



This Isn't My Story, I Don't Know How It Got In There.

Bilocation and Story in Basma Alsharif's Work

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How did I get here? Basma Alsharif asks herself. But where is here? Where is it? Where does it come from? Should it be somewhere else? When you feel out of place, you feel like a stranger, you feel like a foreigner. When you must constantly move, you lose the perspective of the place you belong to. However, as a foreigner, because others will make you notice it, you will have to remember where you come from in order to satisfy the interests of others and be able to think about the origin of everything, about our history. The work of the artist Basma Alsharif (Palestine/USA) uses bilocation and duplication to embody the Palestinian perspective. When the trauma is invisible yet perceptible, where do we go back to when we are lost? Through psychedelic and utopian narratives, she takes us to bilocation – an extra-corporeal phenomenon by which she inhabits multiple places at the same time – in hypnotic couplings that weave the personal and the political, the magical and the everyday, the screen and the audience.

Let us begin by looking for a link between Basma Alsharif and our history with the aim of gradually building up the plot of our story. Basma Alsharif was born in Kuwait in 1983. Of Palestinian origin, she soon emigrated to the USA and Europe, where she currently works as an artist and filmmaker. Her work focuses on the post-Palestinian perspective. What does this mean? It involves experiencing a fractured identity in exile, at a distance from Palestine but with the aim of building an image of this place beyond conflict and death. Her work analyses individual memory along with collective history and unearths the com-

mon framework of the Mediterranean and the effect of uprooting in any place on the planet.

But, what is the Mediterranean today? The Mediterranean has a beautiful nomenclature: cradle of cultures, races, languages, religions and civilisations. A historical, geopolitical area; a place of literature. It is the Mediterranean of Chateaubriand, Fernand Braudel, Lucien Levefre or the classical world of Winkelmann, the Orientalism of Flaubert, Loti... A place in whose waters travellers, traders or writers move freely. Sometimes they are shifting waters, altered by colonisation and the wars of territorial possession or independence. This means speak-



ing of history. Of a past always in progress, in a *passéité* as Paul Ricoeur once wrote about the passage of the past in his analysis of the writing of history, of the account of events. In other words, the past continues happening at present through different strategies that constantly give it life. However, the Mediterranean is experiencing a present that extends beyond its past. There is a desire to understand but also to prepare today for tomorrow. The work of Basma Alsharif is in this vein. Alsharif, attracted by the visual and film media, explores political landscapes whose narratives evolve through an unfinished story but with some desire to build themselves into a future. This is why her work entails an experience of immersion both in the narrative forms and the use of psychedelic images, binaural sounds or experiences of bilocation in which viewers feel that they take on a presence in different places at the same time and shift in a contorted movement. Thus, the territories through which her camera wanders are recognisable: Italian or Greek islands, Turkey, Athens or Beirut, California or the Mojave Desert, the Gaza border and somewhere in France. In all of them, the duplication of the experience is a powerful resource to understand the displacement of the body beyond the territory. Perhaps this duplication is understood as such in the integral diaspora with which the Palestinian artist defines herself and should not be misinterpreted as the “luxury of distance”.

Thus, if we go back to the idea of the Mediterranean, we imagine that it is impossible to describe or define the richness and complexity in an inventory and we have also seen this in Edward Said's analyses on the notion of Orientalism. Then we see that the entire definition of Mediterranean is narrowed in its description and expands through the experiences of

the subjectivity of our desires, the epistemic violence upon an Orientalist eastern Mediterranean and the death on the coasts of a sea that grows in cruelty faced with the policies of closing borders in Europe. In this way, we find it impossible not to refer to current events and the cancellation of the work by “Bifo” Berardi, “Auschwitz on the beach”, in relation to what the Mediterranean is today. “Auschwitz on the beach” is a poetic performance by the Italian philosopher produced by Paul B. Preciado, the curator of Documenta 14's public programme that should have been premiered in Kassel on 24 August 2017. The performance was cancelled weeks before its opening, unseen, just because of its title and what it may suggest. The critical voices¹ that see in Bifo an anti-Semite were heard before and after the cancellation of the work. The violence, non-episodic but systemic and epistemic, with which the Mediterranean is experienced today does not seem proof enough of a re-emergence of Nazism. Why does what happens in this sea only affect us, the Mediterraneans?

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What is at a play, as some of us have tried to show on the issue of necropolitics in the Mediterranean, is not demonstrating whether Auschwitz was worse than our current time but rather that the deaths in the Mediterranean, the corpses *on the beach* to which Bifo alludes, are the result of a systemic violence whose victim is the distant other, the other opposite Europe, the

1. Jorg Steinback, who greatly stirred up the controversy about the title of the performance by the Italian one week before in a German newspaper, accused the artist of playing down the greatest act of dehumanisation of the Nazi totalitarian regime under the name of Auschwitz, which was related to the beaches of the Mediterranean covered with refugee camps and corpses.

“Muslim” other, in the sense in which Primo Levi² describes the individual who has lost his humanity because of abuse of power. Thus, it is not about anti-Semitism, a trivialisation of evil, but about regarding Nazism as a terrible way of totalitarianism whose horrible legacy has been manifested until the present and is exhibited in some pieces of Documenta 14.³ But, who cares about the voices of the south? We must learn from them, for instance those of Athens,⁴ or also of Bifo’s. We must focus on another analysis of the violence and this, today, is on the Mediterranean. Following the words of Bifo’s statement, “the Mediterranean is one of the theatres of this emergency.”⁵ Emergency of an unparalleled violence that, as Achille Mbembe proclaimed in his necropolitics, is the “extermination of the migrant population,” in which death is no longer meaningful, in which bodies are a waste product. So, what is Europe’s historical and political accountability in this decline of the Mediterranean? Are Europe and the Mediterranean antagonistic? Once again it is clear that borders are stronger than desires, people or words.

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It seems that the Mediterranean emphasises a difficult stratigraphy of analyses between the notions of territory, race, culture and politics,

between the European Mediterranean, the Maghreb and the eastern Mediterranean. This complexity is seen more than in past years in Documenta 14, not only because it is also held in Athens but because it shifts its discursive construction onto works that take time to understand, in which the knowledge of the subtle events between the centre of Europe, the borders, the refugees and the artists of the eastern Mediterranean are led, sometimes in a clearly critical way, through a path of weak assemblages, fragile untimely uprisings, nearby deaths and poor exhibition.⁶ If I have focused on Documenta 14 it is not to speak of its pertinence but because we can see some splashes of what is advocated as the current Mediterranean in some of its works and mises-en-scène. Faced with the other’s pain, we boast of showing concern, understanding and affection – and Paul B. Preciado and Adam Szymczyk insisted on this. But what happens with my pain? Because it seems as if a silence is imposed on our issues, on our problems faced with the others’ pain. A distance is imposed on us that makes us foreigners in our own experience of the horror, and strangers of our Mediterraneanity. The distance of someone who must not be but is present there because he is. I am Mediterranean. Are we going to keep quiet faced with the issue of our Mediterraneanity? “For whom are they shooting us,” shouts a Palestinian woman in “We began by measuring distance” (2009), by Alsharif, seeing the bodies shot down around them after having completed the measurements that tell us that, in the conflict, distance

2. Primo Levi analyses the death and dehumanisation of the victims in the Nazi extermination camps emphasising the figure of the “Muslim” in his work *If This Is a Man*.

3. That is, speaking of Europe, showing case studies of the German province or the Germanic state on the xenophobia wave, the unrest of European workers, the humiliation of the southern Mediterranean countries faced with the austerity policies and the total death of democracy after the saving of the banking system.

4. “Learning from Athens” is the motto of this year’s Documenta, although it has also not been well understood.

5. Franco “Bifo” Berardi’s statement on 21 August 2017 after the cancellation of “Auschwitz on the beach”, a performance together with Dim and Stefano for *The Parliament of the Bodies*, curated for Documenta 14 by Paul B. Preciado.

6. The apparent and confused precariousness of means and the portfolio of names – not particularly renowned – from the art scene make it the least attractive Documenta in history for many.

only matters in relation to the enemy, and we do not know him.

We continue to be pariahs in our own culture, pariahs of the Mediterranean. Perhaps because only we suffer this illness that is the solution to an episode of *House*. The eloquent doctor of the “everyone lies” unveils the fraud of the name of his patient from the eastern Mediterranean, and, therefore, the illness that his daughter suffers: the family Mediterranean fever. A fever that is only passed on between those Mediterraneans by birth (European, Semitic and eastern Mediterraneans). And for this reason, perhaps in the Mediterranean we feel like a family, but also like foreigners. Always everywhere but nowhere: we inhabit the land, we inhabit a language (that which we learnt with our parents). And neither the land nor the language belongs to us. Neither that which we call our native country, nor the mother tongue. Both seem like terms that are added to the embryonic experience of being born and being from one place. However, these terms do not belong to us and we do not belong to them. The governments insist on creating a series of census, travel, planning and labelling documents of our races, cultures, countries and languages. And, once again, life gives us back the destruction of all. Death as an answer to our life. Extinction as a stark uprooting process. We are foreigners in our own flesh.

The Mediterranean is also history. The past is put into perspective through the act of strangeness in the works of Basma Alsharif. We find a community of spirit, a mental communion between foreigners, characters who experience the bilocation and traumatic history of their country and, in this place, Alsharif penetrates the wound and heals it with lemon and honey. However, we can also

discover in her films, as far as we are capable of finding in the other, in landscapes of others, a place of transcendence in which we can put into perspective the issue of trauma and oppression. In these political landscapes she offers us some oneirism that turns time into a non-time in which history, memory, past, present and future, events, affections and desires interweave in a time lapse. In the *fiction d'un double*,⁷ as Abdelkébir Khatibi identifies it, the greatest professional foreigner. A being of living fiction, of more or less expandable reality.⁸ However, this double of living fiction whose reality extends in different sensitive, intelligible and spatial levels, takes on the extreme “foreignness”.⁹

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These acts of “foreignness” are understood as actions of dissidence faced with violence and become an active and productive knowledge faced with the tyrannical trend of destruction. This fluid identity must face its own path in the decolonisation of the signs and its belonging to a place. The professional foreigner functions in the practice of otherness, seeks a vacuum within, surprises himself by feeling other. In the case of Khatibi, she practises writing from right to left and from left to right. She develops in the language of the others by creating their autobiography, writing the history of Morocco, given that for the Moroccan writer and thinker autobiography is an “exercise in otherness and displacement towards the other. A transforma-

7. Abdelkébir Khatibi, *Le scribe et son ombre*, Paris, Éditions de La Différence, 2008, p. 14.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

tion of the body and its sensitivity.”¹⁰ And, yet, “the other like myself” picked up by Lévinas is now out of reach, according to Khatibi, in a process of decolonisation, because the processes of assimilation only show the power of the colonisers but the other of the otherness. Systemic violence becomes latent in the process of otherness, of the identity itself split between the multipolarity. For this reason, the Moroccan thinker, inheritor of post-structuralism thinkers, wishes to reflect on himself from an outside: “The foreigner within me dominated my intimate identity, showed me the amorous paths to be covered, the ecstasies to be gone through.”¹¹

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Moreover, Basma Alsharif defines this “professional foreigner” with the Anglo-German term in action *Doppelgänger* to speak of the phenomenon of the double. Alsharif creates beautiful loops (“High Noon”, 2014), slows down the image by suspending the action and makes the movements go from front to back as if she were looking for the end in the beginning. The reproduction in the opposite direction of the action, the mirror effect that forms kaleidoscopes, long tracking shots (“Home Movies Gaza”, 2013), hands that lead the gaze to a specific point in the filmed landscape, are an exercise in re-signifying identity (“Deep Sleep”, 2014). The repetition of images or

the use of the loop repeats the thought of the memory that is linked in images and always seems the same but creates different meanings. Such as, for instance, the images of the faces in the family albums that the protagonist erases to create a disidentification in “The Story of Milk and Honey” (2011). It is about an anonymity of the family, of any family that extends the strangeness of the disidentity towards the unknown, towards the foreigner. Given that, as Alsharif has argued, we are part of an “imprecise political history” and this is the only thing we belong to. However, any history, as the protagonist of this film advocates, begins and ends in us. In you and me, in us as others. “The Story of Milk and Honey” is an account of fictional love that reveals the political landscape of Lebanon. It is a film essay that emphasises a horizon that could describe different locations of the region of the Spanish Levante, which could speak of different real characters, which could tell the events of different villages or the love stories of different lovers. In this disfiguration we vaguely identify and allow ourselves to be seduced by a narrative that does not bear our name but in which our face could have been erased. Despite an apparent process of telling our story in the past, the post-Palestinian perspective of Basma Alsharif makes us adopt a paradigmatic interwoven future, not only for Palestine but also for the whole of the Mediterranean.

The nomadic memory that the professional foreigner suffers is not built upon pieces of memories seeking to make of the lie a beautiful truth, as curiously some critics of self-fiction try to think, but rather as a fraud of established knowledge in favour of a dual sensitivity. “Every time I am asked about my project, I lie,” says the protagonist of “The Story of Milk

10. Ibid., p. 29.

11. Ibid., p. 101.

and Honey”. Thus we could solve the enigma of a story that tells all stories, even the one yet to come. But, moreover, all these strategies of otherness open up to others like the double, the *Doppelgänger*. Thus we could make a post-Mediterranean story. A story about the duality of our existence. Thus, the binaries become complex and almost destroy themselves in the symbol represented by *Ouroboros*, the name of Alsharif's first feature film (2017). It was shot after Israel's offensive on Gaza and the death of 1,500 Palestinians in 2014. The territory was completely ravaged and Alsharif wanted to record the cataclysm by setting it against a renewing future or an implicit rebirth in the cyclical shape involved in the *ouroboros*. The snake that bites its own tail appears first in his

work “Renée's Room”, produced for the Palais de Tokyo in 2013. In this image, a yellow snake in a blue washbasin bites its tail and makes it bleed. At first sight, it seems as if it is shedding its skin to renew but soon we see that it is devouring something. It is eating itself. It is something ferocious and incomprehensible for our eyes. The myth of the *ouroboros*, a snake biting its tail, is reactivated in a plot of pain. If this figure symbolises the eternal return, destruction and creation, now she goes one step further; Basma Alsharif seeks a recovery of life. Because death imposes itself upon life as in the horror of the siege of Gaza. “Our soul belongs to the past of the dead and ghosts. This is the ideal place for your reincarnation.”¹² This is why love and hope is the only thing left to us.

12. Abdelkébir Khatibi, *Romans et récits*, Paris, Éditions de la Différence, 2008, p. 676.