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Soundtracks of Our Lives: Music-Making and Musicians in MENA Cinema

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### Songs of Nostalgia: Creative Activism and Exile in Elia Suleiman's "It Must be Heaven" and Panah Panahi's "Hit the Road"

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## DOSSIER THÉMATIQUE :

Soundtracks of Our Lives: Music-Making and Musicians in Cinema of the MENA Region

### SONGS OF NOSTALGIA:

#### CREATIVE ACTIVISM AND EXILE IN ELIA SULEIMAN'S *IT MUST BE HEAVEN* AND PANAH PANAHİ'S *HIT THE ROAD*

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**Abstract** | The final scene of Elia Suleiman's film, *It Must be Heaven* (2019), ends with the actor/director sitting in an Arab bar in the city of Haifa, while the young crowd is dancing to "Arabyon Ana" (2000) by Lebanese singer Yuri Mrakadi. The Arabic music is a testimony to a Palestinian-Arab culture that resists erasure. The songs in Suleiman's film not only form part of the soundtrack and provide a commentary on the unfolding scenes but also deliver a chronology of events that firmly places the country within its Arab milieu. Mirroring the thoughts of the main character, they highlight issues of exile and dispossession. Likewise, Panah Panahi's *Hit the Road* (2021) relies on songs to explore issues relating to internal and external exile. Through a close reading of both films, I maintain that the soundtracks are utilized as a creative form of activism to help address matters concerning home and displacement.

**Keywords** | Elia Suleiman, Panah Panahi, Exile, Homeland, Songs, Creative activism.

**Résumé** | La scène finale du film d'Elia Suleiman, *It Must be Heaven* (2019), se termine avec l'acteur/réalisateur assis dans un bar arabe de la ville de Haïfa, tandis que la jeune foule danse sur <<Arabyon Ana>> (2000) du chanteur libanais Youri Mrakadi. La musique arabe est le témoignage d'une culture arabo-palestinienne qui résiste à l'effacement. Les chansons du film de Suleiman font non seulement partie de la bande originale et fournissent un commentaire sur les scènes qui se déroulent, mais livrent également une chronologie des événements qui place fermement le pays dans son milieu arabe. Reflétant les pensées du personnage principal, ils mettent en lumière les questions d'exil et de dépossession. De même, *Hit the Road* (2021) de Panah Panahi s'appuie sur des chansons pour explorer les questions relatives à l'exil interne et externe. Grâce à une lecture attentive des deux films, je maintiens que les bandes sonores sont utilisées comme une forme créative d'activisme pour aider à aborder les questions concernant la patrie et le déplacement.

**Mots-clés** | Elia Suleiman, Panah Panahi, Exil, Patrie, Chansons, Activisme créatif.

In his study on Iranian cinema, renowned cultural critic Hamid Dabashi distinguishes between the role of signs and visions in film. He argues that visions, which “inform our visual subconscious”, are “invisible because they have been secretly ignited” by signs that are neither idle nor controlled.<sup>1</sup> Further, he compares visions to Trojan horses that are instigated by the signs for the purpose of haunting us; he likens them to boomerangs that “come and cause disturbances and revolutions, schisms and protests in cultures.”<sup>2</sup> He adds that signs will continue to remain defiant, signalling visions that appear as apparitions to “ambush the world order of things.”<sup>3</sup> Often, in cinema, the soundtrack denotes a sign that develops into a vision that begins to haunt and occupy another realm.

The final scene of Elia Suleiman’s film *It Must be Heaven* (إن شئت كما في السماء, 2019)<sup>4</sup> ends with ES, the actor/director, sitting in an Arab bar in the city of Haifa, while the young crowd is dancing to “Arabyon Ana” (عربي أنا, 2000) by Lebanese singer Yuri Mrakadi. The bar scene, with its Arabic music, is a testimony to a Palestinian-Arab culture that resists erasure and that continues to haunt the Israeli occupier. Traditionally, Suleiman’s films are conspicuously wrought with silence and paucity of dialogue. Conversations are not only scant but the few that exist are generally trite. The songs in Suleiman’s earlier work have served on multiple levels; not only do they form part of the soundtrack by providing a commentary on the unfolding scenes but also deliver a chronology of events that speak of a bygone era that shaped the Arab world. Using songs in the soundtrack is a tradition that continues in *It Must be Heaven*. Habitually, the mood and thoughts of the main character are reflected through the songs. Meanwhile, Panah Panahi’s debut film, *Hit the Road* (جاده خاکی, 2021), is also a journey of sorts.<sup>5</sup> The plot tells the story of a family on a road trip travelling in an old SUV to deliver their eldest son to smugglers across the border. This road movie, which subtly explores the tensions that persist in modern day Iran, also highlights issues of exile and dispossession. As with Suleiman’s films, the songs in *Hit the Road* accentuate the intense and often undisclosed emotions felt by the main characters. As the members of the family try to escape their inner turmoil, frustrations and pent-up anger are projected outwardly onto one another. In Panahi’s film, we have two genres: western classical music and Iranian popular songs. This dichotomy does not only reflect the contrasts within this country, as they are revealed to us slowly during the trip, but it also underscores the ambivalent position in which the characters find themselves – namely torn between two difficult alternatives, choosing to remain, or venturing into perilous exile. In the closing scene, the song “شب زده” (“Uneasy Wanderer”, 1979) by Ebi, which is mimed by the young

1- DABASHI, Hamid, *Masters & Masterpieces of Iranian Cinema*, Washington, DC: Mage, 2007, p. 402.

2- *Ibid.*, p. 402.

3- *Ibid.*, p. 416.

4- *It Must be Heaven* (Elia Suleiman, 2019, Palestine/Qatar/France/Germany).

5- *Hit the Road* (Panah Panahi, 2021, Iran/Denmark).

boy (Rayan Sarlak), talks of the importance of the homeland, even though his elder brother has been thrust into the unknown. Despite coming from different backgrounds and being at different stages in their professional careers, these directors both employ songs and music to ponder issues of exile and the internal dilemmas faced by the characters in relation to their homeland. Through a close textual analysis and reading of the films, I demonstrate how the use of songs is an integral part of their work: a form of creative activism that negotiates these thorny issues concerning home and exile.

### **The internal monologue through the soundtrack**

In *It Must be Heaven*, the character ES, played by the director, leaves his absent homeland, in quest of a potential Palestine. He embarks on a journey to France and the United States; this outward journey, which is both spiritual and physical, reinforces issues of home and exile that have long defined the Palestinian narrative. By crossing borders, Suleiman is here engaging in “deterritorializing and reterritorializing journeys”, including a home-seeking journey, which is both “physical and territorial” and “deeply psychological and philosophical.”<sup>6</sup> ES’ inner reflections are often highlighted by the choice of music in his work. Songs have played a pivotal role in the films of Suleiman. While his work is often replete with silence, the soundtrack is used as a form of commentary on a particular scene or a rebellion against a certain situation. According to Dabashi, “the singular significance of spatial and temporal rhythm in Suleiman’s cinema [is] a rhythm that hinges on the centrality of silence.”<sup>7</sup> The character ES in the films is traditionally silent and generally reluctant to show any emotion, refusing to be judgmental; in addition, Suleiman’s feature films often “depict an invented self-portrait that is carefully constructed by the director’s selection of images, actions and situations and simultaneously completely undetermined by his personal subjectivity”, which is often reflected through the soundtrack.<sup>8</sup>

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6- NAFICY, Hamid, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001, pp. 5–6.

7- DABASHI, Hamid, “In Praise of Frivolity: On the Cinema of Elia Suleiman”, in DABASHI, Hamid (ed.), *Dreams of a Nation*, London: Verso, 2006, p. 154.

8- PISTERS, Patricia, “Violence and Laughter: Paradoxes of Nomadic Thought in Postcolonial Cinema,” in BIGNALL, Simone, and PATTON Paul, eds., *Deleuze and the Postcolonial. Deleuze Connections*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010, p. 201.



Figure 1: ES sits in a bar in Haifa with “Arabyon Ana” playing in the background.

To Suleiman, “intellectually [...] silence is very close to death [and] there is death in every image” he sees.<sup>9</sup> This fact allows for a potentiality, according to the Palestinian director.<sup>10</sup> The silence, which creates an empty space, demands that it should be filled, and songs become the instruments that fill this vacuum. These attributes are typical of ES, and the songs, in part, act as an extension to his lack of reaction to the scenes that unfold in front of him; in *It Must Be Heaven*, ES, who traverses continents, assumes the role of the observer, at times standing on the margin of the frame, watching but not partaking in the action that transpires in front of him. In an earlier interview with Hamid Dabashi, Suleiman said that his films provide “another way of telling”.<sup>11</sup> The soundtrack at times delivers another form of narration, one that speaks against the “enormity of the thievery that Zionism had committed”, and this requires a different manner of telling.<sup>12</sup>

Songs and music are part of what allows us to construct our sense of identity through experiences that enable us to place ourselves in imagined cultural narratives.<sup>13</sup> As historical Palestine has ceased to exist and what remains of the original country are fragments, the songs and the soundtrack in Suleiman’s film operate on many levels. Many of the scenes that take place in Nazareth are accompanied by the sounding of church bells. These chimes are a reminder of the fading presence of Christianity in the Holy Land on the whole and specifically in ES’ hometown of Nazareth, which is “the Palestinian city that resists negation

9- DABASHI, Hamid, “In Praise of Frivolity: On the Cinema of Elia Suleiman”, p. 154.

10- *Ibid.*, p. 149.

11- DABASHI, Hamid, “In Praise of Frivolity: On the Cinema of Elia Suleiman”, p. 149.

12- *Ibid.*, p. 155.

13- FIRTH, Colin, “Music and Identity”, in GAY Paul Du, HALL Stuart (eds), *Questions of Cultural Identity*, Los Angeles: Sage, 2011, p. 124.

as it holds on to the remnants of its Arab culture.”<sup>14</sup> Suleiman's portrayal of Nazareth is both Arab and Christian, which signals to a past that resists erasure.<sup>15</sup> The Easter Paschal Troparion liturgy (المسيح قام), which accompanies the title sequence of the film, testifies to the Christian presence within the city. A main feature in most of his films, Nazareth, which has the largest Arab population within the state of Israel, has often been described by Suleiman as a ghetto.<sup>16</sup> The films by the Palestinian director have accurately and honestly depicted the phobic existence of the city and the frustrations of its citizens, often projected inwardly.<sup>17</sup> Suleiman has often referred to the internal exile that the people of his homeland experience; according to the director, the Palestinians within the 1948 border often sensed an “inferior ‘otherness’ vis-à-vis the ones who dominated [them]”, adding that “they always felt intimidated when they left Nazareth or visited any Jewish city, stressing that they felt like visitors in their own land.”<sup>18</sup> Suleiman's films are mostly ruminations about internal and external exile, and the manifestation that these exilic conditions have on those at their mercy.



Figure 2: ES watches the two brothers and the sister at a restaurant in Nazareth with Asmahan's “Nawait Adari Alaami” playing in the background.

In one of the early Nazareth scenes, two brothers at a restaurant (played by Ali Suliman and Faris Muqabaa) vent their anger on the proprietor, complaining that their sister's chicken dish has wine in it, even though they themselves are consuming a large amount of whisky. To avert an escalation of the scene, the waiter turns on the music and returns with a bottle of whisky, which he leaves

14- NASHEF, Hania A.M., *Palestinian Culture and the Nakba: Bearing Witness*, Oxon: Routledge, 2019, p. 54.

15- *Ibid.*, p. 54.

16- STUTESMAN, Drake, SULEIMAN, Elia, “Elia Suleiman Interview”, *Framework*, vol. 45, n°1, 2004, pp. 85–94.

17- NASHEF, Hania A.M., *Palestinian Culture and the Nakba: Bearing Witness*, Oxon: Routledge, 2019, p. 55.

18- *Ibid.*, p. 55.



at their table, telling them “Our fault. I am sorry – we should’ve told you. This is on us.” Suleiman, who has come to the bar for a drink following a visit to the cemetery, which symbolically serves as a farewell to his late parents and country, becomes a witness to the unfolding scene. In the background, we hear the first two lines from Asmahan’s “Nawait Adari Aalami” (نويت أداري ألامي) in which the singer laments the loss of her beloved:

نويت اداري ألامي وخبي دمعي ونحيبي  
واحكي شجوني وغرامي لحالي ولطيف حبيبي<sup>19</sup>

I was hoping to cope with my pain by hiding my tears and lament  
And reflect on my grief and talk of love to the shadow of my love.<sup>20</sup>

Even though the song belongs to the golden era of Classical Arabic music, the above lyrics are deployed to reflect the mental condition ES is in, saddened by what he is witnessing and by his impending trip.

The Arabic songs link Palestine and particularly the 1948 Palestinians to their Arab roots, while the foreign songs in Suleiman’s films reflect an inner sentiment of loss and trauma, creating “several associations or double meanings of the visual scene.”<sup>21</sup> In the Central Park scene in New York, ES stands in the middle of the frame looking at the *femen* activist (Raia Haidar) at the edge of the lake as Leonard Cohen’s song “Darkness” (2012) plays in the background. The lyrics state how inward darkness is contagious:

I caught the darkness  
[...]  
I know my days are few  
The presence, not that pleasant  
[...]  
I thought the past would last me  
But the darkness got there too.

The internal and external darkness, typified by the incidents ES witnesses, are reminders of Palestine; the *femen* turns around to reveal a Palestinian flag across her chest. The implication is that darkness is everywhere.

Exile is often associated with loneliness; *It Must Be Heaven* shows ES often sitting alone in a café or bar, surveying the action that transpires in front of him. His companion is the soundtrack, which creates a commentary on what unfolds and acts as a companion to his thoughts. In another Nazarene scene before his trip,

19- (أسمهان، نويت أداري ألامي، (الحنان فريد الأطرش، كلمات يوسف بدروس، 1937)

Asmahan, “I was hoping to cope with my pain” (Composer: Farid Al-Atrash, Lyrics: Yousef Badrou, 1937).

20- Arabic lyrics translated into English by the author.

21- PISTERS, Patricia, “Violence and Laughter: Paradoxes of Nomadic Thought in Postcolonial Cinema”, p. 206.

ES sits in a café in Nazareth watching a disorderly and drunken man on the street; meanwhile, an Abdul-Halim Hafez song « شغلوني » (“Enthralled”, 1955) is playing in the background. The lines that we hear are:

شغلوني وشغلوا النوم عن عيني ليالي  
ساعة أبكي وساعة يبكي على حالي  
ليالي ليالي عهد وغالي مهما جralي  
كان الجمال عندي زهرة وبتعدي ما بين خيال العين  
أعشق جمالها يوم ويفوت عليها النوم أنساها بعد يومين  
إيه اللي خلى الفكر يروح ويقابله من غير ما يقولني  
مين اللي قال لعيون الروح تعشق هواك وتشوفه قبلي<sup>22</sup>

I am infatuated with her, and for many nights she took the sleep from my eyes  
I sometimes lament my state while at times my state pities me  
Endless nights like a precious epoch, which I am unable to understand.  
Beauty used to be like a fleeting flower  
I would fall in love with beauty for a day but then forget it in two days  
What caused my obsession without my knowing  
Who instructed the soul to fall in love with you before I could see you.<sup>23</sup>

Although the song, which is from the 1955 film *Nights and Days* by the late Egyptian director Henry Barakat, celebrates lost and found love, in this instance, the lover is symbolically the country. Once again, the director resorts to a song from the golden era of Arabic music, to allow ES to mourn the multi-layered loss of Palestine and the damage occupation has wrought on the land and its original people. Prior to his departure, the song playing in the background as he sits in the dark contemplating his trip is “خمرة حب” (“Khamrat el Hob”) by Sabah Fakhri. The lyrics, which describe a loveless life that is comparable to an arid river without water, continue into the next scene as ES is on his way to the airport. In the New York bar scene towards the end of the film, when ES joins a Lebanese acquaintance, we hear the song again as his friend questions him, “You Palestinians are strange. Everyone drinks to forget. You are the only nation that drinks to remember.” The melodies aid ES in keeping the memory of the homeland alive.

Songs add another dimension to the visual image, as they allow the director to play with a “mist of virtual images” that surround the scenes.<sup>24</sup> The songs in Suleiman's films attest to the existence of a Palestinian people, despite endless denials by Israel and some western nations. Gilles Deleuze argues that the world has been asked to believe that “Israel has been established in an empty land” and that the “ghosts of a few Arabs that are around, keeping watch over the sleepy

22- عبد الحليم حافظ، شغلوني، (ألحان محمد عبد الوهاب، كلمات حسين السيد، 1955)

Abdul-Halim Hafez, “Enthralled” (Composer: Mohamed Abdel Wahab, Lyrics Hussein As-Sayed, 1955).

23- This translation, also by the author, is not a literal one.

24- PISTERS, “Violence and Laughter: Paradoxes of Nomadic Thought in Postcolonial Cinema”, p. 207.



stones, came from somewhere else.”<sup>25</sup> Till this day, many Israelis continue to deny that a Palestinian people exist.<sup>26</sup> This denial results in two types of exile, an internal and external one. In the film, when ES leaves his hometown, Nazareth, in quest of a homeland, he uncovers in his travels worlds that, in their absurdity, resemble the paradoxes encountered in Palestine. Even though he chooses exile to escape the pain, exile remains with him as he returns to his homeland to confront it anew. Returning to the homeland is part of the steadfastness or *sumud* that has defined those Palestinians who were able to remain in historical Palestine. A physical space is what usually defines a country and its borders. Denied the original homeland, “Palestinians are forced to sustain a virtual homeland [...] which potentially would allow a homeland to come into being,” and film affords them this possibility by “preserving the little that remains.”<sup>27</sup> The songs in Suleiman’s films are cultural markers that link Palestine to the wider Arab world historically and geographically. Music transcends borders, including those of occupied lands. The original country may exist virtually in both the memory of those who were able to persist within its geography, in spite of the changes, and in the memory of the externally displaced who were forcibly exiled from their homeland. The situations ES encounters during his travels are reminders. In Nazareth, before traveling to Paris, ES walks through the streets of his hometown, absorbing some of the typical icons that have come to represent the missing homeland: the 1948 map of Palestine; Naji Al-Ali’s *Hanthalah*; the old, rusty key of the occupied home; the olive tree and the resilient Palestinian woman. In addition, the film not only highlights the pervasiveness of exile in Palestinian lives but also the persistent need for her people to preserve the little that remains as they continue their search for a homeland. The final titles of *It Must Be Heaven* are accompanied by Nagat Al-Saghira’s song “بحلم معاك” (“I dream with you”), in which she dreams of a ship that will take them to a safe haven, and a replaying of Hafez’s song, both of which are indications that, unless a homeland is found, exile will continue to inhabit the consciousness of the individual as they strive for a form of normalcy.<sup>28</sup>

25- DELEUZE, Gilles, *Two Regimes of Madness: Texts and Interviews, 1975-1995*, edited by LAPOUJADE, David, translated by HODGES, Ames and TAORMINA, Michael, New York: Semiotext(e), 2007, p. 333.

26- In a 1969 interview with *The Sunday Times*, the former Israeli prime minister, Golda Meir, said, “There was no such thing as Palestinians, they never existed,” whilst living in a house “that was built and owned by the Bisharat family [...] in the Talbiya neighbourhood in Jerusalem,” p. 400. See NASHEF, Hania A.M., “Challenging the myth of ‘a land without a people’: Mahmoud Darwish’s *Journal of an Ordinary Grief* and *In the Presence of Absence*”, *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, vol. 53, n° 3, 2018, pp. 394–411. Only recently, Israel’s Finance Minister, Bezalel Smotrich, said, “the Palestinian people are ‘an invention’ of the past century”, adding that there were “no such thing as a Palestinian [because] there is no such thing as the Palestinian people”. See “Palestinians ‘an invention’ of past century: Israel’s Smotrich” [online]. Link: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/3/20/palestinians-an-invention-of-past-century-israel-smotrich> (accessed 24 March 2023).

27- NASHEF, Hania A.M., “Virtual Space: Palestinians Negotiate a Lost Homeland in Film” in FILIMOWICZ, Michael and TZANKOVA Veronika (eds), *Reimagining Communication: Experience*, New York: Routledge, 2020, p. 147.

28- نجاة الصغيرة، بحلم معاك، (ألحان هاني شنودة، كلمات عبد الرحيم منصور، 1979)  
Nagat Al-Saghira, “I dream with you” (Composed by Hani Shenouda, lyrics by Abdul-Rahim Mansour, 1979).

## The pain of exile, and the paradox of staying and leaving

*Hit the Road* takes place almost exclusively in a borrowed, run-down, four-wheel Mitsubishi. In interviews, Panahi has often referred to the feeling of “lack of security and of being under surveillance” in Iran, adding that “one seeks refuge inside the car. This has somehow entered into our culture. For us Iranians, the car has become a second home.”<sup>29</sup> In this second home, a family of four, accompanied by their ageing dog, Jessy, are heading towards the Azeri/Turkish border to hand over their eldest son, Farid (Amin Simiar) to human traffickers. An unidentified gloom hovers in the atmosphere in spite of the characters’ attempts at dancing, humour and small skirmishes, as they conceal the reason for their trip from their youngest son (Rayan Sarlak).<sup>30</sup> Marking his debut, Panahi listed Dariush Mehrjui’s *Hamoun* (1989) as one of the films that influenced him because he was impressed by the relationship that existed between the characters, their humour and quick interaction, as well as the director’s ability “to express something of the sadness and frustration that leads to insanity.”<sup>31</sup> The mounting tensions in *Hit the Road* hint at “the wider social turmoil within the country.”<sup>32</sup> The mother (Pantea Panahiha) makes up a story about Farid’s departure, claiming that he is going to get married. There is no defined destination for the eldest son; however, there is a purpose to this journey, even though “it’s the unknown destination that awaits Farid.”<sup>33</sup> Panahi argues that his generation lives in a “state of disenchantment and is in a state of despair.”<sup>34</sup> The young director adds that “the only perspective [they] have is extremely grim and dark.”<sup>35</sup> In an interview with *Sight and Sound*, he explains that when Iranians travel by car, they traditionally listen to old songs, which forms part of the experience of the journey, and “that is also a journey into time, and having this nostalgic feeling for [their] lost past. This past is always expressed through the songs, and [their] singing them together.”<sup>36</sup> The car journeys evolve into a liberating space, punctuated by hope and rebellion, albeit on a small scale.

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29- REZAYAZDI, Soheil, “‘For Us Iranians, the Car Has Become a Second Home’: Panah Panahi on His Debut Feature, *Hit the Road*” [online]. Link: <https://filmmakermagazine.com/114219-for-us-iranians-the-car-has-become-a-second-home-panah-panahi-on-his-debut-feature-hit-the-road/> (accessed 29 March 2023).

30- Young Rayan was not an actor when Panahi cast him in the role. Casting non-actors, especially children, is a common practice in New Iranian Cinema, which is often associated with neorealism. See CHAUDHURI, Shohini, *Contemporary World Cinema: Europe, the Middle East, East Asia and South Asia*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005, p. 74.

31- PANAH, Panah, “Influences and Passions”, *Sight and Sound*, vol. 32, n°7, September 2022, p. 65.

32- THOMPSON, David, “The only way out is exile”, *Sight and Sound*, vol. 32, n°7, September 2022, p. 63.

33- JAMEELA, Maryam, “*Hit the Road* review: a beautiful and touching debut” [online]. Link: <https://nowthenmagazine.com/articles/hit-the-road-review-a-beautiful-and-touching-debut> (accessed 29 March 2023).

34- PANAH, Panah, “Panah Panahi on *Hit the Road* | NYFF59”, 7 Oct, 2021. [online]. Website <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=onuhzYEDjcw> (accessed 8 April 2023).

35- *Ibid.*

36- THOMPSON, David, “The only way out is exile”, *Sight and Sound*, vol. 32, n°7, September 2022, p. 63.

In contrast to Suleiman's film, the soundtracks in Panahi's work allow the characters to exhibit their inner feelings, be it through reacting to the music through dance moves or singing along with the lyrics. In Suleiman's film, the songs are initiated by the director as part of the largely non-diegetic soundtrack, while the pre-revolutionary songs in Panahi's film are played diegetically from a selection of tapes chosen by the family members. In both films, songs offer a repertoire and point to a different epoch, often eliciting nostalgic emotions. They also provide a small window of freedom to characters under the mercy of an oppressive regime. Western culture enters Panahi's film "through his use of the haunting slow movement from a Schubert piano sonata",<sup>37</sup> which the director listened to many times before realizing that, beneath the stillness, there "was something boiling, something about to explode."<sup>38</sup> The first scene of the film introduces us to the younger sibling, who is running his fingers on the piano he drew on the plastered leg of his father, Khosrow (Hassan Madjooi), as if playing the Schubert sonata. On more than one occasion, the sonata is the soundtrack that accompanies the closeup shots of the father, who appears disgruntled and pensive. In one of the final moments he shares with Farid by the river, the sonata is once again playing in the background. The father embodies much of the disillusionment that the rest of the country shares. His anger and frustration are simmering within him. He drags around his plastered leg, which has been in a cast for four months even though it is no longer needed. The plastered leg acts as a metaphor for a past that lingers on through memories and recollections, and contrasts sharply with the present. On the surface, the opening scene appears to be calm, but Panahi adds that he "wanted the film to be completely into this idea of contrast, of contradiction", in which there "is always joy and sadness, laughter and tears [and this comes] from using these two kinds of music: classical music and Iranian pop music."<sup>39</sup> It is worth noting that the pop music used in the soundtrack reflects a movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, an era when "younger stars were moving away" from "eastern" music to more "westernized" forms.<sup>40</sup> In addition, as "music has served as an important alternative political, societal, and ideational space" for Iranians, "music producers and consumers alike, have imbued it with great significance."<sup>41</sup>

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37- *Ibid.*, p. 64. The piece is "Piano Sonata No. 20 in A major D.959, II Andantino" by Franz Schubert.

38- *Ibid.*, p. 64.

39- *Ibid.*, p. 64.

40- SIAMDOUST, Nahid, *Soundtrack of the Revolution: The Politics of Music in Iran*, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2017, p. 46. The songs by Ebi and Shahram Shabpareh, which are used in the film, were very popular and belong to that era.

41- *Ibid.*, p. 2.

After their brief stop at a store, the mother sings along with a 1950s song by Delkash,<sup>42</sup> in which the singer is begging her lover not to be angry because she will be his protector; the lyrics state that spring will come again and shower them with its blossoms:

گفتم، گفتم، گفتم به خدا قهر گناهه  
دل منتظره چشم به راهه  
ای من، ای من، ای من به فدات ناز نکن تو  
با چشم سایت ناز نکن تو  
این دو روز دنیا مثل خواب و رویا گردونه  
آی با هم آشتی کنیم  
که بهار دوباره گل فشونه<sup>43</sup>

I told you, I told you, I told you,  
anger is a sin  
I am following your path with my eyes  
Oh my, oh my, oh my, I could die for you but don't play hard to get  
With your dark eyes, don't play hard to get  
Life is short, and life passes like a dream  
Let us reconcile  
Spring will come again and shower us with its bloom.<sup>44</sup>

The father, the young son and the dog Jessie are partaking in the song, while the eldest son snaps at his mother, asking her not to treat him like a child, an emphasis that he is old enough to embark on this journey alone. In a later scene, the mother pleads with the elder son not to leave, before “Soghati” (“Souvenir”), a song by Hayedeh, is played.<sup>45</sup> The song accompanies each member of the family when they stop at a roadside café. It begins with the young son reciting the words whilst in the bathroom; Farid plays the song in the car; at the same time, the father, who enters the roadside café to light his cigarette, is stirred by the music coming from the car, and begins singing along as he stares through a window that is protected by barbed wire, a mirroring of their prison-like existence. In the distance, the father sees Jessie dragging a red plastic chair, and beyond the small window lies an immense landscape. When he steps outside, he joins his pensive wife and they sing in unison, in a scene that evokes an earlier epoch from their youth.

وقتی میای صدای پات  
از همه جاده ها میاد  
انگار نه از به شهر دور  
که از همه دنیا میاد

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42- Delkash (1925-2004) was considered an Iranian diva singer who sang Persian classic songs and occasionally folk songs. She was renowned for her exceptional voice.

43- DELKASH, “Porsoon Porsoon” (Lyrics and music by Hojat Ashraf Zadeh, 1950).

44- Translation of the lyrics from Persian by the author.

45- Hayedeh (1942-1990) was one of the most popular Iranian singers in the last century.

[...]

عزیزترین سوغاتی‌هنگار پیراهن تو  
عمر دوباره ی منه  
دیدن و بوییدن تو<sup>46</sup>

When you arrive,  
Your footsteps come to me from all directions  
Not from a faraway city  
But rather from all over the world

...  
The dust from your shirt is the most precious of gifts  
The sight and smell of you is my reincarnation.

The young boy joins them, whilst staring at his elder brother, who is lying on his back with his head out of the car window; the younger brother jokingly asks if his older sibling is dead. In effect, Farid is now dead to them. The first time the young boy refers to death was in one of the opening scenes in response to his mother's question "Where are we?" and he replies, "we are dead." In "Soghati", the singer is imploring her beloved not to leave, as she will not be able to survive without him. The song's lyrics heighten the tension that lies between the need to stay and the need to leave; given the political climate of the country, Panahi argues that "the only thing [the young] can dream of is to leave the country, to go elsewhere", but "starting from scratch is not that obvious; it is not a decision you can make lightly and easily."<sup>47</sup> In talking about his own sister's departure, the Iranian director said that when his parents and relatives "were plunged into a state of grave nostalgia [and] sadness", songs they shared would help them remember the times they had together.<sup>48</sup> When the mother cuts a strand of Farid's hair, he snaps, telling her that they should go home, the irony being they have now become exiles in their homeland, living in a borrowed car and having sold their house as well in order to pay the smugglers. The scene of a smuggler appearing on a motorcycle, emerging from the mist and donning a mask, is an indication of the hazardous and unknown future that awaits Farid.

46- HAYEDEH, "Soghati" (Lyrics and music by Mohammad Haydari, 1976). Translation by the author.

47- PANAH, Panah, "Panah Panahi on Hit the Road | NYFF59", 7 Oct, 2021 [online]. Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=onuhzYEDJcw> (accessed 8 April 2023).

48- Ibid.



Figure 3: The young boy dances to Shahram Shabpareh's "Deyar".

The musical sphere allows for "the overlapping interpretations of the past and an engagement in a national discourse about the future."<sup>49</sup> In spite of their differences in age, the four characters can identify with the music that is played in the car, because music can allow for "socially constructed imagined communities that exist purely on the level of discourse", and even a "couple of lines from a song, can become activated and come to the fore at times of heightened political or social tension."<sup>50</sup> As with Suleiman, the Iranian director of *Hit the Road* uses music to create "alternative discursive spaces."<sup>51</sup> In the film, the bodily gestures and dancing attest to a "performance of identity" that signals to one that is at odds with the prevalent narrative of identity by the government.<sup>52</sup> In Iran,

[the] repressive nature and tactics of both the Pahlavi dynasty and the Islamic Republic made identity in Iran a political issue [emerging] as a point of opposition to the government [and] music was used as an outlet for the expression of these conflicts and an avenue for both exploring the nature of identity, and asserting that identity as a point of resistance to the respective state authorities.<sup>53</sup>

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49- SIAMDOUST, Nahid, *Soundtrack of the Revolution: The Politics of Music in Iran*, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2017, p. 11.

50- *Ibid.*, pp. 14–15.

51- *Ibid.*, p. 17.

52- *Ibid.*, p. 17.

53- RAD, Assal, *The State of Resistance: Politics, Culture, and Identity in Modern Iran*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022, p. 112.



In addition, Iranian cinema has helped shape Iranian identity globally, but film-making has for decades been considered by the authorities a form of resistance.<sup>54</sup> Yet, something that has remained constant throughout is the “idea of homeland,” and the “importance of land and the soil of the nation”, which are represented in songs and ballads that refer to the homeland.<sup>55</sup> Once they bid farewell to Farid, the song they dance and sing to is Shahram Shabpareh’s “Deyar” (1979), which stresses issues of exile, longing and alienation:

وای که چه حالی دارم، هوای دیارو دارم  
تو این دیار غربت، فقط خدا رو دارم

I feel homesick  
In this foreign land  
God is all I have.<sup>56</sup>



Figure 4: The father buries Jessy as Ebi’s “Shab Zadeh” is playing.

At the end of *Hit the Road*, the dog Jessy succumbs to its illness; we have a frontal view of an arid landscape as the young son is calling out for Jessy. The barren scene, in which we see their backs as the father buries the dog, is accompanied by Ebi’s song “Shab Zadeh” (1987).<sup>57</sup> This song also talks of a person who thrust himself into exile, unwittingly, having abandoned everything:

54- RAHBARAN, Shiva, *Iranian Cinema Uncensored: Contemporary Film-Makers Since the Islamic Revolution*, translated by MOHAJER, Maryam and RAHBARAN, Shiva, London: I.B. Tauris, 2016, p. ix.

55- RAD, Assal, *The State of Resistance*, p. 127.

56- Translation by the author. Shahram Shabpareh, who was born in 1948, is an Iranian pop singer and songwriter.

57- Ebi, who was born in 1949, is an Iranian pop singer who first started his career in Iran but two years before the 1979 revolution he moved to Los Angeles where he continues to sing. Some have translated the title of his song “Shab Zadeh” to mean nightfall, but the song is addressed to a restless wanderer.

کدوم خزون خوش آواز  
تو رو صدا کرد ای عاشقی  
که پر کشیدی بی پروا  
به جستجوی شقایق

Which creeping creature with an enticing voice called out your name, the lover  
That prompted you to fly blindly,  
In search of anemone flowers.<sup>58</sup>

In the following lines, they plead with him to stay:

کنار ما باش که محزون  
به انتظار بهاریم  
کنار ما باش که با هم  
خورشید و بیرون بیا ریم

Stay with us, the discontented ones, as we wait for the spring  
Stay with us, and together  
We will bring the sun out.<sup>59</sup>

The singer is warning the exiled man that the path he has chosen will only lead to sunset, as dusk has already enveloped the place. The burial of Jessy is symbolic, as it resonates with Farid's journey into exile and the unknown: an emblematic burial of his youthful life.

## Conclusion

Exile, according to Edward W. Said, "is predicated on the existence of, love for, and bond with, one's native place; what is true of all exile is not that home and love of home are lost, but that loss is inherent in the very existence of both."<sup>60</sup> In both of the above films, exile manifests itself as internal and external, and what symbolizes it is the sense of loss and lack of belonging. Said adds that "exile can produce rancor and regret."<sup>61</sup> Furthermore, exile resembles "death but without death's ultimate mercy [having] torn millions of people from the nourishment of tradition, family, and geography."<sup>62</sup> Through a close analysis of both films, I have shown that the songs used are able to bridge various epochs and time. In addition, they mirror the feelings of the characters in both films. Moreover, the soundtrack not only represents a form of resistance to prevalent situations, in its recall of earlier histories, but it also aids in creating a repertoire of memories for lost homelands brought about by exile and dispossession.

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58- Lyrics translated by the author.

59- Lyrics translated by the author.

60- SAID, Edward W., *Reflections on Exile and other essays*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000, p. 185.

61- *Ibid.*, p. xxxv.

62- *Ibid.*, p. 174.

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**ملخص** | ينتهي المشهد الأخير من فيلم إيليا سليمان، قد تكون السماء (٢٠١٩)، بجُلوس الممثل / المخرج في حانة عربية في مدينة حيفا، فيما يرقص الجمهور الشاب على أنغام «عربيّ أنا» (٢٠٠٠) للمغني اللبناني يوري مرقيدي. الموسيقى العربية هنا هي شهادة على الثقافة الفلسطينية العربية التي تقاوم المحو. لا تشكل الأغاني في فيلم سليمان جزءاً من الموسيقى التصويرية فحسب بل توفر تعليقاً على المشاهد التي تنكشف وتقدم أيضاً تسلسلاً زمنياً للأحداث التي تضع البلاد بقوة في محيطها العربي. بالمثل يعتمد فيلم پناه پناهى (2021) *Hit the Road* على الأغاني لاستكشاف القضايا المتعلقة بالمنفى الداخلي والخارجي. من خلال قراءة دقيقة لكلا العملين، يناقش هذا البحث كيف الموسيقى التصويرية تُستخدم كشكل إبداعي للمساعدة في معالجة الأمور المتعلقة بالوطن والغربة.

**كلمات مفتاحية** | إيليا سليمان ، پناه پناهى ، المنفى، الوطن ، أغاني، الغربة، نشاط إبداعي.

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