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Filmic Migration and Wandering Sounds: The Relation Between Accented and Dialect Cinema

Abstract: In the context of the music documentary *Heimatklänge (Echoes of Home)* Marcy Goldberg (48) suggested speaking of dialect cinema. Dialect cinema normally maintains the visual and audio character of its place of origin. It differs from the transnational accented cinema of filmmakers in exile by Hamid Naficy. Using Goldberg's concept, I would like to define dialect cinema as a type of filmic aesthetic and define its features. In *Echoes of Home*, the voice, musical origins and regional sounds are all indicators of dialect cinema. Yet, despite all differences and contrasts, several similarities between accented and dialect cinema exist; These similarities make it possible to consider a filmic migration which functions as a wandering and transcultural circulating movement. Following this hypothesis, an image emerges which, on the one hand, is a musical-regional image of the Swiss Alps and on the other – as I define it – a global yodel soundscape. In my paper I will demonstrate how this is expressed as a circulation and a wandering in *Echoes of Home* and how this is perceived in the audiovisual material.

Keywords: Accented cinema, dialect cinema, *Echoes of Home*, Heimatklänge, Landscape, Music, Migration, Soundscape.

With reference to the music documentary *Echoes of Home (Heimatklänge; dir. by Stefan Schwieter, 2007)* Marcy Goldberg has proposed it should be termed dialect cinema (48). Generally speaking, dialect cinema retains the visual and audio character of its place of origin. It differs from the transnational, accented cinema of filmmakers in exile described by Hamid Naficy. Following Goldberg's concept, I define dialect cinema as a specific type of film aesthetics and identify its features. In *Echoes of Home*, voices, musical origins, and regional sounds are all indicators of dialect cin-

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ema. Yet despite all differences and contrasts, several similarities between accented and dialect cinema do exist; these similarities suggest filmic migration, which functions as a wandering and transcultural circulating movement. Following this hypothesis, an image emerges which, on the one hand, is a musical and regional image of the Swiss Alps, and on the other – as I define it – a global yodelling soundscape. In my presentation I will show how this is expressed in *Echoes of Home* as circulation and wandering, and how this can be perceived in the audiovisual material.¹

Accented Cinema

Naficy defines accented cinema as “the accented style” of international exilic and diasporic cinema of recent decades that operates outside of universal and accent-free film culture. The “aesthetic concept” of these films that engage with “the experience of displacement, particularly as a result of exile or diaspora” (Jahn-Sudmann 183), do not constitute a cinema that is established or coherent – as Naficy emphasises – but instead operate in different and scattered areas around the world. Nevertheless, Naficy concludes, this cinema is highly relevant: not only is it prolific in terms of film output, but it exhibits a great diversity of formal and cultural manifestations, and is socially very influential.

According to Naficy, the accent of these films does not derive from any specific intonation or pronunciation of diegetic figures, but rather from the dislocation of the filmmakers and their technical and artisanal modes of production (19).² Therefore, accented films can be described as both local and global in that they both distance themselves and profit from established practices of production. They situate themselves in the interstices of social forms and filmic practices, whereby the best films of this type are characterised both by the conditions of exile and diaspora and the conditions of the cinema. In addition to letters and telephone calls it is above all motifs of the imagined home country and of life in exile that are thematised in these films. Accented cinema is distinguished by spatio-temporal structures that are at once open and closed. Whereas the portrayal of the imagined original home tends towards boundlessness and timelessness, as well as a fetishising and nostalgic view of nature, landscape, mountains, monuments, souvenirs, and so on of the home country, life in exile and the diaspora is presented by contrast as claustrophobic and panic-stricken, and it operates in a temporal mode. Home, with its open structures, suggests continuity; the paranoid structures of exile are characterised by breaks. While travelling or engaged on the quest to seek one’s own identity it is above all transnational places and spaces – borders, tunnels, airports, ports, hotels, buses, railways, and suitcases – which are foregrounded objects of interest. Journeys can be physical and territorial, but also psychological and philosophical. In the best films of this category, Naficy points out, identity is not static, but a process of becoming; a performative process. In this connection Naficy cites Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s philosophical concept of the rhizome, a

wide array of planar connections that the two philosophers opposed to older hierarchical and dichotomous structures (5f.).

If, as Naficy contends, an accented style in cinema exists which operates at various locations scattered around the globe and which processes filmmakers' experiences in exile and the diaspora, then as Goldberg argues, dialect cinema, which renders its scenic and cultural origins visible and audible, also exists. But what does dialect cinema actually look and sound like? How does it react to its environment? And what aesthetic concepts does it follow?³

Dialect Cinema

Some ways in which dialect cinema reacts to the environment and traditions of its location of origin are demonstrated by a scene from the film *Echoes of Home*. The vocal artist Noldi Alder puts on his costume for "Silvesterchlausen" (New Year's Eve Spirits), an ancient custom in the Swiss Canton of Appenzell. Silvesterchlausen celebrates the turn of the year, according to both the Gregorian and the Julian calendar. On 31 December and 13 January, "Old New Year's Eve", men in masks and costumes with bells – representing the New Year's Eve spirits – make their way in small groups from house to house and wish the occupants a happy and prosperous New Year with a "Zäuerli," a yodel typical of the Appenzell region (Grubenmann and Tralci). That *Echoes of Home* does not merely frame this old custom, but also rhythmises it audiovisually is demonstrated by the example of the extreme close-up of one of the headdresses. The shot is structured in the form of a star, moving from the periphery to the centre, and thus guiding the viewer's gaze to the centre of the frame. At the star's centre are small wooden figures, arranged as though on a stage, which portray scenes from everyday life. In addition to the sound of yodelling on the soundtrack, one hears men's laughter, the muffled murmur of voices, and the sound of the bells that are fastened to the traditional costumes. Further: another shot shows the scenery bathed in a shimmering light while the men in masks dance and jump round in a circle. The hand-held camera is right in amongst the dancers and takes up their movements. After a cut from the dim light of the dawn to the whiteness of the snowy landscape, the Appenzell Alps come into view to the sound of footsteps scrunching in the snow. In static long shots the costumed figures traverse the field of view from the foreground to the background and from left to right; they map both the film frame and the snowy Swiss landscape. Close-ups with unhurried cuts reveal an interior where the men sit at a kitchen table in their everyday clothes and yodel in several-part harmony; this is followed by a view of the outside in which a farmhouse is discernible in the dawn light. In the background a mountain range is visible, which falls away to the right and closes off the image at the top of the frame. There is a cut to a long shot and the sounds of yodelling become quieter as the sound of the wind mingles with the soundtrack. Then Alder's voice is heard commenting on the film images in Swiss German:⁴ "When people sing up there in the mountains I think it's phenomenal." Cut to Alder being interviewed in daylight and in

close-up in front of a wall of firewood stacked against a house. He continues: “If you start to yodel in a pub, everyone goes quiet. I don’t know why, actually. Perhaps a certain amount of reflection belongs to it. Perhaps an ancient religion or a primeval thought is behind it. Or perhaps it’s discipline that the people still keep to. A spirit that is supposed to protect us.” Cut to a group of masked Chläuse who are wishing a happy New Year to an old married couple standing in the doorway of their house. The old man, stooping slightly and visibly moved, joins in the singing with a quiet voice. Alder’s off-camera voice goes straight to the point: “You’ll always get an Appenzeller with a Zäuerli. All over the world everyone listens and is somehow hypnotised. Every Appenzeller notices straight away: That’s where I belong.”

As this sequence shows, *Echoes of Home* does not confine itself to the customs and traditions of Appenzell and the reactions of the people to their environment, it also stages them impressively on an aesthetic level. Here one can cite Gilles Deleuze: that the relationship between milieu and behavior is characteristic of the cinema of the action-image (193ff., 217ff.). The way that people of the Appenzeller Alps react to the Zäuerli is graphically conveyed by the close-up of the old man who is moved to join in the singing. The emotional reaction and the act of joining in are interpreted by Alder as a process of affirming Appenzeller identity. But although the hypnotic effect of yodelling affects all those who hear it all over the world, the sense of belonging and identification with the singing is only reserved for Appenzellers, as Alder clearly states in the above quotation: “You’ll always get an Appenzeller with a Zäuerli. All over the world everyone listens and is somehow hypnotised. Every Appenzeller notices straight away: That’s where I belong.”

Demarcation of the Appenzell region takes place on different acoustic levels: language (melodic murmuring voices, off-camera commentary in Swiss German), music (Zäuerli, yodelling), and natural sounds (wind, snow underfoot). The source of the sounds is situated both in the diegetic and non-diegetic area of the film and is heard both on-screen and off-screen. The complex layering of the various sounds creates a sonorous environment that can be called the sound of the Swiss Alps, from whence the protagonists originated and in which they are absorbed.

Sound Milieus and Filmic Soundscapes

Frédéric Roulier’s “milieux sonores” are an apt expression to describe this (Roulier). Sound milieu “structure a soundscape – like that of a city or a landscape” and characterise a particular “people’s sound environment. The milieu is always defined in relation to a location in space; that is, it does not exist on its own terms, but is always a milieu of someone or something; it defines the local relations, the relationship of a society to its environment” (Maeder 11).⁵ Roulier’s geographic concept can be applied to film and Deleuze’s vocabulary expanded to include the realm of sound.⁶ For in the scene from *Echoes of Home* quoted above the people from Appenzell do not react primarily to the optical characteristics of the region

but rather to the acoustic ones; not so much to the traditional costumes, mountains, and the snowy landscape, but much more to the sounds of yodelling and the bells.

By layering and framing these alpine sounds a “soundscape” (Schafer) is created. The soundscape is “an acoustic ‘envelope’ consisting of noise, sounds of nature, and music, which surrounds us” and, as a composition, represents a “real, existing landscape” that is experienced as a collage. The sounds of the bells, of footsteps scrunching in the snow, the whistling of the wind, the Zäuerli, and the sound of Swiss German being spoken create a soundscape which refers equally to the topology of the Alps and their aestheticised portrayal in film. The acoustic composition is framed and rhythmised by images of idyllic mountain ranges, Swiss farm houses, and yodellers in traditional costumes. The pictures of alpine traditions and locations and the filmic soundscape in *Echoes of Home* build up to form an aesthetic concept that can be termed dialect cinema. The acoustic depiction of the alpine region utilises stereotypical sounds like bells, yodelling, natural sounds, and the distinctive Swiss German dialect that is also known to audiences in other European and non-European countries.

As the concept of dialect plays a central role both in the language spoken by the persons featured in *Echoes of Home* as well as in the film’s language, I would like to clarify at this point what “dialect” means in linguistics, how it is differentiated from accent, and how, in connection with Naficy’s work, it can be made productive for the film. I shall then proceed to contrast dialect cinema and accented cinema.

Dialect and Accent in Linguistics

In linguistics a dialect is defined as “Any distinct variety of a language, especially one spoken in a specific part of a country or other geographical area. The criterion for distinguishing ‘dialects’ from ‘languages’ is taken, in principle, to be that of mutual intelligibility. For example, speakers of Dutch cannot understand English unless they have learned it, and vice versa; therefore Dutch and English are different languages. But a speaker from Amsterdam can understand one from Antwerp: therefore they speak different dialects of the same language. But (a) this is a matter of degree, and (b) ordinary usage often contradicts it. For example, Italian ‘dialects’ (‘dialetti’) are so called though many from the north and south are not mutually intelligible. By contrast Danish and Norwegian are called ‘languages’ though speakers understand each other reasonably well (Matthews). A dialect may take its name from the geographical area of its distribution or from older geographical or tribal names. According to a standard German reference work, since time immemorial dialect has been an indication of origin because it reflects the entire cultural and historical conditions of an area, which thus appears as a more or less precisely defined area of culture and language. Indication means at the same time identification, whereby a dialect signals the special character of the inhabitants of a region and their bonds with their history, their habits, and their customs. In this way the local and indigenous is differentiated from the

superordinate; namely, the standard language and the nation, as well as everything that is alien (Knoop 151). German dialects in existence in the early twentieth century included Low German, Alemannic, Bavarian, and Franconian, which are further subdivided, for example, into Northern Low Saxon, Moselle Franconian, Southern Bavarian, Highest Alemannic, and so on (153).

What, precisely, distinguishes a dialect from an accent, and what do the two terms connote exactly? In linguistics “accent” refers solely to pronunciation, whereas “dialect” relates also to grammar and vocabulary. According to Naficy, there are two basic features of an accent. First, the accent characterises the regional and social origins of the speaker, and second, the intonation of a syllable or word can interrupt the flow of speech. As accents are standardised,⁷ for example, English spoken with a British, Scottish, Indian, Canadian, or American accent, it is virtually impossible to speak without an accent. The majority of accents in English are geographical, although others exist which result when English is not the speaker’s first language (Naficy 22f.).

Dialect and Accent in Films

If this is applied to cinema, it means that the standardised, neutral, unbiased accent found in dominant cinema derives from the prevailing mode of production. Naficy describes both classic and the new Hollywood cinema, which in his opinion is purely for entertainment purposes, as ideology-free and accent-free. However, following this definition would mean that all other non-mainstream films, including those that are not exilic and diaspora films, are accented films. Naficy does mention two aspects that distinguish filmmakers in exile and the diaspora: first, the artisanal and collective mode of production, and second, the dislocation of the filmmakers and their audience: “Consequently, not all accented films are exilic and diasporic, but all exilic and diasporic films are accented” (23). Naficy says that whereas in linguistics accent only relates to pronunciation and not to grammar and vocabulary, the filmic accent of exilic and diasporic cinema goes deeper into the structure of the film: into the narrative and visual style, the characters, the subject matter, the theme, and the plot. In this sense the accented style of a film functions like a combination of accent and dialect as defined by linguistics (23).

Convergence of Accented and Dialect Cinema

Strictly speaking, what Naficy refers to as accented cinema, one could also call dialect cinema. This is interesting because – to expand on Naficy’s comments – dialect cinema also influences narrative and visual style, subject matter, theme, and plot of a film. For example, in *Echoes of Home* the custom of Silvesterchlausen crystallises into the aesthetic focal point, which determines the theme, the formal structure, and the characterisation of the persons in the film, and especially the establishment of a sound environment which is

an unmistakably Swiss film soundscape out of which the people step forward and in which they are embedded. In this sense both dialect cinema and accented cinema operate outside of universal and accent-free cinema. Dialect cinema also functions at once as dialect and accent, for *Echoes of Home* not only changes the accent but also the grammar and vocabulary of universal film culture.

However, there is a difference in emphasis: whereas dialect cinema puts the filmmakers' place of origin centre stage, accented cinema engages with the experiences of filmmakers in exile and the diaspora. Thus in spite of overlap and similarities dialect cinema is different to accented cinema. Filmmakers and audiences of dialect cinema are not as a rule dislocated like those of accented cinema, and rarely have experience of expulsion, flight, or life in exile, as was the case in Italian Neorealist films of the post-war years or the sentimental and nostalgic German "Heimatfilms" of the 1950s, which can be viewed as a response to the uprooting of millions of Germans and which, amongst other things, were nicknamed "hypnotherapy of the Germans" (Koebner 296ff.). Paradoxically, both dialect cinema and accented cinema focus on the search for an own identity. Place of origin plays just as important a role as travels and wandering through other regions and countries of the world.

Thus *Echoes of Home* follows the vocal artist and singing teacher Christian Zehnder on a journey to the Alps to his musical roots and the sound of the Swiss landscape. While the audiovisual layers of multiple image and sound situations gradually coalesce into a musical identity, which can be described as a performative process of becoming, on the visual level of the film an alternation makes its presence felt: between the timelessness of the Super 8 film images and the temporality of the digital images. In Deleuze's terms this can be described as a back and forth between action images and time images, between succession and simultaneity. The HDTV images of the journey, the interview, and the performance permit definite temporal and spatial identification, but the Super 8 material defies any such temporal and spatial classification. Times and places overlap and seem increasingly to cancel each other out. Further, the mood of the digital images tends towards the dismal and restraints, whereas the Super 8 material is cheerful and lively. There is also a break on the level of the film's soundtrack, which begins to undermine any definite classification of the music and sounds (train journey through the Alps, milking machine on an alpine farm) as belonging to a particular region. Zehnder's vocal imitation of machines opens yodelling to experiments, and the foreign-sounding violins and flutes are in contradiction to the sounds of a city in the first scene and point to the fact that music is a global phenomenon and tradition.

The impression of a back and forth between opposite poles becomes stronger on Zehnder's trip to Tuva, where he visits the throat singing group Huun-Huur-Tu. In her stage performances the Swiss American singer and musician Erika Stucky, who lived in San Francisco until she was ten years old, also searches for her musical roots. Mythical alpine creatures in the legends of Valais from which Stucky draws artistic inspiration are grotesquely

distorted in the overexposed Super 8 images. Interestingly, Stucky talks about the “Swiss blues”, which not only conveys gaiety and happiness, but also conveys a mood of sadness through its complexity and tales of woe. Yet through singing, Stucky says, a healing process is set in motion which also endows the suffering with richness and makes it an uplifting experience. In this scene as well the to and from between experimental and traditional modes of performance, temporality and timelessness, gaiety and anxiety, is in evidence.

Circulation among Dialect Cinema and Accented Cinema

Thus, in spite of all their differences and contrasts dialect cinema and accented cinema have much in common. Both function like accent and dialect as defined by linguistics, because they alter not only the intonation but also the grammar and the vocabulary of films. A central concern of both is engaging with the quest for an own identity, and portray it as a process of becoming, as a performative act. Both alternate between utopian and dystopian views of the landscape, and in the process exhibit a back and forth between depictions that are beyond time and space, and depictions that are firmly anchored in a particular time and space. Whereas accented cinema, according to Naficy, ascribes opposing aspects, such as utopia and dystopia, timelessness and temporality, to various locations – place of origin on the one side and exile on the other – in dialect cinema the opposing poles diffuse and interweave in their ambivalence to the point where they become indistinguishable. In both categories of film transnational places and spaces, like train stations and airports, are important. Similarly, means of transport, such as trains, cars, and planes, play a significant role. And in both dialect cinema and accented cinema the motif of travelling and wandering is central.⁸ But why, one could ask, is wandering of such seminal importance in these films?

Migration and Cinema

In my view, this has a great deal to do with the fact that the identity of the filmmakers and the film’s characters, as well as the identity of the film itself can be understood as being in a process of becoming which is not static, but unfolds performatively. The medium of film, too, is permanently engaged in a search for its own origins and roots. Film is not only capable of rendering audiovisual, narrative, or figurative metamorphoses perceptible, it can also transform itself – into a different image, into a different sound, into a different film, or a different film genre. This movement within and between films is also and particularly expressed by the wandering that takes place among accented cinema and dialect cinema, which in itself sets up an interstice, or rather an interstitial movement. In this sense accented cinema and dialect cinema can be conceived of as undertaking filmic migration – a wandering and transcultural circulating movement of images, sounds, films, and film concepts.

End Notes

1. The article is a translation of part/chapter of my book *Berg und Film* (chapter 2.2 “Heimatklänge”, 111-128).
2. Exile and diaspora cinema filmmakers of recent decades include, for example, Abid Med Hondo, Michel Khleifi, Mira Nair, Ghasem Ebrahimian, Rea Tajiri, Charles Burnett, Christine Choy, Gregory Nava, Haile Gerima, Julie Dash, Jonas Mekas, Mona Hatoum, Chantal Akerman, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Isaac Julien, and Shirin Neshat (Naficy 19).
3. Here I would like to point out that dialect cinema follows a similar concept to that of the ethnographic film although with a fundamental difference: dialect cinema always constitutes itself performatively in order to migrate to other filmic concepts and forms – accented cinema, for example – and to undercut itself. Thus in dialect cinema it is not only the protagonists who are searching for their roots, but also the film itself as it circles around various formations and filmic identities.
4. For other dialogues see the German subtitles of *Echoes of Home*.
5. Sound milieus are not only studied in geography, but also in other areas of science and the humanities. Further, with the “spatial turn,” spatial categories have also appeared in “cultural studies and the social sciences since the end of the 1980s,” where they are used to describe “systems, collectives, and groups of elements that interact” (Maeder 9).
6. However, these visible and audible milieus are not merely optical and sound situations as described by Deleuze in the context of modern cinema; for example, the films of Roberto Rossellini, Michelangelo Antonioni, or Robert Bresson, for these invert the former relationship: characters find themselves in the situation of viewers – incapable of acting and only capable of perceiving: “For the characters themselves reacted to situations [...] What the viewer perceived therefore was a sensory-motor image in which he took a greater or lesser part by identification with the characters. Hitchcock had begun the inversion of this point of view by including the viewer in the film. But it is now that the identification is actually inverted: the character has become a kind of viewer. He shifts, runs, and becomes animated in vain, the situation he is in outstrips his motor capacities on all sides, and makes him see and hear what is no longer subject to the rules of a response or an action. He records rather than reacts” (Deleuze 2f.).
7. Naficy is surely referring to “universal” film culture here, for obviously there is a huge difference between a Texan and a New York accent or between a London and Lancashire accent, for example.
8. What I understand by circulation among accented and dialect cinema has much in common with postcolonial studies’ concept of vernacular cosmopolitanism: “Vernacular cosmopolitanism, an oxymoron that joins contradictory notions of local specificity and universal enlightenment, is at the crux of current debates on cosmopolitanism. These pose the question whether the local, parochial, rooted, culturally specific and demiotic may co-exist with the translocal, transnational, transcendent, elitist, enlightened, universalist and modernist – whether boundary-crossing demiotic migrations may be compared to the globe-trotting travel, sophisticated cultural knowledge, and moral world-view of deracinated intellectuals” (Werbner 496ff.; Bhabha 191ff.).

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