

Unfamiliar Film: Sisters Unsettling Family Habits

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This chapter will take its cue from the recent debate on the renewed attention being paid to political engagement in contemporary art. In a reaction to fragmentary, self-reflexive, self-involved art, *Documenta 11* (2002), the international contemporary art exhibition in Kassel,¹ has replaced “post-modern” art with political art from Latin America, Asia, and Africa. *Documenta 11* showed a special interest in the audiovisual arts, referring explicitly to Hamid Naficy’s work on “Accented Cinema”, i.e., exilic and diasporic filmmaking. However, according to the *Documenta 11* curators and to Hamid Naficy, contemporary political art has not put politics back into art by making global and/or local political issues an explicit theme for art. Political art is not necessarily about politics. In this chapter, Hamid Naficy’s work on Accented Cinema will be used to answer the question: How can this otherwise-than-through-politics type of art be considered political? How does the distinction between politics and the political relate to Naficy’s Accented Cinema? In this chapter, claiming political relevance for film, that is, not in terms of film as politics but rather in terms of film as political, implies a critical description of the political belonging to what will be called the home of familiar habits. Naficy has demonstrated how an inquiry into accented cinema entails an inquiry into the significance of diasporic family relationships; similarly, this chapter will explore the home life of the diasporic family. When this chapter describes how the family features in contemporary political film art, it understands the family as the

¹ Every five years, Kassel, Germany, hosts an international showcase of modern, contemporary art. Each *Documenta* has a new artistic director. *Documenta 11*, as led by Okwui Enwezor, consisted of five so-called Platforms for art and discussions about art, held in Vienna and Berlin (Platform 1: *Democracy Unrealized*), New Delhi (Platform 2: *Experiments with Truth*), St. Lucia (Platform 3: *Créolité and Creolization*), Lagos (Platform 4: *Under Siege: Four African Cities*), and finally in Kassel in 2002. Platform 5, the final exhibit in Kassel (June 8–September 15), was intended as the culmination of all the preparatory debate and works-in-progress. For information on *Documenta 11* (and *Documenta 12*, scheduled for 2007): <http://www.documenta12.de/data/english/index.html>, available October 21, 2004.

medium in and through which an accented cinema explores the relation between the public and the private.

Bringing together the contemporary political engagement of *Documenta 11* and Naficy's Accented Cinema, a close reading of particular scenes in the work of three diasporic filmmakers: Dominique Cabrera (France/Algeria), Clara Law (Hong Kong/Australia) and Atom Egoyan (Canada/Armenia) will provide the main thesis of this chapter. It acknowledges that there is a safeguarding tendency in the family, which protects its members from a dangerous outside world. Yet, within the family there is a specific role that mediates the outside world of public responsibilities for the private family, albeit a role different from the father as the head of the family household. In *L'AUTRE CÔTÉ DE LA MER* (Cabrera, 1997), *FLOATING LIFE* (Law, 1996) and *THE ADJUSTER* (EGOYAN, 1991), the possibly conflicting realms of the public and the private are negotiated by a specific family member: the older sister. This sisterly mediator between the public and private comes to the fore in films that function as political art (first section of this chapter), in films that describe the home not as a physical dwelling but in terms of inhabitable habits (second section: habitual home), and in films that even break down the walls of the house to create room for new habits (third section: the house that is not a home). Any understanding of the family in these films as coinciding exclusively with the realm of private life is proven a serious underestimation of precisely the mediating role of the older sister (concluding section: the adjusting sister). These films suggest that the habitual family, as intimated by the marital family tradition, will always work in obscure and un-acknowledged ways, unless the sister appears "to call the shots". In other words, what is concealed in the natural family can only become visible by the appearance of the sister, who proves the habitual workings of the nuclear family wrong.

Political Art

In *L'AUTRE CÔTÉ DE LA MER*, an older Frenchman, who has always lived in Algeria, meets friends and family who have been living in France since the Algerian war of independence. The older man has traveled from Oran, Algeria, to the other shore for what he considers a practical combination of a business transaction and an eye operation. Of course, he will get more than what he bargains for: new friendships, disappointments in old ones, and a confrontation with the political aspects of his past. Dominique Cabrera, a French filmmaker with Algerian roots, has carefully portrayed contemporary France's migrant Algerians. Cabrera calls attention to the Algerian war as the main reason for the diaspora of the older man's family in a remarkable way. Apparently, in the aftermath of the Algerian political upheaval of the 1960s, the protagonist decided to stay in Algeria, while his

sisters moved to France. In welcoming her brother, the younger sister makes no mention of the past and lets her affection overwhelm the protagonist. She would not dare remind him of their earlier painful separation. However, the older sister, in the *mise-en-scène* of an emotional family picnic, is able to combine her warm welcome with the question no one has thus far dared to ask: What role exactly did her brother play in the war? Cabrera neither opts for grainy newsreels, nor institutional settings in which politics could be made an explicit issue for her film; alternatively, she prefers to use the older sister to mediate between the private family and the political background of their family history. Remarkably, Cabrera's 1997 film is a fine example of what *Documenta 11*, five years later, would present as political art.

Platform 1 of *Documenta 11*, entitled *Democracy Unrealized*, was scheduled as a series of conferences and lectures in March/April 2001 in Vienna and in October 2001 in Berlin, remarkably circumscribing the eventful day of September 11 of that same year. Already politicized by its agenda, *Democracy Unrealized* became an even more urgent appeal to research the potential of art in times of political upheaval, in the sense that "unrealized" would not necessarily express a sense of defeat or lost hope, but at least also refer to an argument about art in a process of democratic becoming, never finalized and always underway.²

Meanwhile, Platform 5 included a film program that *Documenta 11*'s co-curator Mark Nash reprised in the Harvard Film Archive as "An Accented Cinema".³ Hamid Naficy's *An Accented Cinema* was used here to address the specific role of film in the process of "democracy unrealized". In Naficy's book, however, it is only in the final chapter that he claims a political relevance for accented cinema, when he explicitly describes the performed identity of exilic and diasporic filmmakers. Prior to that final chapter, politics was also an issue for Naficy, but only provisionally, and only in so far as exilic and diasporic filmmakers themselves explicitly addressed politics or subscribed to political expressions. For Naficy it is important that recognizing *accented cinema* is less a question of subject matter than of style; even *Third Cinema* filmmakers, defined by their explicit references to politics, are considered to be interesting by Naficy for their style because they prefigure the accented style of contemporary exilic and diasporic filmmakers.⁴

² In the Introduction to Platform 1, Okwui Enwezor and his team describe democracy as "a fundamentally unrealizable project – or, put another way, a work in progress" (*Democracy Unrealized: Documenta 11 Platform 1*, edited by Okwui Enwezor et al. Kassel: Hatje Cantz, 2002, p. 14).

³ <http://www.harvardfilmarchive.org/calendars/02novdec/documenta.htm>, available October 21, 2004.

⁴ Referring to Third Cinema's paradigmatic *THE HOUR OF THE FURNACES* (1968), Naficy writes: "Like *The Hour of the Furnaces*, accented films are hybridized in their use of forms that cut across the national, typological, generic and stylistic boundaries. Similarly, many of them are driven by

To be sure, just because accented cinema does not have politics as its subject matter does not mean that accented cinema is not political; indeed, “no other cinema is so intimately political, even though it may not be about politics.”⁵ Apparently, Claude Lefort’s distinction between politics (*la politique*) and the political (*le politique*) is relevant for Naficy, even if the latter does not theorize it as such. Naficy does not come back to his remarks on Accented Cinema being political in contradistinction to the politics of Third Cinema. He does not explicitly think through how cinematic style can be – or in fact has already been – political, although possibly rewarding venues in this respect can be found at a metaphorical level, particularly when he writes about accented cinema’s focus on homeland and houses and its explorations in terms of border crossing as identity crossing. In political theory, Lefort has presented the distinction between the political and politics as follows:

The political is... revealed, not in what we call political activity, but in the double movement whereby the mode of institution of society appears and is obscured. It appears in the sense that the process whereby society is ordered and unified across its divisions becomes visible. It is obscured in the sense that the locus of politics (the locus in which parties compete and in which a general agency of power takes shape and is reproduced) becomes defined as particular, while the principle which generates the overall configuration is concealed.⁶

Lefort’s dialectical distinction calls attention to a paradoxical feature of contemporary, democratic politics. Political parties, campaigning, elections appear to be clear indications of democracy; yet, understanding these clear signs of politics as the essence of democracy runs the risk of obscuring the political culture that is a precondition of democracy. This is why commentators have warned that merely installing the politics of democracy in nation-states without a democratic, political tradition will almost always fail, the only exceptions being Germany and Japan after World War II.

For a film theorist like Naficy, acknowledging the difference between politics and the political entails a cinematic inquiry into the nature of political culture, suggesting at least that film, obviously, cannot install the politics of democracy,

the aesthetics of provisionality, experimentation, and imperfection – even amateurism – and they are made in the artisanal, low-cost mode of ‘cinema of hunger’” (*An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001, p. 31).

⁵ *An Accented Cinema*, p. 94.

⁶ Claude Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*, translated by David Macey (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), p. 11.

but can be imperative for understanding the culture that allows it. Hence, even though Naficy provocatively refers to *auteur* theory by putting “the historicity of the author back into authorship”,⁷ he would not make the accented filmmaker an active agent of politics on the platform of party democracy. Alternatively, a political platform for accented filmmakers would be the one that would let them share the political in *Documenta 11*. On this stage we would find both Lefort’s apparition and obscurity, not of political power and inequality, respectively, but of realizing and un-realizing democracy as an ongoing process. To relate film to the political, therefore, should amount to other descriptions than the old and well-known relations between film and education, documentation, and propaganda. These expressions of film politics are less interesting, from a political perspective, than the medium’s implication in the *modus* of society, i.e., what Lefort calls “the mode of institution of society”.

In *L’AUTRE CÔTÉ DE LA MER*, what is the *modus* of society that both appears and is obscured when the older sister combines both her familial responsibilities of welcoming her brother back into the privacy of sibling relationships and her responsibilities for setting the record straight? The older sister, in *L’AUTRE CÔTÉ DE LA MER*, appears to embody the combination of both private and public responsibilities. This, then, implies the particularization of the general question of where and how the political becomes visible in accented cinema. We may now ask a question about the older sister in accented cinema: can we trace, through the sister’s ways, the hidden principle whereby, according to Lefort, society is ordered?

Habitual Home

Of all the contributors to *Democracy Unrealized*, Iain Chambers is the one who most explicitly investigates the relation between art and contemporary society. Chambers’s essay is about art in the age of what he calls “posthumanism”. Renaissance humanism, with its occidental, unique point of view – also the modern subject’s point of view – is challenged by subjects “besides and beyond... the patriarchal universalism that humanism once proposed”.⁸ In the terms of *Documenta 11*, globalization has brought the previously untouchable universalism of human rights into conflict with non-Western subjects, the latter claiming that universal humanism is almost always Western humanism. As a result, a democratic constituency and the evaluation of economic prospects and promises re-

⁷ Naficy, *An Accented Cinema*, p. 34.

⁸ Iain Chambers, “Unrealized Democracy and a Posthumanist Art” (In *Democracy Unrealized*, pp. 169-176), p. 173.

quire a re-negotiation and historicization of what it means to be a world citizen.⁹

The citizen of a nation-state is the subject of a national narration. Chambers refers to Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* to emphasize the constructedness of national identity. Thence the need for what Chambers calls "pedagogical languages of institutional identity, busily seeking to legitimate the narration of nation".¹⁰ These languages describe or, more accurately, prescribe the state of the nation. And it is in reference to this prescription that Chambers lauds the interruptive promise of art: "The art of the interruption, art as interruption, both brings to light our prescribed state... while also opening out on the possibility of revisiting... those languages elsewhere."¹¹ Hence, the nation is actively constructed in and through language, and it is this representational activity that constitutes the political organizational form that is the state, which then can be questioned by art anew. Thus, art can and will be used to both represent and question the nation-state.

Focusing on this power of questioning, Chambers describes the art of interruption as "the disturbance that uproots the *domus*",¹² the unsettling of that to which we belong – our home. In thirteen lines of text dealing with the terms "habitat", "inhabit" and "habit", Chambers revives the connection, found in German philosophy, between *Gewohnheit* and *Wohnung*,¹³ intimating that the intrusion of art into our homes will be experienced as an unsettling of the habits of our everyday lives.¹⁴ In other words, in our attempt to understand Unrealized Democracy in terms of the political, we have entered the living space closest to us. However, the political, in which we live, is not so much a physical dwelling as a range of habits. The habitual is the expression of familiarity.

Remarkably, this presentation of dwelling in and through the habits most familiar to us does not necessarily make the metaphor of the political habitat less relevant or any stranger. This would have perhaps been the case were *domus* to

⁹ Not surprisingly, the posthumanism that Chambers envisions is not so much anti-human, but paradoxically "*more human* in recognizing its own specific limits and location" (Ibid., p. 173). Chambers's book *Culture after Humanism* (London: Routledge, 2001) goes into more detail.

¹⁰ "Unrealized Democracy", p. 173.

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 173-4.

¹² Ibid., p. 175.

¹³ Chambers, for example, writes: "'home' is rendered an altogether more open-ended and vulnerable habitat. The latter provides less comfort and consolation of an eventual homecoming and more the perpetual point of departure for a journey destined to render uninhabitable previous understandings" (Ibid., p. 175).

¹⁴ In his reading of certain sections in Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, Rodolphe Gasché points out Hegel's indebtedness to an even older tradition: "Indeed, what may look like a mere play on words, Hegel's juxtaposition of *Gewohnheit* (habit) and *Wohnung* (habitation)... is based on the original meaning of the Greek notion of *ethos*" (*Inventions of Difference: On Jacques Derrida*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994, p. 174).

represent *politics* (and not the political). Instead, a familiar character enters the realm of the political, if we present it as the realm of habit: it is the Greek *ethos*, mostly translated as “custom” or “character”. Indeed, to inquire into the customs, i.e., the habits that comprise a person’s or group’s moral character, can be quite a familiar practice when analyzing the identity of individuals or cultures.

Clara Law’s film *FLOATING LIFE* appears to be making precisely this point. Her film about the Chinese diaspora is told from the perspective of a Hong Kong family emigrating to Australia and shows how the strange new surroundings of their Australian house away from home is domesticated by the customary, almost ceremonial tea drinking tradition. This tradition is at first marginalized in Australia, but is later re-installed as the means by which the Chinese can inhabit their new surroundings.

Characterizing the political by using the metaphor of dwelling, and interpreting this metaphor as actualizing not the physical building but rather the habits in which we live, implies an inquiry into *ethos*. Thus, art is political in its settling and unsettling of moral character, which we come to “know” through its habits. The knowledge art provides, therefore, will be an ethical insight into the everyday process of the political. Clara Law’s *mise-en-scène* in the opening scenes shows this brilliantly: the film opens within the confines of a Hong Kong restaurant in which the grandfather is revered for his knowledge and tasting skills. His expertise in tasting tea serves as the center of the scene, with bustling family members and Hong Kong street sounds surrounding the grandfather, which emphasizes even more that his tea tasting and the attention others pay to him as he offers his opinion characterize him as the *paterfamilias* amidst his family. In the next scene, aptly called “a house in Australia”, the grandfather and the grandmother are welcomed into the house of one of their daughters. In this scene, the grandfather is also shown drinking tea. However, the grandfather is not at home, and this is expressed by Law’s *mise-en-scène* that utilizes bright lights to contrast with the Hong Kong chiaroscuro, odd costuming, but most poignantly, it is expressed through a marginalizing of the grandfather’s activity of drinking tea – he uses Australian kitchen ware, letting the apparent success of the daughter’s complete integration take center stage. Complementing this *mise-en-scène* is Law’s use of the camera, which effectively frames the grandfather at the outer edge of the screen. It is only much later in the film that drinking tea lets the grandfather take center stage again. Not surprisingly, it is only then that the grandfather finally feels at home in his Australian house.

What Law makes clear here is that the character’s house must be inhabited by his customs before it can be his home. Yet, we must first see these customs fail in their matter-of-course-like way to understand that these customs are really the issue. The art of interruption, to use Chambers’s terms again, means understanding

that a habit has gone wrong. Art will show, through a peculiar form of hindsight based on unsettling the habitual, how habits determine our day-to-day lives. Differently put, we need art to understand our habits in retrospect. Art interrupts our habits, and that is why we notice them. Moreover, as we come to know our habits retrospectively, and as we understand that habits are necessary for our feeling at home, for “dwelling”, we may presume that new habits will take effect based on the factual interruption of former habits. The art of interruption can be understood as a reiterative process that simultaneously unsettles habits and produces new ones.

Returning to the double movement that Lefort identified as characteristic of the political, i.e., apparition and obscuration, we can now begin to understand what art lets us see. If Chambers is right about art unsettling habits, then what we will see is that the habitual effectively obscures its own workings; moreover, there is no way of knowing this, unless the habitual is interrupted to make its workings obvious. This is how the political – or democracy – works according to Lefort, and this is why art has political relevance. Democracy appears to work politically only if its habitual character is recognized; yet, the recognition of the habit can only occur after it has been interrupted and new habits have replaced the old.

The House That Is Not a Home

Hamid Naficy is less abstract than Chambers when it comes to evaluating the insights offered by art or accented cinema. In fact, Naficy’s book focuses on these insights: it contains 49 more or less lengthy, written closeups, which are case studies of specific accented filmmakers and their work. Naficy’s closeups of filmmakers are very generous towards Atom Egoyan, because he features in seven. But there are other reasons why Egoyan is a paradigmatic accented filmmaker. His work is important, not for its politics, but more precisely for its unsettling of Western customs. This is what makes Egoyan politically relevant. His work always explores the post-humanist landscape. It is thus not surprising to see Egoyan featured prominently in Naficy’s concluding paragraph: “The Ethics and Politics of Performed Identity”. Naficy seems to incorporate Chambers’s description of unsettling art in claiming a unique position for the exilic filmmaker:

Because in exile the familiar becomes unfamiliar and the natural denaturalized, one is forced to face, perhaps more than at any other time, the essential constructedness of one’s own structures of belonging. Distanced from familial and familiar structures, the exiles are in an enviable position of being able to remake themselves.¹⁵

¹⁵ Naficy, *An Accented Cinema*, p. 269.

For Naficy, retrospective distance from familiar habits – a precondition for understanding them – is typical for exilic filmmakers. Note that Naficy's title here contains the word "ethics", which is obviously appropriate when discussing *ethos*. But this is not at all clear at the outset of discussions on the relation between ethics and politics. Naficy, in accordance with Chambers, appears to claim that we shouldn't be discussing the kind of politics which in a certain understanding of ethics is a politics guided by a codex of norms; rather, we should become more interested in an ethics that concerns lived political practices of an everyday nature, taking shape as habits obscuring their own functions.¹⁶

After having established, via Lefort and Chambers, the political relevance of inquiring into the familiar with the specific purpose of unsettling it, we should respond to Naficy's description of exilic film as making the *familiar* unfamiliar precisely through *familial* distance. We should focus on the exilic family in accented cinema. Another look at Clara Law's *FLOATING LIFE* can make this more clear. As we have already noted via the custom of tea drinking in the Australian house, it is the familiarity of habits that inhabits a house to make it a home. Moreover, it is the failure of the habitual that first makes it possible to retrospectively acknowledge the importance of the particular habit. In the film, family traditions are finally restored, which effectively allows the Australian house to become a home; yet, the grandfather cannot take credit for this. Instead, a particular "house in Germany" that interrupts the difficulties inherent in migrating from Hong Kong to Australia, appears to be a necessary sidestep in the trajectory towards the eventual settlement of this Chinese family. It is from this house in Germany, where the oldest daughter lives but never feels at home, that the first attempts are made to mediate between family members, old traditions, new surroundings, and public demands. After the younger sister suffers a mental breakdown, because she was unable to cope with the demands of her completely integrated Australian life on the one hand, and her familial loyalties on the other, the oldest sister intervenes to make it possible to observe both social norms and familial responsibilities in the same house in Australia.

Our sense of belonging to the family's familiarity pertains to the habitual. It obscures its own functions, even though it may be the principle preconditioning our sense of self-identity. The intervention by the older sister in *FLOATING LIFE* makes visible for us what the importance of family habits is for being at home in a house. According to Naficy, the revelation of how the family obscures its own functioning

¹⁶ The identity politics Naficy alludes to in his suggestion that exilic filmmakers are enviable because they can "remake themselves" appears to be a flirtation with *auteurism*. In this chapter, we are more interested in Naficy's claims concerning our structures of belonging than in his analysis of Egoyan's reinvented identity.

will eventually be performed most authoritatively by exilic filmmakers themselves. Unfortunately, Naficy is less attentive to the actual characters in exilic film, because perhaps he has all too quickly tried to establish the exilic filmmaker as a contemporary *auteur*. The politics of the exilic *auteur* do warrant Naficy's description of the exilic, diasporic filmmaker as being in an enviable position to remake himself. And indeed, there is something enviable about Atom Egoyan, as a successful, independent filmmaker who, even in his larger-budgeted films, finds ways not only to develop a recognizable, accented style, but also to reflect his "own increasing awareness of his tripartite identity as Egyptian, Canadian, and Armenian".¹⁷ But we do not necessarily have to follow Egoyan's autobiographical performance of his identity to understand the political relevance of the exilic family. Habitat and habit are unsettled in many of Egoyan's films, but perhaps most significantly in *THE ADJUSTER* (1991), which is less charged by Egoyan's Armenian ethnicity and still explicitly addresses both dwelling and family. The film unsettles the securities engendered by the private home and the nuclear family.¹⁸

The Adjusting Sister

The adjuster is an insurance company employee who compensates the damages suffered by families whose private homes have been destroyed by fire. Noah, the adjuster in this film, takes his job too seriously because he understands his responsibility for his victims to entail entering their private lives. At first, the victims are thankful for his concern and allow him to come unusually close to them. He helps provide for new, temporary dwellings (mostly motel rooms), which makes him seem almost like a family member; eventually, he shares their tables and their beds. Noah's wife Hera is also an adjuster, although she doesn't adjust damages, but censors pornographic films instead. Noah and Hera live in a comfortable house, with their son and Hera's sister, Seta.

Towards the end of the film, this comfortable home turns out to be just a tem-

¹⁷ Naficy, *An Accented Cinema*, pp. 183-4. Naficy has elsewhere pointed out that this reflection is not just a mirroring, but an active construction of identity: "Egoyan became aware of the idea of national identity not as a fixed edifice but as a shifting, performing strategy" (p. 284). Egoyan's films stand as an example of Naficy's general statements concerning accented cinema. He expresses it in the title of his final closeup: "Atom Egoyan's Films as Performance of Identity" (pp. 283-287).

¹⁸ To wit, Naficy's closeup of *THE ADJUSTER* is not included in the ethics and politics section, because in that particular section Naficy considers Egoyan's reinvention of himself to be more important than what the characters do in Egoyan's films. Because *THE ADJUSTER* explicitly addresses the loss of homes, and thus "the dialectics of displacement and emplacement" (*An Accented Cinema*, p. 152), it rather features in a closeup (pp. 178-181) in Naficy's chapter on "Chronotopes of Imagined Homeland" (pp. 152-187).

porary dwelling, not unlike the motel rooms for the fire victims. The house is the model home in a luxury real-estate project, and therefore not the locus of family traditions. Egoyan, in this film, even sets the house ablaze, as if to emphasize that this house cannot be the home of this family. The family will have to move yet again. But it is not just the security of one's private house that is unsettled by this film. The final sequence is a montage of Noah standing in front of the burning model home and Noah's first encounter with Hera and Seta standing in front of what appears to be Hera and Seta's burning house. Noah's hand reaches out to Hera's shoulder. Final shot: back to Noah alone, holding up his hand against a background of flames. The sequence invokes a chronological ambiguity: perhaps this is not the end of the film, but rather the beginning of its story, presenting Noah's hand as the hand that secures the first agreement between the adjuster and the victim. The final sequence provides no closure, but rather unsettles our ideas of the nuclear family. We surmise that Noah is probably not the father of Hera's son, and Noah, Hera and their son are not a "natural" nuclear family. As Naficy notes: "(T)he family structure undergoes a transformation from being based on descent and blood to one that is almost entirely derived from consent and contract."¹⁹

Regarding the shift from habitat to habit, *THE ADJUSTER* confirms that the home does not need to be a house or physical dwelling. Put more provocatively, *THE ADJUSTER* states the home *cannot* be a house. All private houses burn down, with the only remaining dwellings being unfamiliar ones with no family tradition. Houses burn down; what remains is rubble. This kind of interruption of home security Chambers would interpret via the aesthetic of the fragment or bricolage. Chambers concludes his article by noting that post-humanist, interruptive art literally breaks down securities and creates new formations out of the fragments. However, this kind of aesthetic remains perhaps too close to the earlier meaning of habitat as the house of politics and does not accord well with the interpretation of habit as the home of the political. Is there an alternative kind of unsettling aesthetic to the fragmentary unsettling of familiarity, an alternative that explores the unsettling of politically relevant habits, which as Naficy suggests, concerns the habits of family?

For this alternative, we should observe that while the nuclear family is unsettled, there still remains the relationship between Hera and her sister. Here we have a different family relationship based on blood and descent. It is the stable, sibling relationship that we have seen earlier in *L'AUTRE CÔTÉ DE LA MER* and *FLOATING LIFE*.²⁰ The relationship between the siblings in *THE ADJUSTER* does

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 178.

²⁰ To be sure, the sisterhood explored here is not the sisterhood of feminist solidarity.

change, if only against the background of the disillusionment between the husband and the wife, but in effect, the sibling relationship of Hera and Seta is not unsettled. The film shapes the relationship between the sisters in an unfragmented, albeit, at first, mysterious way. Does the film here explore the habitual, or, more specifically, does it unsettle any political habits?

In the film, Hera is shown secretly videotaping the uncut versions of the pornographic films about to be censored by, among others, Hera herself. The audience would normally never know what has been censored and what has not. And so, even though Hera's decisions have public significance, they remain hidden from public view. Seta is an exception, however, because Hera shows her sister the uncut videos. Yet, Hera's colleagues fail to comprehend the intimacy of this relationship. Their misunderstanding is the subject of an unsettling scene, which features Hera, a young co-worker, and their manager. The *mise-en-scène* presents the two males face-to-face with Hera, who is sitting with her back to the work floor, where the work goes on, shown out of focus but well-lit. The scene is comprised of a series of closeups: one shows the younger co-worker and the older boss tightly framed. Hera also is shot in closeup, but to the extreme left of the frame, causing compositional asymmetry not only in comparison to the framing of the two men, but also within the closeup itself. It is an indication of imbalance. Moreover, even the compositionally well-balanced shot of the two men is tilted, because only the older man speaks.

Two misunderstandings occur in this scene. The first is immediately resolved by the fatherly manager, leaving little room for Hera to even question that there was a misunderstanding in the first place. He attempts to reassure Hera that it is not a problem that Hera was caught taping the uncensored films. He calls it Hera's misunderstanding to think that she is going to be chided. In fact, he goes so far as to confess that he himself has been tempted by the material, thus equating Hera's taping activities with his own "sinful but normal" inclinations. This generous invitation to a conspiracy of pleasure, however, appears to be based on another, more important misunderstanding, which involves the relationship of the two siblings. Hera points out that she does not make the tapes to satisfy her own lusts; no, she tapes the films to provide information for her sister.

For Hera and Seta, family tradition dictates that the elder sister stays home, while the younger sister informs her about the world outside. Seta is confined to the family home, not by any physical constraints, but by the family's traditional habits. This tradition allows the younger sisters to have mobility outside the home, but conceptually, it implies a negation of the private family. The younger sister, however, does acknowledge the curiosities of the older sister to know more about life outside the home. In the diegetic present of the film, Hera feels obliged to show Seta the kinds of decisions she is asked to make in the outside world.

Thus, what Seta witnesses has no private sexual relevance; for Seta, Hera's tapes are more relevant as a way of mediating public life with her own private life. Hera's tapes are certainly intended for private purposes, but the tapes are brought into the private sphere of the family, which is not so much the privacy of the sisters' house, but the privacy of the sibling relationship determined by familial habits. In this relationship, Seta learns more about Hera's public decisions. Pornography is thus used ambiguously, as it is in other Egoyan films. There is a reference to the privacy of the family; yet, in a peculiar sense, pornography has a more public significance. Seta ends up embodying both the public and the private, with pornography as the medium. But Seta herself can also be seen as the medium. In fact, in *THE ADJUSTER* she decides what the viewer can see of the extended family – shown in photographs of the family back in the homeland. Seta is depicted with matches, an ashtray and a pile of family snapshots, deciding which family pictures to burn or save. The trope of fire consuming the *habitus* becomes literal: not only what is *familiar* goes up in smoke, but even the *familial* does not escape the final, adjusting settlement. It is through the character of Seta, then, that we, the viewers, learn about both the public significance of the younger sister's work and the private sphere of the family at home, which obviously is not the adjuster's house.

The men in *THE ADJUSTER* – the co-worker, the manager, but also the husband – never come to understand Hera and Seta's family traditions. Although the aforementioned scene with the co-worker and the manager does reveal their awareness of the situation's awkwardness, Hera's references to her family traditions interrupt and upset their assumptions. In this moment of awkwardness, we come to see not the firm control that a censorship institution might have over society, but a more subtle, often ignored, ordering of every day life. The siblings' family traditions continue as the older sister mediates between the familiar and the unfamiliar, revealing the obscuration of the seclusion within the family's confines. The diasporic family, which is an enviable position in Naficy's terms, here unsettles Western habits. However, this insight into the habitual does not come without its costs, because the familial is unsettled as well. We can assume the emergence of new habits, although the insight into these habits will have to be unsettling again.

The second part of Lefort's description of the political as a double movement of revelation and obscuration still requires a response to the question of whether there is a general principle concealed in all this. Would the general principle be that of the demarcation of the home as habit? Or should we note that habit *change* is the very principle that reveals old habits yet (re)establishes others. For now, we can conclude that there is a specific, familial principle that generates the configuration of the political. Celebrated performances of identity by authorial selves (ac-

cented filmmakers) may paradigmatically and enviably break out of the strict anonymity of the habitual. Within film, however, this break out of the habitual is performed when the family appears in the shape of the sister. As the unsettling of the nuclear family takes effect, sisterhood comes to the fore.²¹

²¹ Of course, Egoyan's Seta resembles Hegel's favorite sister, Antigone. In *Glas*, Derrida commented on Hegel's preferences: "Sister, she holds herself suspended between a desire she does not experience... and a universal law (nonfamilial: human, political, etc.) that stays foreign to her" (*Glas*, translated by John Leavey and Richard Rand. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986, p. 149). This suspension can be interpreted as a mediation, in this case, between the natural laws of the family and of politics, which determines the modern state. For Hegel, the sister is crucial because she offers her ethical guidance in civil society (*bürgerliche Gesellschaft*).

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Filmography

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