaches. It starts by discussing the particularity of documentary film, compared to fictional films.

Starting from the classic, but still relevant definition of documentary film by John Grierson as the “creative treatment of actuality” (Grierson 1933: 8), this argument outlines how and why I embarked on this project and how the chosen topic has modelled the final cut, as the directorial decisions have been calculated to best fit the story I am trying to tell. In particular, I am interested in explaining why I specifically chose to portray myself in the film, departing in this sense from fly-on-the-wall approaches that commonly characterise ‘nature’ and observational documentaries.

Apart from discussing why I chose certain tools within the scope of conventional documentary techniques, I will describe the main modes of documentary film, as defined by

Bill Nichols (2001), focusing on the reflexive, performative, and participatory modes, as they are relevant to my work.

As the ethical aspects of this particular film are so important, I will then explain my concerns and the ethical decisions I took, comparing the film I made with other films that have faced similar challenges. In particular, I explore that which cannot be filmed (in this case, my home country of Iran), which is alluded to or explained in other films, that will then serve as influences in my work.

Furthermore, I will reflect on the formal aspects, including camera work, sound design, conducting interviews and the work with actors (incidentally, my own daughters).

Further studies on particular sections and scenes are individually dealt with in parts 2.5 (The Camper Van sequence) and 2.6 (The poetic choice of carrying a TV set made out of cardboard and wood). In addition, the film locations are described in section 2.6 as well.

Following this, I will explain my choice of portraying only artists, and not a wider, more representative group of people, when it is well known that a large diaspora of Iranians of all trades are dispersed around the world, as discussed in Chapter 1. The answer has to do with my own experiences, but also as a departure from other documentary films made about similar subject matter.

Finally, the last sections of the chapter will be devoted to describing the editing process and how and why I came to the realisation that the film could not have an 'ending' in the regular sense of the word. There is no redeeming event, no triumphal return to the homeland, but a process that continues with no end in sight.

2.1 The Documentary Method

The first person to define the “documentary” as a separate filmmaking form was Scottish filmmaker John Grierson (1933). The term documentary was swiftly popularised and over the years became synonymous with “true” accounts of something that happened, although this has never been accurate (Moon 2018: 43).

In fact, Grierson’s definition of documentary filmmaking as the “creative treatment of actuality” (Grierson 1933: 8) is still a significant way to describe this cinematic style, which captures its possibilities and challenges. His definition implies a radical departure from what has been many times assumed of documentaries, namely that they are exact reproductions of reality. Grierson helps us understand that, despite working with reality as its source material, realism is not always required of documentaries, as creativity is virtually boundless. In fiction, on the other hand, one must pursue an illusion of realism (Kania 2002) in order for audiences to engage with images that are admittedly representations of fictional events. This gives documentarists remarkable leeway, as they need not preoccupy themselves with such illusions, and can instead exploit their creativity in countless ways. In fact, filmmakers like Dziga Vertov have actively worked to show, not conceal (as many others have), the fact that behind the cinema device lies a deception. In his quintessential *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), there is a somewhat lengthy sequence where the shot of a horse freezes unexpectedly, only to then seamlessly open the shot to reveal his editor working at her table. He then cuts back to moving images of a child laughing, which the editor had been cutting and pasting moments before. This is a perfect example of how plastic the documentary form is. This is perhaps, too, the first use of the reflexive mode in documentary film’s history. I will come back to this mode later on.

Describing the differences between documentary and fiction, Bill Nichols points out that “fictional style conveys a distinct, imaginary world, whereas documentary style or voice reveals a distinct form of engagement with the historical world” (Nichols 2001: 44). As we have seen, this form of engagement is primarily based on ethical responsibilities (Plantinga 2018: 115-134). Scholars have discussed these responsibilities regarding the filmed subjects (Maccarone 2010) and the spectators (Alshehri 2011), but another aspect of responsibility is often disregarded, and that is to being true to the source material. It should be pointed out that this does not have to do with being ‘accurate’ or present only scientifically proven

truths. However creative its treatment may be, the filmmaker can never forgo the obligation to make representative statements about reality, not imaginary situations.

Few scholars would go as far as challenging the truthfulness of realism. One scholar, when discussing the ethical issues of documentary filmmaking, claims that “filmmakers sacrifice and manipulate two different rights, the participant’s right and the audience’s right to know the ‘truth’ of a particular event or group of people” (Shams Ad-Deen 2015: 84). The statute of reality as truth, and even the existence of *a* truth, are not in discussion. In a recent book, documentary filmmaker Jill Godmilow advocates for the exercise of “postrealism” (Godmilow 2022: 7). She claims that the tyranny of “the real” in documentary, or rather nonfiction as she calls them, has produced unwanted results that often end up in a “pornography of the real” (Godmilow 2022: 13) where actual events and people are turned to inert objects, or matter without spirit. Godmilow goes on to propose 40 strategies that filmmakers could use in order to transcend the limits of the “realist” representation of the world, which are profoundly inspiring although not all of them have been useful for the making of *Colours of Exile*. One of the strategies, which will be discussed further in Chapter 2.3, is described as “collaborate intensively with your social actors” (Godmilow 2022: 101).

Taking these discussions into account, it must be stressed once more that truthfulness towards reality does not necessarily imply a need for realism. Plantinga (2005: 105-106) distinguishes documentary as indexical record from documentary as assertion. In the case of Indexical Record, the filmmaker seeks to present its source material in the most straightforward, objective way possible. Ai Weiwei’s *Human Flow* (2017) takes this path when showing the humanitarian migration crisis in Europe. The shots are raw, images show little editing, and are calculated to document what happens with immigrants from a journalistic point of view. The deception is there but concealed from the spectators.

Documentary as Assertion (Plantinga 2005: 107) refers to the use of moving pictures to make an admittedly subjective statement. The audience serves as an accomplice of sorts to the filmmaker, in the sense that they are asked to believe the contents of the documentary to be truthful (Plantinga 2005: 108). This is the case of films like *Stranger in Paradise* (Guido Hendrikx 2016), in which the director uses actors to act out possible interactions between African migrants and a European teacher. In the case of *Colours of Exile* my main objective is to make a statement about the reality of living in exile. Of course,

such reality is highly subjective, and it is possible that an Iranian emigrant who lives outside of Iran might feel that the film does not accurately reflect their own experiences. This is why I explicitly avoided any implications that what I show is an objective depiction of reality itself, whereby my documentary is closer to the Documentary as assertion approach. Many testimonies are contradictory, and a wide sample of opinions are given space in the documentary, without censoring or privileging any one over the others. As we will see later, the decision of placing my own family and myself in front of the camera is in itself a statement and is intended to work in this direction as subjective reality.

One interesting case study that does not seem to fit in any of these two categories is Errol Morris' masterpiece *The Thin Blue Line* (1988). The film relies heavily on re-enactments and reconstructions, but only to present the case of a man wrongly imprisoned in an orderly and objective fashion. In this sense, questions have been raised as to whether this film was indeed a documentary. The American Academy of Motion Picture Arts famously denied the film a place in the Oscars, on the basis that it did not qualify as a documentary film. Nowadays, the general consensus seems to have changed in this regard, we now see more documentaries that are staged or are based on re-enactment, and several scenes of my film are staged, (will return to this on 2.4 and 2.5) which I do not consider harms its status as a documentary. In fact, I would go as far as to suggest that the staging of these scenes is in fact a requirement of the chosen topic. It helps to connect the audience to the story. A very simple example would be my daughter playing the harmonica. At first, we do not see who is playing, but later when we reveal it's her, that makes the family more connected to the audience. In other words, a piece of music that appeared to be non-diegetic, is revealed to be in fact diegetic, bridging the gap between the audience and the events in the film as the characters listen to the same music as the spectators.

The particular theme of my documentary, what is lost and what is gained in exile, lends itself to certain difficulties. For instance, filming in Iran was impossible for me personally, although Iran was permanently alluded to in the discourse of the interviewees. This was used to the benefit of the film, as the artists I interviewed presented Iran in a paradoxical light, both as the beautiful country where they have such fond memories, as well as an oppressive state where making art is directly impossible. One may ask, which one is the real Iran? In their minds, and in mine, both are real. There is a possibility, however,

that a 'real' Iran does not exist at all. This is why I kept the Iran footage to a minimum. What little footage from Iran is shown belongs to either historical archives, films, or modern-day phone cameras, the latter mainly surrounding popular uprisings. Further footage, such as the interview with my father, is shown on or in the TV box. Such ambivalence is an aesthetic choice that tends to make the spectator doubt if there is any home to return to.

Memory, as Elizabeth Jelin puts it, is neither an invention of the present nor the past as it once was, but it inhabits the tension in between the present and the past, between fact and imagination (Jelin 2003: 18). As films are in fact vehicles of memory (Van Alphen 1997), I used my documentary to dig into the memory of an elusive and possibly inexistent Iran. I borrowed influences from other films that use editing and storytelling devices to talk about that which cannot be shown, such as Rithy Panh's *The Missing Picture* (2013). As Panh, I am more interested in showing the actuality of exile and what it means here and today, than in making a historical inquiry into the reasons for leaving one's homeland. Re-enactments, in this sense, serve the purpose of 'making present' (Power 2008: 15) situations that happened in the past, thus bringing these closer to the public. This is the path taken by Joshua Oppenheimer in *The Act of Killing* (2012). In my documentary, re-enactments such as our playing with the cameras and taking photos, or moments from our daily life such as working at my desk or watching wrestling competitions on TV with my family and later copying them in our living room, are used as tool to bring the situation closer to the public. As Nichols (2008: 73) has rightly pointed out, while this may be considered deceit by some people, these re-enactments have an indexical although paradoxical nature: "Reenactments occupy a strange status in which it is crucial that they be recognized as a representation of a prior event while also signalling that they are not a representation of a contemporaneous event." (Nichols 2008: 73). This is certainly the case with the re-enactments in *Colours of Exile*.

Following this trend, there is one specific type of media that I chose to "forge". It is shown in a scene where I rummage in the attic until I find a cassette tape, which I promptly slide into a cassette player. The recording plays a conversation between myself and my father, on the morning of the day in which I left Iran for good. Except, the voices have been re-recorded. Aside from the fact that those are not the original voices from thirteen years ago, the conversation is exactly as it happened at the time. I chose to re-enact this

conversation in order to construct a scene that is much more dramatic than just my telling of it. The difference between a narration and the original conversation is that in the second case there is true suspense in the Hitchcockian sense: the audience knows something the protagonists ignore. In this case, my father confronts me with the fact that he may never see me again in his lifetime, to which I reassure him that “everything will be alright”. I even make a promise. At the time of the supposed recording, this promise was authentic, as it was my intention to return at a later date. However, the audience is already aware that thirteen years have passed, and my family and I are still away from Iran. Finally, this scene is strategically placed right after a fragment of interview in which Mr Makhmalbaf discusses the topic of nostalgia and specifically talks about his late mother and the scattering of her ashes in a garden.

I also use the dramatic potency of other media. For instance, at some points of the film, I am shown operating a slide projector. I am surrounded by darkness and alone, while my face is illuminated by the light of the images. Nothing is said in these scenes, so that the images themselves do all the work. This is just an expression of the narrative technique known as “show, don’t tell”. Feeling is conveyed through emotions shown in my face, and especially through the power of images. These photographs are old, mostly in black and white, and show moments, places, and family members that are part of my past and fill my memories. They will later re-appear in the TV box at the very end of the film, so the slide projector sequences also serve the purpose of preparing the viewer for the dramatic finale. The projected photographs have a paradoxical effect. While they make the people and places emerge from memory and be present then and there, the fact that they are but two-dimensional depictions on a screen mark the distance, both geographic and chronological.

Making-present is also the strategy followed by the first exponents of Direct Cinema, for instance in *Primary*, by Robert Drew (1960). For the first time in history, filmmakers filmed and recorded sound at the same time and recorded actual events such as a candidate’s run for primary elections in the United States. I will return to Direct Cinema and Cinéma Vérité shortly, but first I will discuss the method I developed for the making of my own documentary.

When I started this project, which was originally titled *One earth, one country*, I was not sure what method and style I would use for my documentary. I was familiar with Bill

Nichols' (1991) six modes of documentary film, but ultimately, it was the topic and the source material that decided the direction to take. As I have mentioned before, I wanted to avoid making objective, matter-of-fact statements about what constitutes life in exile. For this reason, I rejected the expository mode as it would not do justice to the source material. As the name suggests, this mode is quite straightforward and serves the purpose of transmitting factual information to the audience. At the same time, I had a message that I needed to get across to the spectators, so the poetic mode, with its experimentation around forms of representation, was not the best option. Besides, I was aware that, if there are any 'pure' documentaries that use only one of the possible modes, they are few and far between.

I finally settled on a mixture between observational, reflexive, and interactive (later called performative) modes. Nichols points out that "the observational mode limited the filmmaker to the present moment and required a disciplined detachment from the events themselves" (Nichols 1991: 33). While the first part of the statement describes the whole film, as it is a film about the present, I used the detachment strategy on selected shots in which I wanted to see how my subjects conducted their day-to-day affairs without the pressure of the camera. The camera was there, but they needed not engage with it, and even forgot it was there, as the classic fly-on-the-wall technique, famously used by Frederick Wiseman in films like *Titicut Follies* (1967), and *High School* (1968). Another definition of observational documentary films is offered by Plantinga. For him, an observational documentary is a film that "eschews voice-over narration and many other traditional techniques in favour of the observation of the pro-filmic event" (Plantinga 2005: 109). This definition embodies my intention in those observational sequences I shot for the film.

For the most part, however, I wanted to participate in the events that the film shows, because of the natural engagement I have with the situations discussed and the people involved. Also, because in that way I would be able to embody the emotions that interviewers describe. As an artist in exile myself, I needed to lend not only my craft, but also my body and voice to the documentary. In several sequences, for instance when I walk around the alien locations where I live and work transporting a TV set made out of cardboard and wood, and in the shots of my camper van trip, I participate directly in front of the camera. I am also interviewed by my own daughters, which in itself was a challenging

and emotional event. The inclusion of these subjective experiences do not exclude the fact that *Colours of Exile* speaks not only of a personal but of a collective subject. As Laura Rascaroli (2009) explains, the 'personal' in an essay film does not barely refer to the content of the film, but primarily to the strategies of communication or "textual commitments" (Rascaroli 2009: 15). In this sense, the 'personal' shots, as well as the use of the TV set, are used as mobilising and engaging with the audience rather than showcasing a purely subjective experience.

These parts are participative in essence, because the participation of the documentarist is what makes things happen. When the documentarist steps in front of the camera, an illusion is lifted. This exposure goes hand in hand with the reflexive mode, in which the spectator is forced to acknowledge the filmmaking process and reflects on the relationship between the maker, the film, and themselves. The filmmaking process is evidenced for instance in the scene of my daughters' interview, as the montage cuts back and forth between footage from the camera in front of me and a wider shot that encompasses both myself and the camera that films me.

As the filmmaker, my present work is aimed as a bridge between the artists, the audience, the subjects and the film. For this reason, I found the reflective method beneficial for this task. However, I did not intend the film to become an autobiography - a movie about me, my personal life, and my issues and problems (Ruby 1980). Instead, it should be a film about a filmmaker who is a migrant and is making a film about migrants. I attempted to raise and discuss a social issue about immigration and its effects on artists. Trinh Min-ha expresses this point as follows: 'I am not interested in using film to "express myself" but rather to expose the social self (and selves), which necessarily mediates the making as well as the viewing of the film' (Min-ha 1992: 119).

In fact, scholars like Ruby like to point out that filmmakers not only are allowed to show themselves, but have the moral obligation to inform the audience about who they are, and how their identities may affect their films (Ruby 1980). Needless to say, filmmakers not always acknowledge this obligation or act upon it. An example of what Ruby meant can be found in the opening scene of *Far from Poland* (1984). Here, filmmaker Jill Godmilow enters the frame and explains in a direct address to the viewer why she felt compelled to make this film, breaking the illusion of detachment. I do not explicitly expose my reasons for making

my film, but I give an honest account of my situation in the country I was forced to emigrate to , thus including myself within the community of artists whose testimonies make up the bulk of the film. I put forward this message with my presence, alongside my daughters' narrations, and also in the sequences in which I express an emotional response to slides and pictures from the old days in Iran. Another difference between my film and *Far from Poland* is that while Godmilow made a film about a country without living in it and seeing its conditions, I have made a film about the conditions of a country where I live as a guest, a situation that has been going on for many years. Showing the filmmaker's direct experience of the daily conditions and problems in the host country can give more credibility to the film as it contributes to authenticity. All the artists in this film live in a country to which they themselves have stated that they do not feel they belong, and instead consider themselves as guests, and the movie *Colours of Exile* tries to portray their new and particular experiences. Such circumstances make this film similar to the experiences of Ross McElwee and Alan Berliner. These two filmmakers are famous for making documentaries that are somewhat related to their lives and use their experiences and families in their films to convey a universal message. Examples are *Photographic Memory*, by Ross McElwee (2011) and *Nobody's Business*, by Alan Berliner (1996) which is a portrait of the director's father. Efren Cuevas says that incorporating domestic films into personal (or autobiographical) documentaries acquires unexpected resonances, opens up new meanings and provides complementary visions to macro-historical narratives (Cuevas 2013: 18).

In some moments of the film, I am in front of the camera, while there is no one behind it. This is true for the shot of myself dialling on my mobile phone, where I left the camera recording in order for it to observe and capture the reality as it was happening at the moment. I was not sure what would happen once the other person answered, or even if they would answer. Another way in which I reflexively portrayed myself and the process of making this film was in the shots that are filmed at my home. In some shots I appear directly editing the material for the film, as a nod to Dziga Vertov, but also to reflexivity in general. I believe it is important to show that the place where I edit, live, play with my daughters, and watch wrestling matches is one and the same. It is like a small homeland, as opposed to the larger country I was forced to flee from. It is but a small Farsi-speaking haven within a

strange country that does not completely accept our presence. These shots sometimes fall within the observational and the reflexive modes at the same time.



Fig. 1 Working and playing in the same environment. Source: Screen shot from a preliminary cut of the film Colours of Exile

According to proponents of reflexivity, procedures like these draw attention to the constructivism of film; they cue the audience that the images, although bearing an indexical relationship to the world, are subject to selection, order and placement into a certain context. The result is not an objective representation of the historical world but a construction in the form of a narrative that presents an argument about that world as constructed by the filmmaker, based on their particular outlook on life.

As a filmmaker, I have constantly faced dilemmas and challenges related to how I was to represent my subjects. The most important of those challenges was the sense of responsibility of the reality of subjects outside of the film. My efforts were spent in matching the reality of people within certain social environments with their portrayal on the screen. In *Colours of Exile*, my goal was to show the lives of artists who emigrated and live in exile. The film tells real stories about real people, but I was apprehensive about whether the audience would understand the concept. Therefore, *Colours of Exile* attempts to show the current truth in the lives of these artists. It does not pretend to reproduce reality because reality is current and happening but presents one of many interpretations about this situated reality. As Plantinga puts it, documentary films make “no claim to *reproduce* the real, but rather make claims about the ‘real’” (1997: 38).

In the type of documentary film I set out to make, “visual images do not function as information, but as the expression of style and as a contribution to the themes developed by the film” (Plantinga 1997: 72). I am not interested in showing pie charts and bar graphs with the numbers of migrants, where they are from, and how this trend evolved over time. I focused instead on a rather small number of artists in the Iranian diaspora so that their life experiences were not reduced to numbers, but were expressed from a first-person perspective. In this sense, I was inspired both by my own life experiences and John Grierson’s socially committed documentary films movement (Rüffert 2019). While Grierson’s primary aim was a form of propaganda to cement British national identity and values, he also propelled an extraordinary advance in documentary filmmaking by making the working class his subject. He did this, for example, in his acclaimed *Drifters* (1929), and so did Edgar Anstey and Arthur Elton in *Housing Problems* (1935). In *Colours of Exile*, the exiled protagonists are themselves the main characters.

When discussing the making of *Not a Love Story* (Bonnie Klein, 1981), Bill Nichols points to the exploratory journey of the shooting and the transformative nature of documentary filmmaking: “The act of making the film plays a cathartic, redemptive role in their [the filmmaker and the protagonist] own lives; it is less the world of their subjects that changes than their own.” (Nichols 2001: 118). And while this may be true of any film shooting, be it documentary or fiction, it is perhaps more pronounced in the former and especially when the subject matter is close to the filmmaker’s personal experience. When a

filmmaker has a unique engagement with the subject of their documentary film (as is the case with myself), they will deal with it from their specific point of view. This was clear regarding the movie *Colours of Exile*, and since the issue of migration and being far from home and my motherland has caused me much deep pain, the mental and psychological effects the shooting of this film brought me were not minor. For example, probably the most painful part of making the documentary was the day in which my daughters were interviewing me. I was not able to honestly explain to them why I had to end up living somewhere outside of my homeland, as they were still too young to understand. On the other hand, I did not want to put them in any doubt as to who they are and where they belonged. As much as I see myself as a guest where I live, I want my daughters to feel that they are at home here.

In my view, documentary films tend to seek showing aspects of the world from an alternative perspective and style. Such styles have often represented innovations in the history of documentary films and most of the times have tried to encourage the audience to accept the filmmaker's point of view. However, this is not always the case, as there are several different possibilities for a documentary filmmaker who wants to make an assertion, apart from just selling a specific worldview.

According to Michael Renov (1993:21), four different objectives or trends in documentary filmmaking can be classified:

1. To record, reveal or preserve
2. To persuade or promote
3. To analyse or interrogate
4. To express

Within these different objectives, a filmmaker can be more or less convincing and honest about both reality and their point of view. It should be pointed out the extent to which a documentary works like fictional cinema: we as viewers tend to accept its claims without thinking. Based on this point of view, and taking into account that documentaries deal with reality itself, it can be argued that the documentary film deceives the viewer even more than Hollywood fiction films.

These ideas have caused documentary filmmakers to have a more critical view of the documentary tradition and pay closer attention to the application of documentary conventions. This led to different styles in documentary films, particularly the reflexive documentary. In this style, concepts, including the ability to provide reliable evidence, and the possibility of definitive evidence, play essential roles. In the reflexive method, in addition to revealing the events in front of the camera, the filmmaker exposes the filmmaking process to change audience presuppositions and expectations. As a result, the reflexive approach in the postmodern era has become an essential theoretical issue in all areas related to representation. Although I do not fully agree with the following statement, there is a point in saying that “there is no such thing as a documentary” (Rhodes & Springer 2006: 64), in the sense that reality is always mediated by the camera, which itself represents one or many points of view. For this reason, the reflexive approach not only serves the purpose of carrying out more honest work, but to ‘educate’ audiences in acknowledging that what they are seeing is only one of many representations of reality.

Trinh T. Min-ha, in the film *Reassemblage* (1982), provides the background for understanding the reflexive method of ethnographic research. It portrays the rural life of Senegal in a way that refuses to transfer the standard forms of knowledge of the people. I will return to this topic later in this chapter, but first I address the issue of self-representation.

The recent trend of a “cinema of the self” (Lebow 2012), is expressed perfectly in films like *Selfie* (2019), where the whole focus of the documentary is on self-representation. In general, as Rosas & Dittus (2021) demonstrate, there is a tendency for documentaries to concentrate on a small number of people, which lets the audience get to know the characters more in depth but also tends to obscure the general picture. The focus seems to be pointed at the self and (auto)biographies rather than at tackling general, societal matters. A good example of someone who has escaped this corollary of the cinema of the self is the documentary short film *History and Memory* (Rea Tajiri 1991), which, despite its name, does not aim to be “an overarching history of the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II but a more personal account of her [Tajiri] own family’s experience.” Therefore, it can be credible, convincing, and compelling without being definitive or conclusive” (Nichols 2001: 51). In my case, I wanted to convey a general mood among

Iranian artists in exile through the converging views that appeared in interviews. I tried to achieve this through a multivocal or, more precisely, choral set-up (Woller 1999), in which the different voices combined to let the audience fill in the gaps and gain insights on what it means to be exiled.

The first-person film-maker's strategy is self-exposure, via diverse devices. In *Colours of Exile*, self-exposure occurs in various ways, too. Both in a strictly observational way, when I am seen working or playing with my daughters, completely oblivious to the presence of a camera (see Figure 1); or knowingly so, but engaged in a friendly conversation with Mohsen Makhmalbaf (Figure 2). I am also made the object of several travelling shots that picture me carrying a cardboard TV set and traversing my host city.



Fig. 2. A friendly chat between Mohsen Makhmalbaf and the filmmaker by the river. The bridge is a symbol for connection, but the fence around us reminds that we are not completely free.

I helped convey the film's message by portraying myself many times. This way of using myself as a filmmaker, in my opinion, does not turn the film into an autobiographical documentary because my presence in the film is a metaphorical presence, not a personal portrait. All the things that happen to my family and I in this documentary are the same things that have happened in life or are happening now. I did not make any changes when re-enacting scenes, such as lying on the floor next to my girls while they were playing with the camera. I just recreated it as it happened with real people. This is precisely the opposite

of what Flaherty did for *Nanook of the North* (1922). He used actors assembled a family of individuals that were not related, and changed the name of the protagonist. I sought not to be a character in the film, but rather a vehicle to convey the spirit of most immigrants who are forced out of their homeland and must continue to live and pursue a career in a strange country. For the viewer, it is easier to connect with the struggles of one single protagonist, instead of absorbing the information transmitted impersonally by a series of interviewees, each with very limited screen time. In this way, my daily life is the axis that connects the other lives of the artists I interviewed in the film. This includes scenes in the documentary like eating with my family, watching TV, and playing with my children. Through these scenes I introduce the viewer to the themes of this film, to who the filmmaker is, and to where these stories and interviews are coming from. In other words, I use family, memories and events that happened before and during the migration as an expression and representation of the identity of an immigrant, and I show it in the film as an autobiographical rather than a domestic ethnography (Renov 1999: 141-143).

Although widely different, both autobiographical and ethnographic films can achieve a similar degree of engagement with the topics and subjects depicted. Ethnographic films, as we will discuss shortly, often benefit from an outsider's gaze. On other occasions, however, the positionality of the author influences the possibilities and the outcome of the film. In Chris Temple and Zach Ingrasci's *Salam Neighbor* (2015), both filmmakers spent 56 days in a Syrian refugee camp in Jordan to depict daily life there. Unlike me, they were not immigrants, and coincidentally their experiences varied greatly from mine. As stated before, not having experienced the struggles one sets out to document is not an impediment for a highly successful documentary, and in fact in many cases this is a necessity. While shooting their film, Chris Temple and Zach Ingrasci grew more and more surprised by the living conditions in the migrant camp, which had a significant impact on them, their reactions and finally, on the film itself. Syrian refugees were not allowed to stay in the camp overnight due to security reasons, and everyone except for the filmmakers had to spend the night in a nearby village, travelling back and forth every day. This means that the authors had access only to half of the events at the site, missing what happened at night. Although they were allowed by the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) to set up tents in the camp and live like other migrants, their day-to-day (or more specifically night-to-night)

experiences were very different from the migrants', and this significantly impacted their understanding of the issue. This example shows the extent to which the position of filmmakers towards their subjects influences the films they make. I set out to make a film that expresses the pain of being away from my roots for many years. Thus, I have a unique perspective and a position in which I can potentially convey things others cannot. As Naficy and Gabriel point out, "we are always situated in place and in time [making it impossible] to escape the phenomenon of being positioned in culture and ideology" (Naficy & Gabriel 2017, x). For this reason, it is paramount to hold a speaker's positionality (Alcoff 1991; Spivak & Rutazibwa 2018) into account at all times. While some scholars think positionality determines what topics one can or cannot speak (Alcoff 1991), I believe it modifies only the *perspective* of the speaker, not whether they can tackle a certain subject.

When I decided to make this film, I had first-hand experience of the conditions governing immigrants' lives, problems, and effects, primarily on artists. I used this knowledge in applying and telling the film's story. My documentary *Colours of Exile* may be closer to the style of another documentary film: *Unknown Refugee*, by Hamy Ramezan (2015). In this film, Ali Jahangiri and Hamy Ramezan present an image of immigrants not as the scary monsters the press sometimes depict them to be, but as ordinary people who are forced to emigrate due to particular circumstances. The practical experiences of the two filmmakers have helped the film a lot, as both filmmakers are immigrants who have taken refuge in Finland. As a reflective documentary that combines life and filmmaking and presents a first-hand documentary with the knowledge and use of filmmaking techniques, it became one of the inspirations for this film. At times, the questions Ali Jahangiri and Hamy Ramezan ask the immigrants are very similar to the questions raised in my film, the most important of which is about the reasons for choosing to emigrate. Why did they decide to do it, knowing the difficult path that lay ahead? There is a distinct closeness between my experiences and Ramezan and Jahangiri's in their film. Simply put, our works are necessarily different from that of filmmakers who make a documentary where the main engagement they have with their subjects is in terms of interest, rather than shared experience.

Another illustrative example of such kind of filmmaking is the film *Midnight Traveler* (Hassan Fazili 2019). The filmmaker and his family recorded on their smartphones the flight between Afghanistan and a final destination in Europe, under circumstances far less from

ideal. This forced the director to make use of every trick available to him in order to narrate the film story in an effective way. Alternatively, the film *Chauka, Please Tell Us the time* (2017), by Behrouz Buchani shows the filmmaker's experiences in a refugee camp. From another point of view, perhaps the best way I consider I made *Colours of Exile* a more engaging reflexive documentary was to stress my presence towards the end of the film.

I have recorded a scene that was intended to be used at the end of the movie, but ultimately decided against it (See 2.7 in this chapter). In the scene in question I appear in frame, thinking out loud about how I should end this movie. I discuss with myself about what the best finish would be; from an effective (but at this point in time delusional) point of view, the best ending for this film would be the presence of all of us immigrants returning home to Iran. Expressing this issue at the end of the film and creating questions in the viewer's mind through fundamental reflection of the film's message is a means to steer the film towards a reflective documentary. According to Ruby, the filmmaker intentionally reveals the underlying assumptions which caused one to formulate a set of questions in a particular way, to seek answers to those questions and finally to present his findings in a particular way (Ruby 1980: 157). Ultimately, a different ending was devised, in which I expect to bring some kind of closure, not to our struggles, but to some of the questions posed during the film.

Now, one problem that I should tackle at this point is the fact that migration films seem to have flourished over the last few years (Hiltunen 2019). This became especially noteworthy since the 2015 “Refugee Crisis”, as the UNHCR called it⁵

The film industry decided to prioritise the topic of migration so films already in development were rushed through post-production to enter distribution and many new projects kicked off. The competition between films and filmmakers to cover the topic became so intense that even festival hits, like the Locarno winner *Lampedusa in Winter* (2015) with over 60 festival selections were soon taken off the screen to give place to new films (Trencsényi & Naumescu 2021: 118).

⁵ <https://www.unhcr.org/news/stories/2015/12/56ec1ebde/2015-year-europes-refugee-crisis.html>

So, why make yet another film about exile? At this point I want to refer back to my initial remarks in the introduction to this chapter. My engagement with the topic of migration and exile is unique, and so is my approach, as I hope will be evident when watching the documentary. The example of Jean Rouch's *Moi, un Noir* (1958) exemplifies my approach well. The documentary is about young Nigerian immigrants who left their country to find work in the Ivory Coast. There are countless of workers just like them in the Ivory Coast, but Rouch chose this particular person as a subject. This was not just because Rouch asked him to do the voice-over once the film was edited, which was unique, but also because it is Robinson and his friends and lovers that we see on the screen. It is his unscripted narration that we hear, that brings the viewer closer to the character on the screen. In my documentary, I strived to reach a similar level of intimacy, and this was achieved through direct observation and exposition.

Film is, by definition, 'indirect'. It relies on the mediation of a technological device between that which is filmed and the people who watch it. What is direct about the trend 'Direct Cinema', started in the late 1950s, is the relationship between the body that is filmed and that which films (Haleff 1964). Classical examples of this trend are the Maysles Brothers' *Salesman* (1969) and *Gimme Shelter* (1970). Richard Leacock addresses this relationship as he claims the filmmaker must film their subjects with "patience and skill, and sensitivity" (Leacock 1986: 10).

There has been confusion between Direct Cinema and *Cinéma Vérité* (Van Cauwenberge 2013), a style of documentary filmmaking that emerged from the French New Wave movement in the 1950s and 1960s and became popularised by Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin in *Chronicle of a Summer* (1968). While some scholars claim *Cinéma Vérité* is barely the French counterpart of Direct Cinema (O'Connell 2010), they have several differences regarding the filmmaker's involvement in the shots and the philosophy of documentary filmmaking. *Cinéma Vérité* avoids Direct Cinema's 'fly-on-the-wall' approach and often has the authors in front of the camera or otherwise acknowledging their participation and influence on the situations filmed. In this sense, it does not seek an unbiased, objective perspective but a participative one in order to uncover what may otherwise not be apparent (Van Cauwenberge 2013). Part of the confusion stems from the fact that some of the filmmakers that engaged in *Cinéma Vérité*, also made films that can be described as Direct

Cinema, such as Jean Rouch. The Maysles Brothers filmed almost strictly Direct Cinema films, but their classic documentary *Grey Gardens* (1975) has them exchanging dialogue with the subjects, which is a topic more akin to *Cinéma Vérité*. There is, as stated, one important distinction, and that is the presence or absence of the filmmaker in front of the camera. In this sense, my documentary is formally closer to *Cinéma Vérité*, but draws inspiration from both movements.

Both Direct Cinema and *Cinéma Vérité* were made possible by technical advancements that happened between the late 1950s and the early 1960s, namely, the smaller size and larger transportability of cameras and the advent of direct sound.

Turning our attention now to the use of sound, Jeffrey Ruoff points out that the main concern regarding sound in documentary has almost always been realism (1993: 31). Location sound is heavily relied upon, and the sound design made in the editing room seeks to be realistic. Music is used sparingly, and rarely is it more than an accompaniment for the on-screen action, so as not to enter into conflict with the image itself. Films like the already mentioned *Gimme Shelter* (1970) are rare in that the music is an integral part of the film, but it does not disrupt the image because it is being heard by the protagonist themselves. There is an important distinction between those sounds that can be heard by both the audience and the protagonists, which is called diegetic sound, and sound that only viewers can hear. The latter is called extradiegetic or simply non-diegetic sound (Rogers 2015: 2). In short, diegetic sound establishes a common knowledge between viewers and protagonists, a kind of familiarity and sometimes complicity. Extradiegetic sound, on the contrary, tends to separate the realm of the one who watches and the world of those on the screen, exposing the device of filmmaking. In my documentary, I used both diegetic and extradiegetic sound to enhance the different moods I wanted to convey.

I chose folk music from Iran to score the film in an extradiegetic form. Not to make it more 'realistic' but to show the separation between the reality of people in exile and the country they have long left behind. These beats clash with the Georgian brick facades and the semi-detached houses of West London. On the other hand, diegetic sounds, such as my daughter playing the harmonica, bring the spectator closer to what is happening in the present. In this way, I tried to oppose the long-lost, probably imaginary homeland to the present, more real, everyday struggles of artists in exile. Several musicians like Niaz Nawab

appear performing their music on camera, while for others like Zakhmi I chose to show fragments of their music videos, in his case because its tone contrasted perfectly to the experiences he shared in his interview regarding violence and racism in the UK.

To end this section, I want to point out my intention for the viewer to become aware of what they would watch and what story they would tell, if they were making the film, and that they would do from the beginning. I find that viewers are sometimes thrown into the world the filmmaker has created and are thus forced to try and make sense of this world, helped only by the few hints they get from the images and sounds on the screen. *Colours of Exile* makes it clear from the beginning that it is about the life of an immigrant filmmaker who is making a film about immigration. I wanted to achieve the most direct and smooth style of communication with the viewer.

The film begins with shots of myself watching a TV box that stands at the top of a wire fence post. The TV is showing my father, who answers to the question posed by someone off-screen: "Do you miss them?". My father replies: "A lot. They keep saying, 'I'm coming this month', 'I'll be there in 5 months', but it's been 13 years, and they haven't come." This is done in order to present the topic of the film, which is separation. The fact that I, and the TV, are standing in the middle of a field in England, further enhance the feeling of being far from home. It also supports the words of my father. Indeed, it's been 13 years and we have not yet returned. Right after this scene, my daughters enter into play and complete the depiction of the protagonists. They state clearly and through short sentences who they are, who we are, and why we are here.

Another reason I chose the cinematic modes I have discussed in this section was that I gradually realised that my film somehow benefited from the functions of the reflective documentary, but also of observational and performative modes. For example, in the film, I have a direct connection with the topic under discussion and my personal life is involved in this topic, and I see myself in a similar way as the artists interviewed in this film. For these reasons my presence in the film somehow evokes an expressive function. This type of relationship with the subject can be one of the functions of these documentary styles (not only reflexive), for instance in the way Jill Godmilow used her presence in the film *Far From Poland* and her explanations about the story of the film. Another example is *Chronique d'un été* (1961), where Edgar Morin and Jean Rouch appear in the movie as investigators.

Through interviews, exposure of my family and myself before the camera, observations of migrant life, and fundamentally exposing the behind-the-scenes of making a documentary, I tried to fulfil the same investigative function as the French *Cinéma Verité* artists.

A few words should be said about the practical and ethical concerns of working with real people and with their real-world experiences, many of which have been unpleasant or possibly triggering painful memories. Since many of the participants were artists in exile (see Chapter 2.3), their experiences were deeply personal and, in some cases, politically sensitive. I was careful not to pressure anyone into sharing more than they felt comfortable with. The interviews were conducted in a safe, respectful environment where they had the freedom to stop or withdraw at any time. In post-production, I remained open to feedback from participants regarding how their stories were portrayed, ensuring they felt represented truthfully and with dignity.

As for the crew, I tried to maintain at all times a collaborative and ethical working environment. I ensured that everyone involved was treated with respect, paid fairly where possible, and given clear roles and responsibilities. Given that filmmaking can be a demanding process, I was mindful of the workload and the challenges that came with working under difficult conditions, particularly for those handling sensitive material.

When working with my editor (see Chapter 2.7), who was based in Iran and in the process of deciding whether to leave the country, I was transparent about the risks associated with the project. I made sure he understood the potential consequences of working on politically sensitive material and allowed him to make an informed decision. Once he committed, I took precautions to protect him, including secure methods of transferring footage and limiting digital exposure that could attract unwanted attention.

Handling footage safely was a critical ethical consideration. Given the risk of government surveillance and censorship in Iran, I had to ensure that the footage was transported securely. Instead of using online transfer methods, which could be intercepted, I arranged for trusted individuals to physically carry hard drives between Iran and the UK. I only involved people I knew personally and who fully understood the responsibility. This cautious approach was necessary to protect not just the footage but also those involved in the film's production.

One of my core ethical concerns was ensuring that the film did not exploit the experiences of my contributors for dramatic effect. While exile and migration often come with hardship, I did not want to portray the participants solely as victims. Instead, I sought to highlight their resilience, creativity, and agency, offering a more balanced and truthful representation of their experiences.

I was also conscious of the emotional toll that revisiting painful memories could have on my participants. I approached each interview with sensitivity, giving them space to tell their stories on their own terms. If any of them expressed discomfort or hesitation, I respected their boundaries and did not push them to share more than they were willing to. For example in the film there is a scene that Mr Hossein Khosrojerdi cries, that moment my cinematographer wasn't sure if he should continue filming or not, but I told him to do so. After that I showed the footage to Mr Khosrojerdy and asked him if he is happy to use his emotional moments and he confirmed yes. So I made sure to take care of my participants.

Given the political climate surrounding exile and migration, there was always a risk that certain aspects of the film could be considered controversial. I carefully navigated these challenges, ensuring that no one was put at unnecessary risk. Where needed, I took steps to protect identities, either by omitting certain details or framing the narrative in a way that minimised potential dangers for those still living in Iran.

2.2 Employing the Interview Style

As my documentary focuses primarily on personal experiences, the choice of interviewees and the questions they are asked are paramount. The aim of this section is to analyse how the interviews were designed and conducted. Issues relating to the choice of contributors will be discussed in the following section (See 2.3).

The first thing that should be addressed is the simple fact that the interference (or mediation) of a camera necessarily influences what happens in front of it. The camera and its history and associated symbolism are thus shape considerably the outcomes of the interview. Such fact is the premise behind Mitchell Block's, *No Lies* (1973), where a young woman is confronted by her date and his camera, whereby her date is a purported film student practicing his camera work. The man conducts an informal interview, lightly asking standard questions about her routines and her life. However, the interview goes awry when she admits to having been sexually assaulted some nights before. At the end of the film, the audience learns that the whole interaction had been scripted, and the events depicted in the short film were fictional. However, the film does make a point: that despite being an inanimate object, a camera can radically change the behaviour of people.

There have been instances when the impact of a camera was recorded in video in real life. In his film, *Level 5* (1997), Chris Marker shows real footage from the American invasion of Okinawa and Saipan, in 1944. He claims not to be interested in the real conflict *per se*, but since he wants to design a video game based on the events of the Battle of Okinawa, he needs to understand what happened at the time. For this reason, Chris Marker interviews survivors and historians, and investigates not only how the battle between the American and the Imperial Japanese armies developed, but also the impact of the invasion on the civil population, many of whom were opposed to the Japanese occupation. In particular, Chris Marker pays attention to frames of footage from Saipan during the latter part of the Second World War. Saipan is located in the Northern Mariana Islands, which had been under Japanese occupation since 1914. When the Americans disembarked in 1944, the local inhabitants started to fear violence on the part of both armies, so many of the inhabitants took desperate measures. In a particular film clip shown by Marker, one can see a woman standing by the edge of a cliff. Upon pondering her choices, she decides to jump to her death. However, just before jumping, a remarkable thing happens, which the director points out: the

woman looks briefly in the direction of the camera, acknowledging the fact that she was being filmed. This prompts Marker to ask, “Do we know she would have jumped if at the last minute she hadn’t known she was watched?” (Blümlinger, 2010: 11).

On the other hand, the supposed absence of a camera, in situations such as hidden-camera documentaries (famously featured in Michael Moore films such as *Sicko*, 2007) allows for things to happen that might not otherwise have happened if the depicted individuals were aware of the existence of a camera. This was pointed out as early as 1946 by Van Dyke, who noted that “the camera is sometimes the spectator, sometimes the unseen observer; sometimes it seems to be the books themselves. There is interpretation and fluidity here” (1946: 408). However, hidden-camera footage is considered highly unethical and, in most countries, also illegal (Lin, 2013: 112). While some films use hidden cameras as a device for engaging in questionable and exploitative practices (e.g. Maleno and Roberto Malenotti’s 1964 exploitation documentary, *Slave trade in the world today*), others like Werner Herzog have used concealed cameras, smuggled into North Korea, to pick up images that would never otherwise have seen the light in the West (See *Into the Inferno*, 2016).

From these examples, it is clear that the addition of a camera to human interactions has the power to change said interactions, and so it should be accounted for when planning the shooting of a film. This is especially true in documentary films, as more often than not, the protagonists are common people, and not trained actors (Lacey & McElroy, 2010). As a result, the actors’ inexperience and lack of knowledge as to how their image will turn out in the finished work plays an important role in their behaviour.

Sarah Pink (2004) has discussed in-depth the differences between audio-recorded and video-recorded interviews: “By the video interview I mean not simply a video-recorded interview. Rather a situation where the video camera and the informant’s understanding of video’s potential for representation is an integral part of the interview itself and of the way it is analysed” (Pink, 2004: 62). Indeed, in line with Goffman’s idea of ‘dramaturgy’ (1959), social actors act differently according to where they are placed, whether frontstage or backstage.

My own experience in the making of *Colours of Exile* also reached this conclusion, as it soon became clear in my research that the preliminary interviews with some artists turned

out considerably different from those interviews in which I used the filming equipment, even when discussing similar topics. This was true in Amir Ali Khosrojerdi's interview, for example.

While the above differences were expected, a different issue arose in the course of the film's pre-production: the use of online meeting software such as Zoom and Skype. Some of the interviews I did for *Colours of Exile* would have taken massive effort and time, were it not for the availability of video calling software. In some cases, these interviews were time-sensitive. Such was the case with Mr Ebrahim Golestan, whom I was only able to interview via phone call, due to his unfortunate passing soon after.

There are two important aspects that differ between these online interviews and the more conventional face-to-face interviews, which I learned in the interview process: first, in terms of the online interviews, the drawback of the two (or more) participants of the interview not being in the same room and space, such as missing out on the personal connection of body language; second, the familiarity most people had developed with Zoom meetings, thanks to the global pandemic of COVID-19 and the lockdowns that were put in place around the world. To my surprise, the people I interviewed via Skype or Zoom were considerably more comfortable than those in face-to-face interviews who were not accustomed to being captured by a cinema camera.

Regarding the actual interview questions and the way the interviews were conducted, I spent a lot of time developing a set of questions I could ask every interviewee. These had to do in general with their own particular experiences, and particularly in their insights of what being an expatriate meant. For this reason, I asked repeatedly about their life before and after leaving Iran, the reasons they left Iran, as well as their definitions of exile. As I explained in section 2.1, my intentions in this documentary were to make some points about the hardships of exile, based on the personal experiences of actual expatriate artists from Iran.

Returning to Goffman's (1959: 8) idea that each interview is both a performance by the interviewee and a possible platform to get a message across, I decided to relinquish the directorial role over the interviewees for the duration of the exchange. As such, not only did I choose to listen much more than I spoke, but to remove my voice altogether from the interview, editing out the parts when I spoke and asked questions (See Figure. 3). I took

further distance from the interviewees when I showed myself in the film, either editing interviews on the computer or watching them projected onto a screen.

This fly-on-the-wall interview style was highly successful in Kim Longinotto and Ziba Mir-Hosseini's *Divorce Iranian Style* (1998), a documentary on the institutional violence against (mainly) women in real divorce court cases from Iran. In comparison, I should note that my task was considerably easier, for Longinotto's subjects were already under tremendous stress and grief during the filming of the documentary. I used this technique especially for the interviews I conducted outdoors, where I had a camera closely follow the subjects and myself while we were engaged in a friendly and relaxed talk. I considered that this interviewing situation generated less feelings of pressure or responsibility (at least, in the mind of the interviewees) compared to a staged, sitting-down interview on a set. In some cases, as with the singer Niaz Navab, I chose to listen to what she had to share, as she seemed not to notice the gaze of the camera and was distinctly relaxed during the interview. In other cases, like the recorded outdoor talks with Mohsen Makhmalbaf, I was myself one of the subjects, and achieved the same familiarity with which we normally conversed when there is no camera filming us.

Furthermore, I noticed that some of the people I interviewed seemed to be poorly suited for a sitting-down interview. Such was the case with Amir Ali Khosrojerdi, a young rapper that goes by the name of Zakhmi. As mentioned above, on the set, Zakhmi was quite stressed and would constantly check with me if he was 'doing ok', if he looked well or if the answers he provided were the correct ones (Figure. 4). This, of course, was not the intended process of interview, so I switched to a standing and an action interview, where I would film him going about his regular chores at home (Figure. 5). This experience prompted me to vary my methods of interviewing people, as many of the artists I talked to were quite experienced in giving interviews and felt comfortable just sitting with the Lavalier microphone clipped on their lapel and having the camera lens within their line of sight the whole time.



Fig. 3 Iraj Emami in his home/studio



Fig. 4 Amir Ali Khosrojerdi (Zakhmi)



Fig. 5 Amir Ali Khosrojerdi (Zakhmi) in standing interview

Employing this active interviewing strategy had an interesting effect. I intended to move away from a structured approach to the interviews, asking the same questions in most cases and inquiring about certain topics that I had been interested in. In turn, I employed a less structured interviewing method, removing my intervention from the interviews. The result is that, when the spectator watches the film, the interviewees seem to be casually conversing among themselves. For instance, in an early version of the film I included a handful of separate interviews that discuss the use of the mother tongue in the interviews and in their art. The people expressed some agreements and some particular views on the subject, but the inclusion of all of them, edited back-to-back into a single segment of the film, forces the viewer to identify a connection and a dialogue between them. Leger Grindon (2007) draws attention to the “Polyvalence” of interviews, a property that emerges not from the discourse of the subjects but from the whole montage of interviews: “Rather than a unified film that articulates a clear attitude towards its subject, the ensemble of interviews may contribute to a range of opinions in which a genuine tension of conflict emerges” (Grindon, 2007: 8). Despite the broad range of different experiences each particular interviewee offers, a general mood emerges that is common to all of them and has to do with their status as exiles. Together, they transmit some of their desperation, hope, nostalgia, and an array of emotions that cannot be put into words, to the audience.

This also expresses a creative use of the principle discovered by Lev Kuleshov in the 1920s (Prince & Hensley, 1992) about the cognitive power of editing. In the final cut of the film, instead, there are two main sequences of interviews. The first one is meant to present the characters, and consequently makes use of the fragments of interview that were more personal to them and not necessarily shared by the other interviewees. For instance, Maryam Hashemi explains that she dislikes telling people she is Iranian, and Afshin Naghouni recalls moving cities several times due to the war, implying that “even in Iran I was a migrant at different points in my life”. It is only in the second sequence of interviews that their testimonies begin to dialogue between each other.

One important point is that I let the participants decide for themselves where the interview was going to take place. Almost unanimously, the chosen settings was their homes or studios (Figure. 6). This did not strike me as particularly notable at first, as I too was most comfortable at home, where I worked on my film. It was only when editing those interviews, sat at my desk, that a realisation came to me that it was not just the familiarity of the space that made them choose it, but the activities they carried out there. Indeed, for us artists in exile, apart from our individual voices and our collective language, there was a third factor that would remain ours forever: our work.

Furthermore, this was a safe space, where they could be free to express themselves. In this respect, I was heavily influenced by the interview style of Jennie Livingston’s *Paris is Burning* (1990). The setting in this film is a story in itself, for example, the books and paintings in the artists’ studios where filming took place.



Fig. 6 Interviewing Mohsen Makhmalbaf

Some interesting findings arose directly from the interviews. While the main question, ‘what does migration mean to you’, was quite standard, the follow-up questions and the remainder of the interview would be directed to where the subjects took them. For example, quite surprisingly, Hossein Khosrojerdi claimed in his interview that, in actuality, to lose one’s identity was a kind of ‘gift’, for it was an opportunity to build oneself from the ground up. In an action shot, Mohsen Makhmalbaf points to a suitcase and says: ‘this is my entire life’. Everything he owns fits in that carry-on bag (Figure. 7). As we will discuss later (See Chapter 2.6), such an approach to identity tends to appear in interviews with refugees and expatriates. Authors like Haile et al. (2020: 27) point out the complex mechanisms that come into play when ‘negotiating’ an identity, thus they prefer to talk about ‘identity markers’ rather than an essentialising definition of identity. In the case of *Colours of Exile*, I was aware that expatriates may engage in different ‘identity performances’ and representations of their own selves according to specific needs, just as refugees usually try to satisfy the expectations of

donors and refugee-camp managers (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2011). This is why I tried not to steer the interviews to any given place or direction, but to simply listen.

Identity was also at the heart of Maryam Hashemi's testimony, whom I interviewed at the place where she was currently painting, namely an underpass in London. There, she questioned her own identity, and made the important distinction between what she felt inside, and what she told people. According to her, she had found it easier to reply to questions about her provenance to just say "London". Accepting her place in this sprawling megalopolis was to her an important part of getting to know herself better. She explains it in this way:

As I became more comfortable with myself and my own presence, I was able to see and feel more at home here. It was interesting when I realised that my relationship with myself had many issues, and when I came here, I finally understood and asked myself, "Who am I?, and what am I?" (Interview with Maryam Hashemi for *Colours of Exile*).



Fig. 7 Mohsen Makhmalbaf's carry-on bag

2.3 Subjects: Why Artists in Exile and not Ordinary People?

Originally, I set out to interview only Iranian filmmakers. However, I understood that artists in general have certain comparable experiences, and that their points of view would greatly benefit the film in general.

It is important to limit the scope of the film in this sense because of the sensible distinction between refugees and expatriates. The former have received, as mentioned in Chapter 2.1, extensive coverage in recent documentary films (Hiltunen, 2019; Trencsényi & Naumescu, 2021). Films like *Chauka, Please Tell Us the time* (Behrouz Buchani, 2017) narrate the horrors of refugee camps, while others like *Sonita* (Rokhsareh Ghaemmaghami, 2015) denounce the terrible conditions in which refugees have to live when they move to countries that are also under a dictatorial regime (in this case, the story of a young musician who flees Afghanistan and establishes herself in Iran). Shown besides each other, these hardships compared to an interview with a musician in Europe who had his lyrics censored in Iran may seem like a minor thing. This is why this documentary film only dealt with the exiled group of people, rather than also including refugees.

In his interview, Mr. Khosrojerdi notes the important distinction between migration and exile. The latter refers not to a life choice, but a necessity, oftentimes (but not always) because of life-threatening situations in your home country. However, there is a further distinction to make, and that is for those who are exiled for political or economic reasons. The participants and I are in the former group, but it is no less true that we were forced to leave Iran. While it might seem easy to just forget one's art, to just avoid making political statements or filming things that could be considered controversial by the government, artists will almost always find these options unbearable, and prefer to start over somewhere else. The counterpart of Viktor Kossakovsky's first rule for directing ("Don't film if you can live without filming") is that once you become a filmmaker, then you can no longer live without filming. Here, again, the perfect example is Jafar Panahi. No threat of violence, no amount of arrests, no time in Evin could make him renounce filming. As Jill Godmilow explains: "To me, he's a heroic figure, for defying the authorities, for figuring out how to keep making films, and for producing, one after another, superb cinema." (Godmilow, 2022: 118). This is an appreciation shared by most of the people I interviewed, and it is present in their answers too, as they all explain why they could not continue to do their jobs in Iran.

For a better exposition of this important fact, I decided to interview several artists who are representative of a broader segment of the expatriate community. By dealing with the immigration issue and its effects on the creativity of Iranian artists, the film tries to share some of the difficulties and hidden costs of exile through the artists' words. My film attempts to discover the secrets of Iranian artists in exile to find an answer to its central question of, what is the impact of exile on artists? The film creates an opportunity for the audience to think about migration and immigrant issues, or even to experience it on the screen if they do not know what it is like to be taken away from one's home and homeland by force.

I think one of the most important moments in the documentary film is when Mr Hossein Khosrojerdi starts crying when he talks about one of Iran's greatest filmmakers, Mr Bahram Beyzaei. When editing the film, I was faced with the ethical choice to either cut or leave this shot in the final cut. After careful consideration, I decided to use that shot as it is (with Mr Hossein Khosrojerdi's consent), without cutting it or changing it. It is a moving moment that encapsulates perfectly what Iran means to artists, and helps better understand our struggle, objectives and choices.

Naturally, I started out interviewing filmmakers, if only because they were closer to me and I already had many contacts. Apart from Mohsen Makhmalbaf and myself, *Colours of Exile* counted with the participation of director Iraj Emami, producer/director Bahman Maghsoudlou, and actor Soussan Farokhnia. I am also very thankful that Mr Ebrahim Golestan had the kindness to grant me an interview over the phone, despite his old age at that time. Unfortunately, Mr Golestan passed away on the 22nd of August this year. He is the first Iranian filmmaker to win an international award for a documentary film. His appearance also enriches the film because a wide arrange of opinions and experiences are offered, not only from people who have recently migrated, but also artists who have done so half a century ago.

Soon I was acquainted with an extensive mesh of artists in exile. For instance, Ebrahim Golestan had worked with a talented writer by the name of Ghazi Rabiavi, whom I met and interviewed for *Colours of Exile*. Considerably younger than Golestan, he published his first short stories in the 1980s, and because of them he ended up imprisoned in the recently constructed Evin Prison, in Tehran, among many other political prisoners. He was a prominent member of the Iranian Writers' Association until it was banned in 1981 by the Iranian

authorities, but this did not deter him, as he continued to write and meet with other subversive writers, including the well-known novelist Houshang Golschiri.

Other artists involved in the making of this documentary were the painters Hossein Khosrojerdi, Maryam Hashemi, and Afshin Naghouni, along with the singer Niaz Nawab (In France) and rap artists Amir Ali Khosrojerdi, who does rap under the pen name Zakhmi, and his wife Soghand. They are based in London, where they are developing a successful career in music.

2.4 Voice Over: Use of my Daughters' Voice

As Jeffrey Ruoff points out, "Voice-over has long been one of the stylistic signatures of documentary sound" (1993: 31). Indeed, the voice-of-god style is one of the most characteristic featured of classical documentaries, concerned mainly with exposition and with transmitting a reassurance that what you are being told and what you are seeing is nothing but the truth (Wolfe, 1997: 149). Perhaps the clearest example is the American series of 20-minute newsreels *The March of Time* (1935-1951), voiced by Westbrook Van Voorhis. In Britain, John Grierson was one of the pioneers of narrated documentaries, with *Night Mail* (1936) perhaps being his finest, with a text written by none other than the British-American poet W. H. Auden. Voice-of-god narration has been extensively used in nature and scientific documentaries, of which I can mention the 1975 Golden Globe winner, *Beautiful People* (Jamie Uys), or BBC's *The Life of Birds* (1998) and its follow-up *The Life of Mammals* (2002), both unmistakably voiced by Sir David Attenborough.

Roy Paul Madsen describes the uses of voice-over in classical documentaries:

Narration in documentary film may be used to add verbal information, to relate scenes on the screen to preceding scenes, to add colour, mood and feeling, to point out an important detail, to increase or hold back the tempo and to tell the viewer what action to take as the consequence of having seen the documentary film (Madsen, 1973: 338).

Interestingly, other (mostly contemporary) documentaries use the voice-of-god not to convince the audience of something, or to transmit a scientific truth, but instead creatively, sometimes satirically, or as a form of mockery. This is how, for example, Alain Resnais convincingly tells a tale that may or may not be true about the National Library of Paris in his short film, *All the Memory in the World* (1956). This uses an approach that had already been taken to the extreme in Luis Buñuel's *Las Hurdes* (or *The Land Without Bread*, 1933), where the filmmaker tells either ostensible exaggerations or direct falsehoods. *Blood of the Beasts* (Jules Franju, 1949), with its collected and monotone description of what happens at a French slaughterhouse, is another example of ridicule by way of the voiceover. Ross McElwee's *Sherman's March* (1986), cleverly uses narration in a highly personal and satirical way, not as

an all-knowing disembodied voice, but as a way of speaking directly to the viewer. Patricio Guzmán used voice-over as a way to stress the veracity of certain tragic events during Chile's dictatorship period that had up until then been hidden by the press and historians (*The Pearl Button*, 2015).

Finally, there have been efforts to deconstruct the voice-of-god trope. One recent example was that of the remake of Carl Sagan's classic documentary series, *Cosmos: A Spacetime Odyssey* (2014). This documentary uses the voice and image of black American astrophysicist Neil DeGrasse Tyson, of whose credentials nobody can doubt, but who belongs to a stereotypical criminal demographic (Corner, 1996: 171). Last, Chris Marker had the two main versions of his magnum opus, *Sans Soleil*, narrated by women (Florence Delay in French, and Alexandra Stewart in English), something that was surprisingly unusual at the time.

With these examples in mind, it is clear for me that I should not discard the use of voice-over based on its associations to dated tropes and obsolete documentary styles (Drew Robert, 1983: 271-273). Stella Bruzzi explains that "The negative portrayal of voice-over is largely the result of the development of a theoretical orthodoxy that condemns it for being inevitably and inherently didactic (Bruzzi, 2000: 40), but this is no longer the case (Wolfe, 1997: 150). It is an interesting tool, if used properly, though it is worth mentioning that Drew Robert is completely against the use of narration in documentary, which he considers to be "what you do when you fail" to tell a story with image and sound (1983: 271). Sarah Kozloff is of the same opinion, even describing voice-over in documentaries as "the last resort of the incompetent" (1988: 21). While these strong statements may be true in many cases, it is not, as I have tried to prove here, the general rule for all documentaries.

In *Colours of Exile*, I intended to take a different approach to the voice-over, by distancing myself from the classical use of an authoritative, deep, manly voice that speaks as it is the only truth. Instead, the voices I chose are those of my own daughters, aged seven at the time of the filming, who represent and contribute more innocent perspectives which I hope will engage the viewer to the emotions in the documentary.

On this note, one interesting experiment I did was to have my daughters interview me on camera (See Figure 8). It was an open interview, and the only prompt I gave them was to ask me anything they were interested in, on the subject of my arrival to the UK. It was a

disconcerting experience, as I was worried that they would ask certain questions that I either had no answer to, or that I could not answer truthfully. In their upbringing, I put considerable effort into teaching them that wherever we were, that was their home. However, that is not the truth for me, as my identity is marked by exile. After interviewing many artists and asking them questions about exile, I wanted to give an opportunity to my daughters to ask me the same questions, to ask how exile had impacted me, and why I was here so far away from home.

The interview with my daughters was considerable in length, but in the final cut there are two main questions they asked me that survived, and none of them are explicitly answered in the film. The first question is “what does migration mean?”. The second question is “Why did you come here?”. I was astounded at my daughters’ curiosity and understanding of our position, and the reason I do not answer on film is because I want the film to be the answer.

On the one hand, I wanted my daughters, and the viewers, to know the truth about Iran and how the government and the dictatorship created the series of problems faced by Iranian people and artists in particular. On the other hand, I did not want to ruin my daughters’ view about a country that they are hoping to visit and might do so in the future. This experience made me think deeply about my own discourse about Iran, and how it may sound contradictory to others, especially since I am constantly describing the country as both a special place on earth, and one that has caused me so much pain and anguish. In the editing process of *Colours of Exile* (See Chapter 2.7), I learned that the same contradictions arose in most of the interviews.



Fig. 8 My daughters interviewing me at home

One other reason I had for using a voice different than my own, is that I wished not to have a central place in my documentary. In fact, my goal was to be just amongst the rest of the Iranian artists in exile. My voice is equal to the voices of others, and ours together is the voice of exile. Therefore, mine is not a film in the ‘diary’ style, as that of Jonas Mekas’ important work *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania* (1974), where the whole point of the film was to express the director’s own, particular experiences. In my film, on the contrary, my experiences are shared with other protagonists in a similar situation as myself. Just because I am the director does not mean that my point of view is more important than the rest. Nor did I wish my voice to appear as omniscient, for that would defeat the purpose of portraying myself and the other subjects as people living precarious lives in places we have not chosen freely.

In *Colours of Exile*, the decision to use voice-over felt challenging at first because the movie was dealing with many artists, and each had their own story to share; as a filmmaker, my initial resolve was not to use any narration and let the story find its own way visually. Moreover, I was trying to escape from making a purely dialogical film, populated by talking heads alone. The testimonies had to be present, of course, but having done the interviews and collected all the pieces of information given by the subjects, I found myself lacking a coherent story. All I had were several interviews with a number of artists, each with their views and stories about being in exile, with no convincing narrative arc to engage the viewer.

I decided on the addition of my daughters' voice as narration, because I felt that they hold somewhat paradoxical positions, and that this would add some ambiguity to the story. My daughters were brought up in the UK, but their background and ethnicity are Iranian. They have and have not been marked by exile. This in-between status was compelling to me, and also a unique point of view. No other person featured in the documentary shares their particular vision. Furthermore, no one else, I truly believe, could express themselves with the simplicity and knowledge they show in their interventions: "Our father has not been in Iran for a long time. He wants to take us there", to which her sister adds, "Our grandfather is there". I believe this short exchange is an example of powerful storytelling, hinting at the objectives and desires of different characters at the same time.

In addition, I noticed that my presence in the film does not on its own offer much information about my life and me. I had to find a way to describe who I am and why I am making this film. My daughters' narration and their conversation about me could add more context to the film, and they have such a simple way of laying out the facts that the audience is guaranteed not to get confused, and can perceive me as a filmmaker who tries to tell the story of Iranian artists in exile. The fact that my daughters were in the documentary and talked to me was a way to show more about my life in exile without taking the attention away from other people and things.

I chose to start the film with their testimony, in which they express their own very particular point of view regarding who they are, who I am, and what my film is about. They present themselves at the beginning, then present me and my profession. They move back and forth between Farsi and English, but they are fully aware of this, knowing that they come from a migrant family despite having been born in the UK. In fact, this sequence would not have worked if it were not for precisely this awareness of their societal place, their ethnicity, and the purpose and subject of the documentary. Sometimes, they speak to the audience. Other times, they discuss between themselves. In a deleted scene Maia would ask: "Is he going to be a filmmaker?"; "He already is a filmmaker", replies Shanna. Theirs is not the manly, omniscient and authoritative voice of Ernest Hemingway (who voiced *The Spanish Earth*, Joris Ivens, 1937). They are dubitative, playful, and they provide a unique point of view, not usually seen in films. One example of a young girl providing a voiceover is *My Paper Life* (Vida Dena, 2022), where the film's protagonist, a Syrian girl named Rima, flees her country

to Belgium. While Rima experienced the cruel drama of the war, Shanna and Maia (my daughters) are detached enough from the topics discussed on the film to be genuinely intrigued about its outcome. Also, Shanna and Maia offer the film a certain naïve freshness that helps set the tone apart from other films in which there is excessive solemnity and a tragical aura around the topic of migration (e.g. *Human Flow*, Ai Weiwei, 2017). However, naïvety is not the same as obliviousness. They are, as I explained earlier, fully aware of our position, and they express this by telling the audience that this film is “about a journey”. The idea of a journey encapsulates perfectly what exile is, not an in-between experience (see Chapter 1), not being stuck away from home, but a fluid, unfinished state that means something different to everyone.

As I pointed out above, I feel lucky that with few prompts and full disclosure about the topics discussed in my film, my daughters were able to carry out both my interview and the voice-over parts of the documentary. Apart from their voices, they lent their images to the film, and the camera shows them carrying out their daily activities, trying to raise me out of bed, and even going on a family excursion (see section 2.5)

My daughters’ voices are partially my own, as I raised them with constant references to and stories about Iran. At the same time, although they were born away from Iran, exile is part of their budding lives. This creates a personal dilemma, because at the same time that I want them to know what is happening in Iran, I feel happy that they did not have to experience what I have been through before taking the decision to migrate. To this effect, Werner Herzog’s *Ballad of the Little Soldier* (1984) is a harrowing example of children being put through things no child should ever have to experience. My daughters’ interventions were unscripted, and it would also be unfair to downplay their individuality and agency in their thoughts and discourse. After all, would *Paradise Lost* have been the same epic poem had it not been dictated to John Milton’s daughters by their blind father?

2.5 The Camper Van

A film that is about a journey and about the movement of a population over long distances and for a long time cannot be anchored in the rigidity and stillness of talking heads⁶. A series of people of different ages and backgrounds are asked the same two questions: Who are they, and what do they want from life? When I interviewed several people of similar backgrounds and ages, about the topic of exile, I realised it would not fit the dynamics of the film.

Several films, now grouped as a kind of genre popularly called 'road movies', use movement and transportation to develop a cultural critique: "road movies generally aim beyond the borders of cultural familiarity, seeking the unfamiliar for revelation, or at least for the thrill of the unknown" (Laderman, 2002: 1-2). This definition is, in my opinion, highly relevant for the analysis in this thesis. This is due to the emphasis placed on culture, and the (un)familiarity of settings, which not only serve as a form of deconstructing deeply rooted cultural biases, but also as a narrative device that brings the spectator closer to the protagonists of the film, due to them sharing the sense of alienation (in the sense of Bertolt Brecht).

Road movies, as Eyerman & Löfgren (1995) remind us, have been a long-standing staple of American cinema. However, one needs not be part of a society that has been built entirely around roads and highways and that is "constantly changing (...) on the move somewhere" (Eyerman & Löfgren, 1995: 53), in order to understand the topic of movement and travelling. There are, though rare, "European road movies", described by Laderman (2002: 247-282). Furthermore, it would be misleading to only consider proper road movies who prominently feature long driving sequences. Instead, I opt a more encompassing definition, centred on a principle called the 'mobilisation of narrative' (Orgeron, 2008: 13). Road movies come in all shapes and sizes, and a cabal example of this style is Abbas Kiarostami's timeless classic *The Taste of Cherry* (1997).

In summary, sequences that are themed around a road trip help mobilise the story, bringing a certain dynamism to the film (Orgeron, 2008: 13), and place the protagonists in a

⁶ Krzysztof Kieslowski's short documentary film *Talking Heads* (1980) succeeds in the use of this device precisely because his film is about definitions.

new setting with which neither them nor the spectators are familiar. This helps with character identification and serves as an equaliser in terms of the information the audience receives. They know what the people on the screen know.

Mobility and dynamism are emphasised during different moments of the film, for instance, in the already mentioned scene where Mr. Makhmalbaf talks about his travelling suitcase, or in time-lapse shot of a bustling central London. The latter is used to show how expatriates are sometimes anchored to a place, unable to freely return home or go where they wish, while the rest of the world seems to have somewhere to be. In the documentary, my daughters and I do not make the trip I wish to take, but the one that we can. That is, an excursion to the countryside. In reality, my biggest wish is to travel either back in time or back to Iran. Also, the excursion shown in the film is a trip that is more relatable to a wider audience compared to that of exile, which most viewers have not experienced. I wanted to evoke that feeling of travelling, in which we are away from home and somewhat out of place. Even when one wants to get away, it always feels alien at some point. This is the reason why the sequence that follows the scene where I ask the girls if they would like to go camping, even when there is rain forecast, is a montage of different interview fragments where the subjects discuss the bitter taste of migration. The contrast between the shots and scenes that involve the camping excursion and some rigid, fixed camera interviews only highlights that the movement that ensues in the excursion is only apparent, barely a simulacrum of freedom. This is further emphasised by the use of drone footage from the camping site, giving the appearance of a kind of surveillance and of being observed and controlled.

Regarding the impossibility of turning back the time to my happiest times in Iran, films have the strange capacity, famously pointed out by André Bazin (1960[1958]), of preserving people and images from the past like the process of mummification did in ancient Egypt: “Photography does not create eternity, as art does, it embalms time, rescuing it simply from its proper corruption” (Bazin 1960[1958]: 8). In a way, making a film about Iranian artists in exile is a form of time travelling, of protecting the memory of those who had to leave their country for another place they can never truly call home.

The camper van itself is full of signs of a journey that maybe I have done in the past and which has taken me far from Iran forever. Other signs can be read as promises of a future when I return to my homeland, which all the characters in my film, and especially myself, have

been struggling with for years. The van starts moving, and I begin a journey with my family in the heart of the film, reminding the audience not to forget that we are guests here, and still traveling on countless journeys so that one day the flight to the homeland and the end of being away from home will take place.

My feelings toward the camping trip are in direct contradiction to those of my daughters, visibly excited throughout the experience and showing in that attitude a difference with my own feelings as an expatriate. For me, this is but a small fragment of the real journey of my dreams, which would take me back to an Iran, and that may not even exist outside of my mind (or the expatriate's collective mind). This small world inside the campervan is, from the point of view of my children, filled to the brim with their known family members, songs in Farsi, and the laughter of girls and parents alike. But it should not cast shade on the bigger world that was lost to them before they were even born, because of exile.

Upon arrival, the party gathers together to eat marshmallows and drink tea by the fire. This is the time I make use of a drone to get an aerial shot of the camping site, and I use this shot to stress how small the world built by the fire is, compared to the vast countryside that surrounds us. It serves as a humbling reminder of how exile brings us together, but at the same time curtails our freedom of movement and expression. It may be cosy and warm by the fire, but the larger picture is more obscure and daunting.

The drone shot is useful because it shows a reality the people depicted in the documentary ignore. In fact, even when I was myself in front of the camera, my approach to the entire camping sequence was close to that of the Maysles brothers. In their films they "wish to show people living their own lives and speaking their own thoughts with a minimum of structuring of events by the filmmaker" (Haleff, 1964: 19). For example, the casual conversation between mother and daughter about their garden expenses in *Grey Gardens* (1975) can be compared with the candid conversations I have with my daughters about life in Iran, which may be followed by a simple observation about eating marshmallows or anything of the sort. I tried not to steer the action towards a previously thought script or outline, but instead be as honest as I could by allowing the camera to record the events.

2.6 Locations and the Carrying of the TV Box

The outskirts where we camped are in direct contrast with the city, whose bustling and crowded nature is emphasised by the already mentioned time-lapse shot. The camper van sequence that I have just described (See section 2.5) serves the purpose of setting in motion the documentary, from the bustling city to the tranquil countryside.

All things considered, the location scouting for *Colours of Exile* was met with the same contradictions and ambiguity that my subjects describe in their interviews. For once, I had the freedom to choose my own filming locations, something that is not common in documentary filmmaking. As two scholars state, “plan as you might, film locations often seem to pick themselves, sometimes for arbitrary, sometimes for practical reasons” (Barbash & Taylor, 1997: 37). The reasons for this are obvious, and one of the best examples is again *Gimme Shelter* (1970), where the Maysles brothers had no choice but to follow the Rolling Stones on tour, shooting wherever the band were at the moment. I had none of these constraints. If anything, as I will explain later, I was limited not in the locations I could film, but in the places I could not.

On the other hand, despite the freedom I just described, I chose not to use any exotic locations based on aesthetics or any significance of the place. This is further emphasised in the scarce use of establishing shots, the almost non-existence of wide shots of the landscape, and the fact that the outside shots were filmed with no regard for the weather. In fact, most of the locations were shot during cloudy, rainy days. These directorial choices serve two purposes: First, they contribute to the general tone of the film, which I would not consider to be especially cheerful; Secondly, and more importantly, they stress something I wanted to convey in every aspect of the film, which is the fact that expatriates do not belong either to their original country nor to their host country. They bring their own personal Iran with them - a country that, as I have stressed multiple times, may or may not exist outside of their imaginations. But in any case, locations themselves are irrelevant, and the proof stands in the similar descriptions and testimonies recorded from Iranian artists in exile who may be in London, in Belgium, France, or even Berlin.

As I pointed out in chapter 2.2, artists in exile bring their own world wherever they go, and they almost invariably try to build their studios to the image and likeness of that world.

Painters' workshops, sound recording studios, a writer's desk full of their papers and half-read books, or simply a showroom where they keep their works of art, are to them their own pieces of land where they feel free and safe. I wanted to show these places, not only because the interviews would be more successful there, but also because it tells so much about life in exile. I used long shots of the studios, tight shots of certain objects and works that I found especially interesting, and even cutaway shots to corners of the small spaces, a technique that was perfected by Yasujiro Ozu (Burch, 1979: 154) to convey feeling through images that do not show human beings. I did the same to my own private editing and workspace, cutting away from the desk where my laptop usually sits and panning through the movie posters I keep on the walls as reminders of why I want to make films.

The one place in the world that would be necessary for this documentary , but where I could not personally film is, of course, Iran. There are other alternatives, thanks to the 'mummy complex' of cinema, and to the possibilities of animation for instance. Documentary filmmakers have found creative alternatives to shooting on location. *Waltz with Bashir* (Ari Folman, 2008) is an excellent example (Cf. Godmilow 2022: 99). The director, Ari Folman, had witnessed the massacres of Palestinians carried out at the refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila, just outside Beirut. Not only this, but he was a soldier within the occupying army, meaning he was in a position of power. No cameras captured the massacres, and he himself had lost memory of the event. He resorted to animation based on interviews he conducted with his former fellow IDF soldiers in Beirut. However, I chose to show Iran mostly through its music and people. I avoided using extensive archival footage, even though I have an extensive photographic archive. As we will see later, the deliberate obscuring of such memories and images takes meaning at the end of the film. In addition, even when I could have had friends and family send me footage from Iran, I also willingly passed on the opportunity. This was simply because I wished not to talk specifically about Iran, the real country that certainly exists and where the subjects and myself were born. My aim here is to discuss exile, migration, and what happens to the artists that are forced into such situations. Whenever I listen to their interviews, and whenever I lose myself in reminiscence, I come to the same conclusion: that the Iran they describe, the one I have in my mind and about which I tell my children, does not actually exist.

While I only sparsely used images from Iran, I did extensively bring its soundscapes to the film, in the form of music that I like and usually listen to. This is because music is a form of art that stems from imagination and thought; just like my own conception of the country I came from. In this way, the sounds from Iranian artists support, rather than compete with, our collective recollection of how Iran is.

Apart from the music and the locations, I also wanted to emphasise the topics of the film with the use of a wooden TV box, which I show myself transporting to different places throughout the film. Regarding the use of props in cinema, I find quite interesting the concept of MacGuffin, that Alfred Hitchcock has taken from literary studies. A MacGuffin is an object that is irrelevant by itself, and has little to no value, but is nonetheless crucial for the advancement of the film's narrative. The classic example is the falcon statuette from John Huston's *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), especially since at the end of the film it is uncovered as a fake, worthless statue. But without this Maltese falcon, "the stuff that dreams are made of" as Humphrey Bogart bitterly declares, there would be no film.

Since a MacGuffin is above all things a device to advance the plot, it is rarely used in documentary film. A few examples can be mentioned, such as Wim Wenders' *Lightning Over Water* (1980). In this film, the director wanted to record the last days of Nicholas Ray, the director of *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955). Wenders had learned that Ray, an old friend of his, had gotten an aggressive cancer that would probably kill him. Wenders set up a small crew and went to spend time with Ray, trying to talk to him about all the things he considered would be irreparably lost should death overcome him. Unfortunately, this was exactly what happened, and Wenders found himself without enough material to make a film (Geist, 1980: 48). This is why the second half of the movie does not show the image of the late Ray, but instead his presence is guaranteed with the inclusion of the urn with his ashes. This long sequence comes to a tremendous denouement when the urn is transported on a sailboat along the Bay of San Francisco, where friends of Ray and the crew celebrate Ray's life and eventually toss the ashes into the sea. Again, without the use of the urn as a MacGuffin, the film would have never been finished.

Like the urn containing Nicholas Ray's ashes, my TV box contains part of me, namely my memories. This is implied throughout the film. However, the box is to remain locked until the very end of the film (see following section), at once keeping the mystery and emphasising

the importance of its contents. It will be only thanks to the curiosity of my own children that these contents will be finally exposed, ending the film and breaking the spell.

In a recent Lebanese film that premiered in Rotterdam, *Thiird* (Karim Kassem, 2023) a similar device is used. The protagonist transports a door, complete with its frame, through different sceneries. The door is a symbol for an opening, a passage. But so is the television, as it is used in my documentary. A television allows one to see what is far away. And what is farther away for someone in exile than their homeland? Perhaps it is not even geographically far, as for Mexicans who cross the border illegally and establish themselves in Southern California, but are unable to go back to Mexico. I also see some sort of similarity with using such a device for conveying a message in the movie *Blackboard* (Samira Makhmalbaf 2000), where Kurdish teachers carrying blackboards look for students in the hills and villages of Iran, near the border during the Iran-Iraq war. I have learnt from Mohsen Makhmalbaf that using such a device can be very important in transferring a message that should not be told through voice.

Another reason I had for using a symbolic object is my already discussed effort to use the image more than the filmmaker's voice. My film aims to explain the information to the viewers more visually using images and less narration. In its very basic meaning, I tried to follow the command "Show, don't tell." The recurring motif of moving around in different places while holding a wooden TV is a way for new immigrant filmmakers and other artists who have long lived in exile to talk to each other.

With that explanation, the sacred object of my documentary is the same evocative wooden box that we have known for decades as a television. I carry that box with me, and it keeps reminding me of my goals and what I have lost in exile. Through television, one can see what is far, but one cannot transport oneself to those places. But at the same time, a television set is not just an inanimate object. We place a lot of emotions and significance on that small box. Am I hiding my memories in that television? Is that television reminding me of things I had in Iran? Is this the imaginary life, to paraphrase Edward Said, "Physically here and mentally in Iran"? What happens if I open that box? I wish I could. It is a box that contains the pains common to all immigrants. Should the box be always turned off, like we have been 'turned off' since we left our homeland? The box is a symbol of all the artists who could have done so many things in their homeland, but after they left, they could still do some things but

they could not make films, and just like the television, they stopped working, they paused, being left on stand-by.

The television set is the condensation of the ambiguity and in-betweenness that I have been describing throughout this chapter, and which has appeared in every interview I conducted when making *Colours of Exile*. When I was in Iran, my homeland was the root of my ideas, but it was not possible for me to develop those ideas due to censorship and the many other restrictions. Now that I am in exile, I have the freedom to express and use my ideas, but the guest country is not the place of my ideas, and my ideas have no root here. The metaphor is completed by knowing that to own a TV set in Britain you are, unlike in most countries in the world, required to apply for a licence granted by the King. Unlicensed use of TVs is punished by law. While carrying the box, I feel as if I were myself locked in that box, as if all the filmmakers and artists and other immigrants are locked up in that box, the little house of our collective dream. This dream remains inexhaustible until I can finally make a film in my homeland, until I open the box and let everything out.

When walking in the city centre, carrying the box, followed by the camera, a number of thoughts would intrude and disturb my train of thought, sometimes making me forget I was in the middle of a shooting. I would feel overwhelmed by the sheer number of people passing by, with whom I could not identify. I think these shots really convey my loneliness, my emotional separation regarding my current community, and my physical separation regarding my old one. Where does any person that is forced to migrate belong? Questions of identity are raised at every step an exiled person makes, and no definite answer is ever found.

It is important to note that my film does not seek answers - it barely even pretends to show non-expatriates our own world. For how one can explain certain things to someone who has never taken a nap below the branches of an olive tree, that has never felt the sounds, the soft breeze and the smells it brings. But to let these memories die, by not telling them, by keeping them to ourselves, would be wrong. Just as I was transplanted, uprooted from the soil that watched me germinate, now I feel it my duty to plant my seeds in this soilless city where I currently reside through the use of cinema language.

2.7 Editing and Ending the Film

As I mentioned in Chapter 2.6, even though I could not personally be in Iran, I could have had footage sent to me in the UK. I chose not to, for the film demanded that all the action was set in Europe. However, for the editing process, my reasoning was different. I wanted to have the film edited in Iran by an Iranian editor. In the following paragraphs, I will explain why.

Taking into account the number of editors available in my guest country and the credentials they carry, and knowing the risk and effort to edit the film in another country, having the film edited in Iran may not seem like an especially convenient or even safe choice for editing my film. Furthermore, not being able to work side-by-side with the editor and the delays that working remotely would bring to the film, were calculated pitfalls that I willingly underwent, for reasons that will hopefully become clear.

Editing is an important element of storytelling, and a tool for transmitting emotion and information. Furthermore, this emotional component of editing is not just for the audience, as editing is in itself an emotional process. Some scholars have described a type of point-of-view editing (Carroll, 1993), where the emotions to be communicated to the audience are not those the film tries to bring or enhance, but those of the editors themselves (Carroll, 1979). I decided on an editor with emotions similar to myself, as he is himself in the process of migration, although he has not left the country yet.

Even when the film shows me editing scenes on my laptop, I entrusted the bulk of the editing to another person. This was done to achieve a certain detachment from the film, something I could not have done myself. As Nichols points out, Eisenstein regards defamiliarization as an important tool of montage (Nichols, 2022: xiv). Detachment, in this case, has had two positive effects in the final cut of the film: first, it has made it enjoyable (and understandable) to everyone, and not just myself; Second, a more objective point of view was able to include only the necessary scenes, keeping the film at a reasonable runtime. My involvement in the film and the topic, made it hard for me to cut some of the material. This would have resulted in a ten-hour tour de force comparable (in length, only) to Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985) or Leonardo Favio's *Perón, Symphony of Feeling* (1999), so I decided to give it to someone else who was detached enough that they could cut and edit the film.

Editing *Colours of Exile* was challenging. The biggest barrier I faced was sending the footage to the editor in Iran. This proved to be a huge risk, because if the authorities happened to find out about the movie and get access to the footage, they would certainly arrest my editor and whoever else worked on the film. For this reason, I kept the making of this film strictly to myself, not sharing it publicly to anyone outside the production crew. I was fully transparent with him about the risks involved, ensuring that he was aware of the potential dangers before committing to the project. He was, however, determined and passionate about working on the film. To securely deliver the footage, I had to find trusted individuals in the UK who could physically transport the hard drives to Iran. This process was far from easy, as I could only rely on people I personally knew and trusted.

Another reason for the editing to be carried out in Iran was because the person I chose to edit it was thinking of migration. He wanted to leave country, and I wanted to use his feelings in the documentary. As it turned out, the footage I sent him profoundly impacted his life, as he reportedly decided to postpone his migration process after hearing all the stories about what happens to artists in exile. Needless to say, he was exposed to dozens of hours of footage, while the film ended up having a running time of just over an hour. One imagines that once Iranian artists are free from government censorship, everything will be perfect, which is just not the case. In 2017, I directed a short documentary film titled *The Postman*, in which I tell the story of an Iranian poet who emigrated to the UK and works as a postman. Although he enjoys the job, since it lets him exercise and it takes him only a few hours daily, it is far from the fantasy of most of us who dream of pursuing a career in the arts.

My editor is the same conundrum most of us faced at the time, and I felt a sort of pride in that my film helped him during his process. This achievement also makes me confident that the film will have an impact on the audience, which is of course my main objective. The biggest issue was regarding my editor's safety. I did not wish to place him in a difficult position only because I wanted an editor that was involved with the topics of the film. However, he confirmed several times his enthusiasm in participating in this project, stating that he wanted to edit the film and found the topic and the material quite interesting.

As to the logistics of the editing, I had to send the footage through several different people, instead of all at once, so that it would not arise suspicion among government authorities. For this, I had to find trusted people here in the UK who were travelling to Iran

and willing to take my footage in the form of a hard drive. These safety measures proved successful, as in due time the editor received every hard drive I sent him.

The last topic I want to discuss in this chapter is the ending of the film. Knowing how to end a film is, in documentaries, quite a struggle. This is due to the fact that documentary films deal with reality, and reality has no beginning and no end. The central conflict of the documentary (the exile situation) may never be resolved. As Bill Nichols explains:

Conventional documentaries typically exhibit a narrative with a beginning that demands an ending which resolves the issue identified at the start, a resolution that belongs fully to the world of fiction rather than to a reality where problems persist long after the completion of the film. Real issues cannot be reduced to the damage incurred and obstacles faced in individual cases and specific instances, nor can they be resolved within an hour or two of screen time (Nichols, 2022: xiii).

Rarely does the perfect ending present itself to the filmmaker, for instance when Werner Herzog was filming a zoo in Central Africa for his film *Echoes of a Somber Empire* (1990) and a soldier handed a chimpanzee a cigarette. The animal, evidently used to the object, starts smoking, to which Herzog's informant reacts in disgust. Momentarily, the informant announced, "I cannot stand this. Can you please turn off the camera?" Herzog, being Herzog, replied that he needed the shot for the film. After a moment, the informant chose to negotiate, "well, do you promise it will be the last shot of the film?" The film cuts to black at that moment.

Ending *Colours of Exile* was quite a different chore. *Echoes of a Somber Empire* is about a period in the history of the Central African Republic that had ended years before, so it was complete. In the case of Iranian exile, it is an on-going process with no end in sight. Iraj Emami narrates in the film that in his youth he became part of a generation that migrated to Europe to gain knowledge but always with the objective of returning to Iran as soon as possible, for there were endless possibilities to pursue their art there. Now, he says, "the younger generations have become disillusioned (...) you won't find anyone in Iran who doesn't have the desire to emigrate". Hence, there is no happy ending or solution in this film. For me, the ending for the film's journey is when we are all back to Iran. However, it all depends on if the

home we left, is still the home we imagined for many years, which is the question I want the viewers to be left with.

In the back-and-forth process of editing this film, we went through around ten drafts, refining the film scene by scene and shot by shot. Each time, it would take the editor an entire day just to upload a draft due to slow and controlled internet access. I would then review the footage, provide feedback, and we would repeat the process until we achieved the final version. Despite the difficulties, this experience was incredibly rewarding. The challenges of remote collaboration, creative exchange, and technical obstacles made the journey unique, and in the end, I am immensely proud of the final outcome.

I aimed to conclude the film on a hopeful and happy note. The film ends with a sequence featuring my entire family gathering around a metaphorical hearth inside our current home. Even our family dog joins us. This kind of union is achieved inside our small home, even when the rest of our family and compatriots are scattered around the world. As there is no resolution to the conflict of the documentary, using metaphors such as this is a necessity. According to Nichols, documentaries

Are about those concepts and issues that we need metaphors to describe. That is to say, some topics lend themselves to straightforward description; few issues are involved, and a prosaic, linear account is all we want or need. The manufacture of silicon chips might be such a topic, and the use of various grips and strokes in tennis another. Love, war, and family, on the other hand, are topics that a straightforward, dictionary-style definition does not exhaust (Nichols, 2001: 73).

My daughters challenge me to a wrestling competition, that is, to enact what until then they had just seen on television, to bring wrestling from far away to their living room. As it could not have been otherwise, I let them win. The prize? I had promised that if they won the contest, I would finally show them the precious contents of the TV box.

The girls eagerly anticipate what is inside the TV box I carry constantly. I believe now that it is finally time to reveal its contents. Carefully, I open the box, unveiling various forms of media: photographs, film, slides, and small vessels holding memories, both mine and

those of my beloved from the past and the present. These images include moments with my family, their family, places I have lived, and where I grew up. From within the box, I produce an old Polaroid camera, which has the power to create more of these memories, capturing current moments that will join the rest of the pictures. This scene transitions to my daughter's voiceover, expressing excitement about opening the TV box and the surprise they will discover the next day, where we, in a wide shot, are standing together, leaving the TV box by the river. This symbolises my decision to come to terms with my situation and embrace this country as my home, at least for now.

Memories are not just in the past. We make them every day. By sharing my past memories with the younger members of my family, and later disposing of them in the river, we are proverbially letting them flow. Once free of the necessity to drag this anchor around, my family and myself are forced to not dwell in the past anymore, to create new memories and identities. Together.

Conclusions

This thesis was motivated by one simple question: What is lost and what is gained in exile? Whilst the question seems simple, the countless different experiences of exile, each one unique and personal, make the answer particularly complex. We have outlined but a few, with no pretension of being exhaustive .

The lens chosen for this argument is that offered by filmmakers and other artists, not because their experience differs radically from the rest, but because the impact on their work is both more powerful and far-reaching. As we have seen, many filmmakers in exile , including myself use this very topic as inspiration for their films. This is not merely because of a passion for self-referencing, but because it is, in almost every case, an unresolved part of our lives and it deserves to be examined in-depth.

The question of exile has multiple sides, so intertwined and mutually dependent, that they are impossible to address in isolation. Thus, a study on exile as the one presented here cannot be straightforward, but instead must necessarily involve many different aspects. We have discussed the politics behind it, its impact in the creative work and in the lives of artists, the fundamental humanitarian dimension, the history and development of exiles not just in Iran but globally, as well as presented several case studies. For this very reason, I have decided to present these conclusions in a rather extensive way but separated in four main categories .

In the following pages, then, I would like to summarise once again the objectives we set to achieve in this thesis, provide a critical reflection on the questions posed at the beginning of this chapter, discuss the main lessons learned from the research conducted, and finally describe how a perspective on exile can be (and has been) put forward through cinema. In the latter I will be discussing the contribution I hope *Colours of Exile* can make to ease the problems associated with situations of exile.

Objectives

This work does not pretend to be, and in fact cannot be, merely theoretical. Much to the contrary, it takes on a firm commitment to its subject, namely exile and exiles. It has for this very reason much actuality, as news regarding the movement of people across borders are constantly discussed in the media (Shohat & Stam, 1999: 374; Cf. CNN, 2008; BBC, 2010; RSF, 2023). In this sense, pretending to make a purely descriptive contribution would be foolhardy and tactless. Furthermore, it would be far from my sentiment and action, as the main reason I set out to make *Colours of Exile*, and the main reason I make films, is to affect the people who are exposed to them.

The work presented here has two main objectives, coinciding with the two main audiences it aims to address: on the one hand, there are those who have not experienced exile, but are inevitably exposed to it through the media; on the other hand, the exiles themselves or those who are considering taking such leap, who may find it helpful in order to make their minds or to simply know what to expect.

Regarding the first group, the words ‘refugee crisis’ are nowadays unfortunately part of the everyday vocabulary of newscasters (Trencsényi & Naumescu 2021: 118). The images accompanying this news are always concerning, and the situation seems dire. At the same time, especially in Europe, news of hate crimes against immigrants appears on a daily basis as well. It is not always easy to understand what exactly is happening, or how this crisis can be solved. In fact, seeing how the situation seems to worsen, it may seem that nothing can be done. After all, serious organisations such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees have spent decades and millions of pounds in trying to prevent tragedies related to the movements of people across borders... to little avail. Because I recognise the important work such organisations conduct, I do not claim that I am in a better position to do something about the refugee crisis. Doing nothing, however, is not a possibility, as I am involved politically and personally in the struggles of migrants. The question is, then, not whether I am in a position to do anything, but how can my work help others. I hope to raise awareness regarding the problems associated with forced or voluntary migrations. As we will see further ahead in this chapter, I believe cinema to be a privileged medium to do so.

One of the most important distinctions we have made in this thesis is between the different categories of displaced individuals. We have seen that the categorisation has to do primarily with whether the displacement was forced or voluntary, although in most cases the degree of wilfulness is debatable. Further precisions can be made whether the migration was motivated in economic, political, or life or death reasons. In this sense, refugees are those who seek asylum in a country other than their homeland, having fled because they had no other option. Refugees often escape from wars, dictatorships, or political persecution. Sometimes they are certain influential persons who have received death threats from their governments, but in many cases they are whole populations forced to leave everything behind because to stay would have been the same as signing a death sentence.

However important it is to distinguish the different categories of displacement, it is also clear that any categorisation in this case involves some kind of violence or obligation. In Chapter Two, we have reproduced part of an interview with Mr. Hossein Khosrojerdi, where he makes a distinction between migration and exile. Exile is not a life choice, but a necessity, usually owing to life-threatening situations in the home country. However, there is a further distinction to make, and that is for those who are exiled for political or economic reasons. The people interviewed for *Colours of Exile* and I are in the former group, but it is no less true that we were forced to leave Iran.

Failure to perceive the situations Mr. Khosrojerdi refers to often leads to exiles' departure being perceived as voluntary. Most of them could, theoretically, continue to live in the home country for their whole life. The perfect example is, once again, Jafar Panahi. He has stayed in Iran and in fact had been until recently prohibited from leaving the country. No attempts on his life have been made. He has been prosecuted, defamed by the state-owned press, imprisoned, bans have been imposed on his work, but he is ultimately allowed to live and go about his daily life relatively unharmed. This is the situation we have defined as 'internal exile' (Shklar, 1993; López Zarzosa, 1998), in order to distinguish it from the 'external exile' to which many as myself have been subjected. This distinction serves as reminder that to call any kind of exile 'voluntary' is misleading. In *Exile family movie* (2005), we see that Arash Riahi's family is divided in two: half of his relatives still live in Iran, and half, himself included, are established in Austria and North America. Their lives are not fundamentally different, as every member seems to be considerably well-off, and some of them even have

the opportunity to visit him in Europe. He could have stayed in Iran and live an easy life, as many of the artists interviewed for *Colours of Exile* could have. What he would have been unable to do if he stayed, was to have the freedom to make the films he wanted to make.

Being able to exercise one's freedom of speech, express oneself creatively and without restrictions, is as important for a fulfilling life as having a job or good health. It is also a fundamental human right, recognised in Article 19 of the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). This is something that came up time and time again in interviews and serves as a reminder that however 'voluntary' artists' exile may be, the alternative would have been to give up their dreams and freedom, and either clash with the law or self-censor their work. I believe this important issue is adequately addressed in *Colours of Exile*, as I strived to show the difficulties of life in exile and what it means to be an exile. This way, the experience transmitted by the artists that appear in the film is only mediated by the camera and the editing process, instead of by uninformed and sometimes biased news commentators and media corporations. It is precisely because of the extensive media coverage that initiatives like this documentary are important for raising awareness and fighting misinformation.

At the same time, we need to acknowledge the impact the research put forward here, as well as the documentary *Colours of Exile*, can have in those who are either considering leaving their country or already have. While the media tend to portray this issue as catastrophic, exile is seen by some as the end to all their woes. As our research and work shows, it is neither. In the next section we will go into detail on the disadvantages and benefits exile can have on people.

In Chapter Two we have mentioned the case of *Colours of Exile's* editor. Working with him has been challenging for many reasons, one of the main ones being the distance, as he is based in Iran. Also for this reason, the sole process of having the footage delivered to him was arduous and dangerous, exposing him and the messengers to being arrested. Luckily, this did not happen, as every measure possible was taken so as to prevent the state police to know of the kind of work being carried out by us. Reflecting on this process, I see now its paradoxical nature. The main reason I chose not to edit the material myself was the extent to which I am involved with the material, the facts, and the people portrayed in the film. I thought it would be harder for me to cut the footage than it would be for someone who was rather neutral to

the topic and images. On the other hand, I chose to work specifically with him because he believed Iran offered him few opportunities to do the kind of work he wanted to do. However, soon enough I learned that he, as an Iranian artist, was also moved by the topic of the film and was affected by it. At the same time, my assistant producer in Iran went through a similar process. He was planning on moving to exile to follow his passion for filmmaking. However, after watching the footage I sent him and having hours and hours of conversation, he re-evaluated his plans and decided to postpone his migration.

It is often difficult to assess all the variables from inside the country of origin, as sometimes one may think that their situation is unbearable, and the only thing needed to become free is to leave. But acting upon this decision is frequently a point of no return and demands to be pondered and assessed extensively. Of course, meditation without further information is pointless, but if one has been so touched by the contents of this film so as to modify their life plans, others in the audience are bound to follow suit.

Although in a less dramatic way, some exiles that I have contacted while making this film have expressed that this project was also helpful to them. Mainly, they claimed that the experience of being interviewed and coming in contact with this documentary made them realise that the network of exiles around the world is larger and more compact than they had thought previously. They felt less lonely seeing how many people of different parts of Iran and different artistic backgrounds have come together in ways that would have not been possible in the homeland.

Such testimonies have inspired me. They give me hope that this project is not irrelevant, that it has a purpose and an effect, and audiences will not be indifferent to it. By presenting different points of view, I hope that it will be similarly accepted by people of different backgrounds and with different views on the matter. If at least some of them leave the theatre having their perspective altered, it will have been worth the effort.

What is gained? What is lost?

In Chapter One we have recalled the reaction Jafar Panahi's character in *No Bears* (2022) had when asked if he wanted to leave Iran. He angrily replied "Why would I do that? All my life is in Iran". This line of dialogue stresses the fact that he does love his country and, even if a travel ban was not imposed upon him, he would never leave. As with other cases we have collected in the previous chapters, we highlighted the fact that, unlike the case of refugees, going into exile is technically a voluntary choice made by each person. At the same time, seeing that so many people "choose" this path in life, we must acknowledge that, with all the suffering it produces, it must have positive aspects. Hence the question, What is gained in exile?

Let us start by discussing what can be gained in exile. The obvious upside is an improvement regarding one's quality of life. Most people interviewed for *Colours of Exile* have left Iran to live in countries rated highly in all the different Quality-of-Life Indices such as the Human Development Index (<https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/human-development-index>) or the OECD Better Life Index (<http://oecdbetterlifeindex.org>), mainly in Europe in North America. Although the same quality of life is not shared by every inhabitant, and least of them recently arrived immigrants, reaching one of such countries is undoubtedly an improvement over the everyday conditions at their homeland. This was the case in Vida Dena's documentary *My paper life* (2022), where even if the whole Syrian family has to live in a minuscule one-bedroom flat in the outskirts of Brussels, the eldest daughter can proudly claim that "At least now I can decide who I will marry". Loving the land in which one was born does not imply having to accept every aspect of life at the homeland and leaving is almost always done with a heavy heart, as Arash Riahi testifies in his *Exile family movie* (2005). Among his earliest childhood memories is the long trip that took his family and him out of Iran through the Turkish border. What he most vividly recalls are the landscapes engrained in his mind, as well as the sadness in the faces of all the grown-ups in the group.

Many exiles that we have mentioned in the previous chapters have profited from various opportunities, resulting often in successful careers in the field of their choice. Such is the case of Parviz Sayyad, Amir Naderi, Bahman Ghobadi, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, to name a few. These filmmakers had already been making films in Iran, before going into exile, and in fact the last decades have seen a bustling film industry in that country (Naficy, 2012: 311). For

instance, Hamid Naficy reported in 1995 that around 50 feature films were produced annually (Naficy, 1995: 548). Barely fifteen years later, that number was doubled, and the production of short films was well over 2,000 per year (Golmakani, 2009). To compare with other countries, this number well surpasses that of the yearly production of films in Britain (that is, England, Wales, and Scotland combined) (Harouni, 2013). What is important here is not the number, however, but the fact that the Iranian dictatorship prevents filmmakers from expressing freely, thus limiting the possibilities for movie-making. As a result, Iran produces “dozens of bland romantic dramas” (Harouni, 2013) each year. Neutral, irrelevant films that have nothing to say. This is the main force that drove Makhmalbaf, Sayyad, and the rest into moving out. They wanted to make movies, just not *any* movie, and being able to exercise free speech was an instrumental part of their plan.

Cultural differences are bound to arise, and while these are frequently a source of trouble and misunderstandings, there is an upside to being exposed to a different way of doing things, and that is the ability to expand one’s perspective. While the artists interviewed expressed different degrees of ‘acclimatisation’, most of them acknowledged having learned important lessons from the interaction with a different culture. This is especially important in artistic environments, as art tends to condense cultural patterns specific to the culture of the artist, even without their knowledge. Consequently, many Iranian artists who found themselves working in Europe or North America have learned to blend an ‘exotic’ (for the host audiences) art style with a more local artistic language. This blend has been successfully mastered by Iranian artists such as Shirin Neshat and Gelare Khoshgozaran, who actively seek culture clash in order to make some points with their art.

The last “benefit” of exile came up frequently in interviews, and it is the existence of a global network of exiles, often willing to collaborate with each other. Their shared situation and their life histories have made them prone to solidarity, and this is expressed not only in work collaborations but in more invisible connections: help with making contacts, giving honest feedback to others’ work, and generally inspiring and supporting each other. Personally, I owe much to the unwavering support received from fellow exiles such as Mohsen Makhmalbaf and Bahman Ghobadi. Their inspiration, solidarity, and encouragement have been without a doubt the driving force behind most of the projects I have done since I left my homeland.

On the other hand, when leaving one's country of origin, one renounces to many things. Things that one may never recover. Earlier in this chapter, we have mentioned how dramatic the act of crossing a border can be, especially considering that such a decision cannot be undone in many cases. At the same time, most of the people I talked to, and myself as well, had originally refused to think that they would not be able to return at some future time. In fact, hope in a safe return to the homeland is a topic much discussed in all the interviews I conducted. This is a pipe dream that most of us exiles share, but it is precisely why it is so potent as a film topic. As Naficy puts it, "Exile is inexorably tied to homeland and to the possibility of return. However, the frustrating elusiveness of return makes it magically potent" (Naficy, 1999: 3).

In Chapter Two, I mentioned that my biggest wish is to travel back to Iran, but not just any Iran, the Iran of my youth, or one where I can pursue my career exactly as I intended it. That is as impossible as travelling back in time. Fortunately, as André Bazin famously posed (Bazin 1960[1958]: 8), cinema is a kind of time machine, which preserves people and images just as they were, and even has the power to create a different reality. It is perhaps our only chance to recreate it. During the interview with Mohsen Makhmalbaf in which we are seen walking and standing near a bridge, he asked me why I wanted to go back to Iran. When I struggled to find an answer, he said to me, "You are dreaming about a place that doesn't exist anymore, and it is only in your dreams". He would often suggest that migrants should one day go back to their homeland and see for themselves that such place doesn't exist anymore. This way, Mr. Makhmalbaf explains, they will understand that they are actually not missing too much, hence being able to feel much better in the host country. So in a way, making a film about Iranian artists in exile is a form of time travelling, of protecting the memory of those who had to leave their country for another they can never truly call home.

Among the main reasons for not feeling at home in the host country are the cultural differences, some of which are not easy to overlook. When one comes from a Muslim country, especially, these differences are exacerbated, even for non-practicing Muslims. There are certain ways of dressing, of maintaining interpersonal relations, of addressing our elders or our children, and generally of conducting oneself through life that could cause troubles or communication breakdown. This often results in feelings of isolation and of being misunderstood, which in turn have deep psychological consequences for the exiles

(Chaudhuri, 2020: 6). For this reason, having a network of close acquaintances that either come from the same region or are in a similar situation regarding immigration, is instrumental to living a fulfilling life in exile. However, one must not forget to actively engage with the host community, for this as we have seen provides a chance to look at things in different ways, expanding one's insight and effectively enriching one's culture.

An important part of culture is defined by language. We have committed an extensive part of Chapter One to discussing the issues regarding the loss of native language. One of the points made was that, as Linda Nochlin (1996) proposed, visual artists are endowed with more tools to successfully develop their craft in an environment that speaks a different language, compared to writers or filmmakers, for instance. This may well be true, as the question of whether to make films in the local language or in Farsi features prominently in the interviews presented in *Colours of Exile*. In fact, I was rather surprised when Hossein Khosrojerdi claimed in his interview that, in actuality, to lose one's identity was a kind of 'gift', for it was an opportunity to build oneself from the ground up. However, he was not prepared to give up his mother tongue, Farsi. He could renounce to everything and start over, except for the language. Other interviews coincide in the importance of speaking one's language in order not only to better express themselves, but because of the strong connection the stories they are trying to tell have to the Persian language.

Those who adopt the local languages usually do that in order reach a wider audience, but also because of the resistance many local communities show towards alien languages and cultures. Racism has been, unfortunately, a rising problem in recent times (Walia, 2020). Most of the persons interviewed report having suffered episodes of racism and discrimination in their host countries. Ultra nationalistic and chauvinistic ideologies are on the rise, for reasons that exceed the scope of this work, and artists in exile are known to have been targeted in many opportunities, as exemplified in Zakhmi's case in the film. This is a hindrance to developing a successful career, but luckily, a majority of the local population usually reacts positively to the presence and work of exiles.

Finally, there is one quite specific aspect of discrimination that should be mentioned, as it has been covered in this investigation (Chapter One). I am referring to the somewhat contradictory nature of exiles when it comes to filmmaking. Iranian filmmakers working abroad are in an unsure position, as the language and the topics of their films frequently

portray situations and stories that are alien to the host countries. At the same time, the Iranian authorities and the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance rejects them as foreign films.

Lessons learned

The premise behind the theoretical discussion offered in Chapter One is that identity is a social and individual construct. It is not given, it is not received as an inheritance, and it is not the same throughout the life of any individual. As Stuart Hall (1990) argues, identity has less to do with a state of *being*, than with *becoming*. In this sense, and perhaps much to the surprise of many who tend to see the issue in one dimension only, exile can be understood as a formative experience just as any other.

Post-colonial theory, despite all its valuable apportions to liberation processes in the Third World, tends to understand displacement as a suspension or a dismantling of one's identity (Bhabha, 1994). According to these scholars, when a person is brought against their will to a new setting such as sugarcane plantations in the Caribbean, they cease to be African, Zimbabwean, Kongo, Hausa (Gruzinski, 2002). They are not American either, or even subjects of the European empires that control the islands. It is understandable that intellectuals highlight the tragic aspects of colonisation (Fanon, 1961; Said, 1978), since there are certain discourses which try to do the exact opposite and posit that colonisation has brought civilisation and advancements to some peoples. This of course is just a crude attempt at justifying the unjustifiable, to try and defend some of the worst crimes known to humankind.

There have been criticisms to Bhabha's ideas (some have been mentioned in Chapter 1.2), including the notion that the Third Space is mainly a discourse or cultural position and thus fails to address the economic and physical aspects of the exploitation of colonised peoples (Bhandari, 2022). In this sense, it has been claimed that such discourse is prone to being appropriated and manipulated by Neocolonialism (Abou-Agag, 2021).

However, it would be difficult to contest the fact that Bhabha's theory is certainly a step forward in the understanding of hybridity and the cultures of the subaltern. The idea of a Third Space challenges binarism and deconstructs the idea of an essentialist identity, thus pushing forward the notion of hybridism. Different, conflicting and opposite identities

intersect, interact and clash in the intangible territory that Bhabha calls the “Third Space of Enunciation”, a zone of negotiation and translation. This is precisely where, according to post-colonial theory, something different can emerge, not always as a mere reconfiguration of already existing traits but as something effectively new. Bhabha even recognises cinema as one of the main areas of identity dispute where a Third Space can be configured, as he makes it clear when discussing the role of colonial stereotypes in film:

our political referents and priorities - the people, the community, class struggle, anti-racism, gender difference, the assertion of an anti-imperialist, black or third perspective - are not "there" in some primordial, naturalistic sense. Nor do they reflect a unitary or homogeneous political object. They "make sense" as they come to be constructed in the discourses of feminism or Marxism or the Third cinema or whatever, whose objects of priority - class or sexuality or "the new ethnicity" (Stuart Hall) - are always in historical and philosophical tension, or cross-reference with other objectives (Bhabha, 1989: 118).

Also speaking of cinema, Bhabha explains that “an important feature of colonial discourse is its dependence on the concept of ‘fixity’ in the ideological construction of otherness” (1983: 18). Stuart Hall picks up on this remark when he claims that there is nothing ‘essential’ about identity (Hall, 1990), just as there is nothing essential about the imagined community (Anderson, 1983) known as Iran. As we have demonstrated, there are many different experiences of what Iran is, and all of them are equally valid. Exiles show a longing for an entity that does not exist in reality, and perhaps never existed but in the collective minds of Iranian people. However, the main aspects of this collective construct are shared by all the people I interviewed, and probably by exiles in general. It is not a delusion but an operative reality that fuels the hopes and dreams of a community which has no alternative but to live far from their homeland.

One thing in which post-colonial theorists are right is the ambiguous nature of exiles (Bhabha, 1994). While they are away from ‘home’, they return to Iran in their minds constantly, never forgetting where they came from and where they hope one day to return (Naficy, 1999: 3). And while they live and work in a host country that opened their borders to

them, they are reminded daily that they will never fully belong there. This is shown in their work, which shows the influence of both lands, and is enriched in the process. Shirin Neshat's 2021-2022 exhibition in Munich was suitably called "Living in One Land, Dreaming in Another" and it mainly features portraits of non-Western people in the style of the Western canon, but intervened with Persian calligraphy (see Fig. 9).

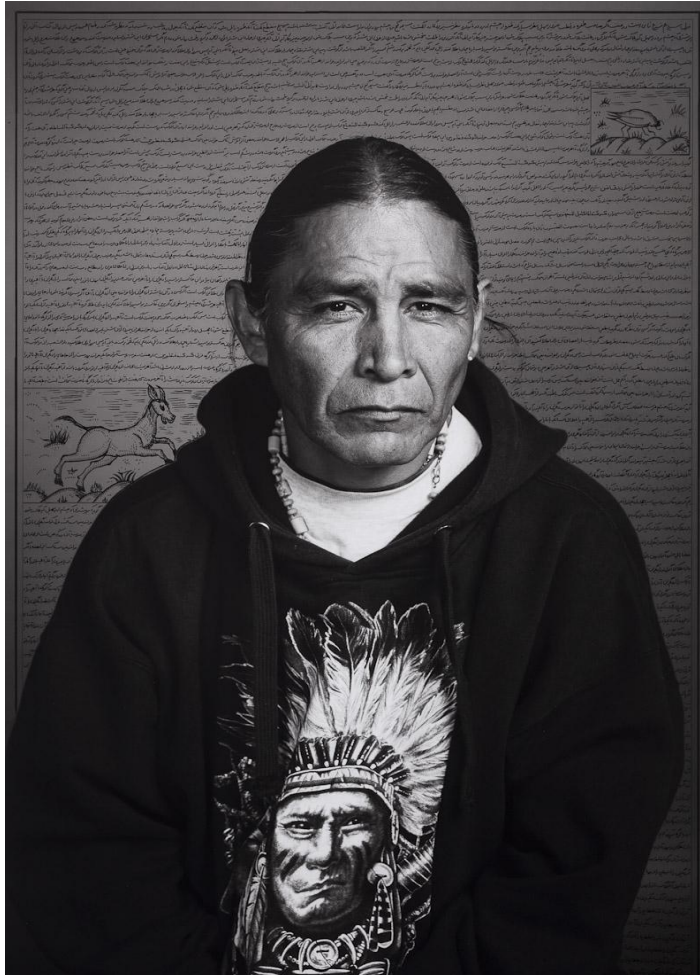


Fig. 9 Herbie Nelson photographed by Shirin Neshat. From the 'Land of Dreams' series, 2019. Copyright by Shirin Neshat

As we will see in the next section, cinema is an especially welcoming medium for this kind of ambiguity. This is due to its paradoxical nature, as the camera always works as an in-between, a device for connecting faraway lands, peoples, and times that "creates an essential space for connection and reflection" (Godmilow, 2022: 46). The ability of cinema to convey the experiences and identities of exiles was demonstrated when discussing South American (especially Chilean and Argentinian) exile cinema (Solanas, 1980; López Zarzosa, 1998).

When discussing the different categories that relate to displaced persons and groups, we have opted to look at displacement as a *continuum* (Schuster 2016) between those who migrated purely voluntarily and those who were forced to do so. This is done to be able to account for all the existing cases, as the traditional categorisation tended to draw a sharp distinction between “voluntary” migrants and “forced” refugees. Exiles were forced to leave their countries too, but mostly for political reasons, and not because of war, natural disaster, or economic crisis. In this sense, we claimed that to distinguish between voluntary and forced migration is stigmatising, as people may judge those who “voluntarily” left their country. In reality, however, there is a degree of agency and a degree of necessity in every migrant. Thus, it would be pointless to discuss whether a filmmaker who went into exile to make the films of their choice has done so voluntarily or forcefully.

To further explore the nuances of exile, we have proposed to use the category of “internal exile”. It should be pointed out that this is not a distinction between types of exiles, but an attempt to broaden the subject by considering “exiles” people who would not normally fit into the category, i.e. those who did not actually leave the country.

In summary, the lessons learned from our research point to a malleable, relational definition of exile. Being in exile has nothing to do with choice, it is a condition imposed by the socio-political circumstances and how they affect the ability of the people to pursue the career they want. No person should be forced to either give up their career or to have it decided for them, and this dichotomy should not be thought of as a discretionary choice.

If anything, internal exile is worse than the external one, as there is no escape from it (Naficy, 1999: 199). But our research has shown that there is a situation worse than exile, internal or external. It is the condition of those who manage, after years of struggle, to return to their beloved homeland, only to find it changed, making them realise that the place they had so long yearned for no longer exists. One constant of people in exile is the development of nostalgic feelings towards the past. It is common to battle the feeling of being a stranger by creating an imaginary homeland for which to yearn. If one is abroad, one craves to be at the homeland at that precise moment. For one in internal exile, it will be not a place, but a time in the past when things were right in the country. Sometimes, however, it is best not to reach that place of dreams, for it will undoubtedly be quite different from the idealised, imaginary homeland we exiles carry within our hearts.

Documenting exile

Studying exile from a theoretical point of view and making a documentary to show the struggle and the experience of artists in exile are two very different endeavours. While theory may help decide on a particular approach to documentary filmmaking, to conducting the interviews, or even to writing the script, there are certain specificities of the documentary style and of filming in general that need to be discussed separately.

The main feature that distinguishes documentary from fiction is the moral responsibility the documentary filmmaker has towards the people and events they portray in film (Plantinga, 2005). In the case of exile, this is an especially important thing to take into account, because ultimately what we are trying to do is to document the suffering of people. And in the case of *Colours of Exile*, this kind of suffering is shared by the director as well. The fact that I am a filmmaker in exile myself has certainly helped during interviews, both in terms of my insight into the topic, which allows for better and more precise questions, and in terms of how comfortable the interviewees got and how they reacted. Having a camera pointed at oneself is always intimidating, and filmed interviews should never be considered a completely transparent look into the mind and thoughts of the people who participate in it. Hence the importance of being interviewed by someone with similar experiences who can understand the other person's struggles.

When starting the project, I felt drawn to the reflexive type of documentary, as I thought it would best encapsulate the spirit of the film. However, I soon realised that I should focus not too much on the actual process of making the film, but in creating an audio-visual landscape that would accommodate the stories collected. This would be better achieved through a blend of different documentary modes, of which the more suitable would be the reflexive, observational, and interactive modes.

As we have discussed in Chapter Two, while the reflexive mode places the emphasis on how a documentary is created, mainly by exposing the device of filmmaking, the observational documentary tends to detach the camera from that which is showing. This has been termed the fly-on-the-wall approach, and has been useful for some segments in which I wanted the audience to feel a certain familiarity with the people and actions that happened on-screen. Observational strategies also allowed me to capture on camera that which would

not have happened if there was an active cameraperson interacting with the subjects. Some of the interviews, most notably that of myself and Mohsen Makhmalbaf walking around, use this approach. Finally, the interactive mode is basically the opposite and demands an active participation of the filmmaker. If the events in observational documentary happened precisely thanks to the people being unaware of the presence of a camera, the events in interactive (also called participatory) documentary happen precisely because there is a camera.

A decision regarding the participatory nature of this documentary was the inclusion of my own two daughters as characters. They introduce the film by describing the main characters and the theme, from a very naive, simple point of view. This helps the viewer be acquainted with the topic and characters of the film in a light, playful fashion, instead of introducing the subject of exile tragically, which may shock audiences. Shocking may be useful for other productions, but *Colours of Exile* does not intend only to enlighten people about the hardships of exile and instead wants the viewers to be involved from a personal point.

The theme of this documentary, what is lost and what is gained in exile, lends itself to certain difficulties. The first one was the physical impossibility of travelling myself to film in Iran. I chose not to show archive footage as well, and used the absence of such images to the benefit of the film, as the artists I interviewed presented Iran in a paradoxical light, both as the beautiful country where they have such fond memories, as well as an oppressive state where making art is directly impossible. With so many different opinions and experiences, which one is the real Iran? In their minds, and in mine, all options are real. In reality, as we have discussed earlier in this thesis, the country itself does not exist in the form they describe it. In the film, I am shown carrying a TV box, which stores my memories and the representations of Iran from my childhood. I have negotiated with a film crew in Iran to have my father interviewed, as well as having my old town, the schools I used to go to, and other specific images such as the olive trees in my father's house, which have grown considerably since I last saw them. Only showing these images outside of the TV box is an aesthetic choice that tends to make the spectator doubt if there is any home to return to, outside of that small box.

Before I end this part of the conclusions, I want to address the political and personal side of making this type of documentary. I believe that documentary films can play a

fundamental role in expressing society's current problems and issues, such as raising awareness and contributing to societal debates. But, of course, the backgrounds and interests of the filmmaker influence this effect. When a filmmaker, such as is my case, has a unique engagement with the subject of their documentary film, they are bound to express only their specific point of view, which is of course one among many. This was clear regarding *Colours of Exile*, and since the issue of migration and being far from home and my motherland has caused me much suffering, the mental and psychological effects the shooting of this film brought me were not minor. For instance, I strongly believe now that the most harrowing experience during the shooting of this documentary has been the day that my daughters interviewed me. All the honesty and straightforwardness that I expected from the people I interviewed; I could not offer. I felt a knot in my throat as I tried to explain to them why I had to end up living somewhere outside of my homeland, and I found myself hiding a truth I felt they were still too young to understand. On the other hand, I did not want to put them in any doubt as to who they are and where they belonged. As much as I see myself as a guest where I live, I want my daughters to feel that they are at home here.

There are certain challenges that are unique to first-person filmmaking. The first-person filmmaker's strategy is self-exposure, using diverse devices. In *Colours of Exile*, self-exposure occurs in various ways, too. As Jean-Louis Comolli (2015) would say, cinema in the first person tends to think the documentary format as a discursive practice, rather than a mimetically one, and it is in this sense that filming in the first person can be an 'antidote' against the irreflexive audiences who just believe what they are being fed from the screen. So, by putting myself in front of the camera, I wanted to make a statement not only in terms of documentary filmmaking, but in trying to draw the attention of the viewers and have them share my journey, the stories I was told, and come a bit closer to the realities of living in exile. And while this could arguably be achieved also through the use of narration or other similar strategies, I believed my bodily presence to be needed in order to get my message across more effectively.

Film as a medium has allowed me to draw the audiences' attention to the situation of exile without the need to experience it themselves. And it has allowed me to express my own anguish and thoughts on the matter. Though the yearning for a return may

never fully dissipate, exile can also become a catalyst for personal growth, cultural exchange, and ultimately, a redefined sense of self and community.

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