Introduction: Aporias of Foreignness: Transnational Encounters in Cinema

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About Foreignness and Aporias

> It's a lot of work, being foreign.
>
> --Anne Tyler, *Digging to America*, 2006

What does it mean to be-placed-into-foreignness? To be marked as foreign? To inhabit this category and feel its weight? Why might it mean 'a lot of work' as a quote from Anne Tyler's novel specifies? We know that certain bodies, or regions are labeled as foreign but also certain texts and images as well. The foreign is a sticky term – it sticks to a body of a human, or to a particular image – and it marks it as something *else*, something as *not me*, something other, alien, some form of alterity. Asking these questions, we are thinking about the recent issue of *National Geographic* (April 2018) in which the new editor-in-chief, Susan Goldberg, first woman and first Jewish editor of the magazine, apologizes for what we already know so well about the magazine's visual politics: for privileging white male gaze while documenting 'foreign' regions of the world, for emphasizing the 'foreignness' of those regions as other, often primitive, savage, less than first-worldness, out-of-sync with modernity. Goldberg writes that the magazine elicited the help of John Edwin Mason, 'a University of Virginia professor specializing in the history of photography and the history of Africa, a frequent crossroads of our storytelling': 'What Mason found in short was that until the 1970s *National Geographic* all but ignored people of color who lived in the United States, rarely acknowledging them beyond laborers or domestic workers. Meanwhile it pictured "natives" elsewhere as exotics, famously and frequently unclothed, happy hunters, noble savages—every type of cliché' (2018). The editor has apologized for a racist lens *National Geographic* has employed for generations, vowing to inspire change.

The word 'aporia' expresses doubt, an impasse. Its ancient Greek origin, *aporos*, means 'impassable,' 'without passage.' In philosophy, aporia expresses a difficulty in establishing a stable truth since aporia signifies the presence of evidence both for something and, simultaneously, against that something. Being aporetic, thus, points to non-binarism, toward a wavering border.

What do aporias have to do with the figure of the foreigner, a figure that has been historically a preoccupation of philosophy, political theory, cultural studies, and film and media studies to name just a few areas of inquiry? Why might we need aporias to talk about foreignness in more complex and nuanced ways? Jacques Derrida acknowledged his fascination with aporias (and he insisted on using the plural): 'the old, worn-out Greek term *aporia*, this tired word of philosophy and logic, has imposed itself upon me' (1993, 12). Aporias obscure clarity and certainty; they frustrate. Rather than overcoming or resolving aporias, Derrida posits their critical potential: 'I was then trying to move not against or out of the impasse but, in another way, *according to*

another thinking of the aporia, one perhaps more enduring. It is the obscure way of this "according to the aporia" that I will try to determine today' (1993, 13). We believe that foreignness invites us to think according to this other logic, indeed, 'according to the aporia.'

We approached this special issue with an understanding that foreignness is *critically aporetic* – undecidable, impassable, and thus always quivering. In my (KM) earlier work I theorized the notion of 'quivering ontologies' (Marciniak 2006, 27) as a way of inhabiting the aporia, of conceptualizing the way the figure of the foreigner is always suspended between her place of origin and the host nation. She is negotiating her subjectivity in the interstices of belonging and, as such, is often vulnerable to processes of inclusion and exclusion, appropriation or expulsion. Quivering ontologies is an idea that allows us to explore the intricacy – and the intimacy – of cultural mechanisms that put the foreigner on a precariously wavering border between being and not being a valid, culturally sanctioned subject. We could thus say that the aporetic foreigner embodies the border. Revisiting Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition*, Judith Butler writes that Arendt 'established politics as a public sphere on the basis of the classical Greek city-state and understood that in the private domain, a *dark* domain by the way, necessarily *dark*, slaves and children and the disenfranchised foreigners took care of the reproduction of material life' (Butler, Spivak 2007, 14-15). In many cases globally, the disenfranchised foreigners still take care of the reproduction of material life and are 'the barely legible or illegible human[s]' (Butler, Spivak 2007, 15).

So why foreignness now? 'Foreign' derives from the Latin forās, meaning 'outside.' In our current historical moment, foreignness is increasingly an operative word that functions as a warning, a worry, a threat – an impasse indeed. And foreignness is a term of unequal value, by all means not a universal term. If one follows President Trump's rhetoric, for example, one could realize that one is a 'wrong' foreigner in the U.S. who came from a 'shithole' country, or one could be from a 'desirable' region. So, to be sure, not all foreignness is disavowed and repudiated, just the kind that is specifically racially, ethnically, and nationally marked.

In coining the term 'aporias of foreignness,' in our special issue we aim to explore the idea that foreignness is always overdetermined and unstable *vis-à-vis* national belonging and, as such, subject to scrutiny and discipline. Trinh T. Minh-ha, for example, refers to the figure of the foreigner as a 'traveling self' and, commenting on the U.S. border politics, she critiques the perception that 'every immigrant or a voyager of color is a potential terrorist' (2011, 5). In a current climate, specifically in a European context, we see a vigorous renewal of this idea vis-à-vis the Syrian refugee crisis as waves of Islamophobia rise, singling out specifically the figure of a dark-skinned man as a site of national panic and spearheading what Imogen Tyler calls 'epidemics of racial stigma,' recasting 'refugee crisis' as a 'racial crisis' (2017, 4).

The current frightening rise of xenophobic and nationalistic movements in various parts of the world certainly compels a reflection on foreignness as a perceived contentious and challenging idea. We think of present political tensions regarding the Syrian refugee crisis, the morbid reality of new border regimes and border deaths around Europe and the US, and the UK's vote for 'Brexit' – largely motivated by anti-immigrant sentiments and a desire to return to a core of white Britishness. We think of the inflammatory rhetoric around the construction of a wall between Mexico and the US, …..[Bruce to finish]

Transnational cinematic cultures are inevitably engaged with multifarious representations of foreignness that ask spectators to think intersectionally *vis-à-vis* complex configurations of nativity, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, or economic privilege. The post-2000 period in particular offers a rich archive of global films – features, documentaries, experimental productions and online video – that place (im)migrants, refugees, exiles at the heart of the diegesis. In putting 'aporias of foreignness' center stage, we are interested in a politics and aesthetics of encounter, a trope we understand broadly, one that focuses on encounters occurring diegetically (for example, citizen/foreigner, foreigner/foreigner), or meta-diegetically (for example, the spectator and the text).

We treat 'foreignness' as a relational concept, considering not only the figures of (im)migrants and refugees but also historically dispossessed indigenous populations. We draw an inspiration here from Derrida's complex contention that while the aporetic foreign has traditionally been considered a figure of death, there is at the same time an obligation to host the foreigner. We hope that this special issue will contribute to transnational cinema studies by bringing to light a rich archive of films that often show how xenophobia and xenophilia together function in the imagining of the nation. Simultaneously, we are interested in the way formal aspects of cinema, while foregrounding foreignness, at times play with a defamiliarization of the spectatorial comfort by emphasizing alterity articulated both by the cinematic apparatus and the social context. For example, film and media scholars commenting on migrant, intercultural, or transnational cinema and grappling with the foreignness of certain aesthetic forms, have approached filmic medium through discussions of 'aesthetics of opacity' (Bayraktar 2016, 145), 'haptic visuality' (Marks 2000), 'revolting suture' (Marciniak 2005, 385), or 'elsewhere-within-here' (Trinh 2011). Transnational encounters involve figurations of (mis)recognition, conflict, desire, appropriation, and transgression. Focusing on the ways that cinematic language might offer 'alternative alterities,' we have sought innovative theoretical foci that would let us imagine 'foreign' difference outside the paradigms of subjugation, victimhood, or exoticization.

Foreignness and Cinema [Bruce]

> Every film is a foreign film.
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> --Atom Egoyan and Ian Balfour, Introduction to *Subtitles: On the Foreignness of Film*, 2004

Cinema as art and as international social practice has been interwoven with the modalities of foreignness from its inception.

Arrival of a Train at a Station? --maybe stupid or not – encounter with a 'foreign' object? Movement of the train producing fear/anxiety?

The Immigrant? Charlie Chaplin

Maybe: The Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of the Bolsheviks (Lev Kuleshov, 1924) → I am thinking of other examples than Chaplin to decenter the US focus we always hear about (or some other example perhaps? I am not insisting it has to be this film)

Also ethnographic films maybe + Subtitles: On the Foreignness of Film? (Egoyan)

Becoming-Refugee / Becoming-Foreign

No one likes refugees.

--Charles Simic, 'Refugees,' 1999

A US-based poet, Charles Simic, recalling his experiences of dislocation from post-WWII Yugoslavia, writes sarcastically: 'My family, like so many others, got to see the world for free thanks to Hitler's wars and Stalin's takeover of Eastern Europe' (1999,120). And he adds: 'It's hard for people who have never experienced it to truly grasp what it means to lack proper documents….The pleasure of humiliating the powerless must not be underestimated' (Simic 1999, 121). Ai Weiwei's recent epic, *Human Flow* (2017), a film currently gaining an international momentum, is keenly aware of these sentiments. We want to focus on *Human Flow* for a moment because of the extraordinary scope of the material it presents and the attention the film is receiving due to Weiwei's international stature as an exilic ('foreign') artist and activist committed to social justice. The film offers a panoramic overview of the global refugee crisis, covering twenty three countries from the US/Mexico border to Libya, Lebanon, Kenya, Pakistan, Turkey, Gaza, and across Europe. It offers interviews with several refugees, NGO workers, politicians and activists, which are scattered throughout the film like poems appearing on screen, punctuating the flow of images. At the heart of this documentary that offers harrowing images of human dispossession and trauma mixed with shots of human movement, landscapes, objects, and animals is an ethical consideration of how to represent a humanitarian disaster of such proportions in a way that resists aestheticization or sublimation of trauma.

Eliminating voice-over, *Human Flow* is a contemplative cine-essay, advocating a politics of witnessing, and presenting Weiwei and his film crew as they travel around the world documenting but also being-with refugees. In many ways, *Human Flow* is thus about encounters. This mode of 'being-with' is exemplified by Weiwei himself, as he appears on screen at various moments without addressing the viewers -- directing the crew, cooking meat on the open grill, filming with his cell phone, buying fruit, getting a haircut, cutting a man's hair, visiting graves. His presence then introduces varied emotionalities as he is directly interacting with refugees, joking with them, consoling them, offering water or blankets. At one point, we see him deliberately walking alongside refugees and, of course, as audience, we understand that Weiwei's walking has a different valence and a different weight than the refugees' walking. This 'walking alongside' might serve as a metaphor for an understanding how to apprehend the crisis and represent refugees who, at some point, were just inhabitants of specific societies and cultures and have *become* refugees and thus have *become* foreign through various modes of escaping from war zones, political strives, upheavals, or postcolonial hardships. The film makes it clear that no one just *is* a refugee, or a foreigner – one becomes one. Following Simone de Beauvoir

who taught us that femininity is a social construct – 'One is not born, but rather becomes, woman' (1974, 301) – it is clear that being a refugee is a social construct as well. The film thus shows us the process of moving into a refugee status and then experiencing -- living -- its consequences. It reveals various painful ways of inhabiting this category of, to use Butler's words, 'spectral humans, deprived of ontological weight and failing the tests of social intelligibility' (2007, 15).

The tactic of 'walking alongside' refugees might be thought of as akin to Trinh's 'speaking nearby' (Chen 1992), a methodology Trinh employed, for example, in her documentary film *Reassemblage*: one that strays from 'speaking for' or 'speaking about' Senegalese rural women she filmed. 'Speaking nearby' is thus a conceptual attempt to avoid a patronizing, racist, and controlling lens that apprehends the filmed subject. Indeed, Trinh defines the mode of 'speaking nearby' as 'a speaking that does not objectify, does not point to an object as if it is distant from the speaking subject or absent from the speaking place. A speaking that reflects on itself and can come very close to a subject without, however, seizing or claiming it' (Chen 1992, 87). Weiwei's deliberate presence in *Human Flow* certainly points to the way the film reflects on itself and his 'walking alongside' refugees at least gestures toward some form of filmic transparency, toward a desire to find a non-patronizing, non-sentimental, non-sensational way to reflect on what it might mean to become a refugee. It gestures toward respect (and at one point we hear Weiwei saying to a man, 'I respect you').

There is one moment, however, that makes it quite clear that 'being-with' refugees or 'walking alongside' them is, after all, only provisional, temporary. We see Weiwei holding a piece of paper with words '#standwithrefugees' and then the wind blows it away, underscoring the fleeting nature of such efforts. As audience we have already been prepared for this metaphorical moment as, earlier, Weiwei somewhat playfully exchanges passports with Mahmoud, a Syrian refugee. The exchange lasts a brief instance as Mahmoud says, 'You can also take my tent,' and Weiwei acknowledges that he has an art studio in Berlin. This failed 'exchange' creates a tonality of incongruity and obvious awkwardness, ultimately pointing to the limits of such an 'exchange.' 'Standwithrefugees' is thus an evocative if not an aporetic hashtag of a limited *material* applicability while it still acknowledges the possibility of emotional solidarity or affinity. In doing this, it reminds us of the fraught issue of allyship and tensions surrounding this concept, that is, the point that, despite socially conscious intentions, allyship often perpetuates an uneven distribution of power that further disenfranchises the marginalized and dispossessed. And Weiwei seems to be acutely aware of this. Of his interaction with Mahmoud, he says in an interview with *The Guardian*: 'You tell these people that you're the same as them. But you are lying because you are not the same. Your situation is different; you must leave them. And that's going to haunt me for the rest of my life" (Brooks 2017).

Human Flow thus contemplates on the possibilities and limits of being-with refugees while visually deliberately intertwining drone photography with close-ups on the ground. The tactic of employing aerial shots and then taking us to close-ups (with varied affective impact, as we see crying and smiling children, barbed wire, a photo of someone's cat on a cell-phone, a wrecked stove in a burned down house, refugee tents soaked in rain, open graves) suggests that refugee crisis is both global and intimate, distant and not-so-distant. This constant mode switching -- zooming in and zooming out -- corresponds to a deliberate accumulation of the diversity of

clashing images: still landscapes enveloped in a fog, shots of sea, images of mountains and roads, all mixed with what Jacques Rancière called the 'intolerable image' – evoking the abject and perilous circumstances of refugees (2009, 83).

Like his other, often controversial work[i], *Human Flow* has received criticism; Brooks interviewing Weiwei for the *The Guardian* article summarizes these critiques: 'His critics view him rather differently: as a crude provocateur, trading in stereotypes and bankrolled by the west' (2017). And Weiwei's response to such critiques is quite evocative: 'All day long, the media ask me if I have shown the film to the refugees: "When are the refugees going to see the film?" But that's the wrong question. The purpose is to show it to people of influence; people who are in a position to help and who have a responsibility to help. The refugees who need help – they don't need to see the film. They need dry shoes. They need soup' (Brooks 2017). If we accept his point, it perhaps becomes clear why the film feels excessively long – two hours and twenty minutes: it requires enduring spectatorship, one that accepts a certain level of monotony and the feeling of never-endedness, which appear to emulate the condition of refugeeism.

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Title?

Descriptions of our contributions [Bruce]

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[i] See Marciniak (2017) for a discussion surrounding Weiwei's photographic performance in relation to Aylan Kurdi, a Syrian toddler who drowned off the coast of Turkey in 2015.