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Finding Home in a Liminal Space: Exile and Return in Andreas Dresen's *Halbe Treppe*

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Andreas Dresen's film *Halbe Treppe* (2001) opens with a slide of a photograph taken by one of the four main characters while on vacation with his wife. There is no sound, no music, only a view of the yellow desert at sunset, a camel, and a palm tree. As the slide show continues, we hear the voices of the people watching, but we do not see their faces as they make comments about the pictures on the screen. In fact, we are first introduced to one of the two couples through the photos, which are often off-center and unflattering. In this way, Dresen begins a film

about characters who are emotionally displaced by locating them in an "exotic" country and allowing the spectator access only through the mediation of the camera that took the photos, then the narration by the couple themselves, who argue about what the photos depict, and finally the person shooting the film, who will not let us see the characters as they are but only as they appear in the slides. Tropes of exile, like those in the opening image, as well as the sense of displacement created by the way the story is filmed, are reflected in the character, the name, and the location of the *Halbe Treppe*, the *Imbissbude* (diner, snack bar) that serves as the emotional heart of the film.

As John Durham Peters notes in an article on exile, nomadism, and diaspora, concepts of mobility lie at the heart of the western canon, beginning with the idea that to be human is to be exiled from God (17). As distinct from nomadism and diaspora, Peters argues that exile suggests "banishment," which can be voluntary or involuntary, internal or external, but that "most explicitly involves a home or homeland" from which one is physically displaced. In addition, the concept of exile is associated with issues of identity. Exile can imply not only separation from God, but from the womb or oneself. Though the experience is traumatic and often results in an intense desire to return to or restore the original, the ultimate futility of such a project can also "conjure something new in the very act of looking backward," thus becoming the source of great creativity (Peters 19). The connection between exile and the cinema was specifically cited by Walter Benjamin, who noted the stage actor's feeling of exile in front of the movie camera, rooted in a sense of displacement and loss resulting from the shock of being confronted with new audio-visual technologies. Yet as Peters points out, even long before the advent of moving pictures, acting itself was considered a form of exile. The term "scene" is derived from the Greek *skene* (tent), the "primal scene" of exile, with its connotations of opposing images of rootlessness and home, wandering and return, exposure and shelter (Peters 25). In a sense, actors are put in a *skene* to invite mental travel into new identities (Peters 26-27).

Centered on a "tent" located "halfway up a staircase," Dresen's film highlights the sense of exile experienced by characters that both figuratively and literally leave home. The story and Dresen's stylistic approach to it connect *Halbe Treppe* to films made by deterritorialized filmmakers, as described by Hamid Naficy in his book, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*. These filmmakers use what Naficy terms an "accented style" (22), which involves certain modes of production and filmmaking strategies that allegorize the exiled state. Since exile is inextricably bound-up in questions of homeland and identity, to connect Dresen's film to exilic cinema is to situate the film in the tradition of New German Cinema, characterized by its preoccupation with issues of German identity, rather than with German cinema of the immediate post-unification period, which has been criticized for avoiding the subject (Treut 2002; Rentschler 2000). After examining the similarities between *Halbe Treppe* and the "accented style" of exilic filmmakers, I explore the connection between identity and place in the

film, position it within the larger context of German cinema, and argue that Dresen's film calls for a re-examination of the traditional concept of *Heimat* in a newly unified, multicultural Germany.

In his book, Naficy identifies three types of accented cinema: that made by exiles, members of a diaspora, and ethnic and identity filmmakers (10-17). The category of exiles is further broken down into internal and external exiles, the former including those oppositional filmmakers who remain in their countries though they may face persecution (11-12). Naficy deals only with deterritorialized filmmakers, usually from postcolonial or third world countries, who have left home and live, for the most part, in northern cosmopolitan centers. He analyzes their films in terms of what he calls an "accented style," rather than using genre or theme. This style includes the use of certain modes of production, themes or tropes of exile, and performative strategies that communicate the condition of exile experienced by the filmmaker (Naficy 22-35).

Though Dresen is not an exile, he does qualify in some ways as an "accented" filmmaker. As Naficy notes, this group includes those that moved from the margins to the center even within the West through a process he terms "internal decolonization," the result of various civil rights, counterculture and antiwar movements of the 1960s and 1970s. During the next two decades, the "failure of nationalism, socialism and communism" as well as the "fragmentation of nation-states" caused a similar movement from the margins (Naficy 10). In this sense, former East German filmmakers like Dresen, though they are neither ethnically nor linguistically set apart, are minorities in a culture to which they were forced to adapt. Dresen began making amateur films in 1979 at the age of 16, and then worked as an assistant director at DEFA Studios before entering the Konrad Wolf Academy of Film and Television in Potsdam-Babelsberg from 1986-1991. His film academy sent its students out into the streets to record the fall of the GDR, and from this footage Dresen made several short films. The unification of Germany and the collapse of DEFA, which both followed the completion of his studies in 1991, caused turmoil in his professional career. As he noted in an interview with *Film und Fernsehen* in 1997, he was faced with an unfamiliar situation after the Wende: "Ich war bei dem Studium mit der Perspektive angetreten, dass man irgendwann ins DEFA-Studio ging, dort seine Jahre als Assistent machte und, wenn man Glück hatte und es die Chefetage wollte, mit Mitte Dreißig oder später seinen ersten Film drehte... Nach der Wende war plötzlich viel möglich, aber das war zugleich eine Gefahr, weil die Sachen ganz schnell rausgeschossen wurden, ohne dass sie ausgereift waren" (8-9). Like the characters in his film *Halbe Treppe*, Dresen had the "ground pulled out from under him" (as he describes the situation faced by the two couples) when DEFA reneged on its promise to provide partial funding for his first feature, *Stilles Land*, a mere two weeks before filming was to begin. It soon declared bankruptcy, and Dresen was forced to turn to private financing from a West German producer. And though the film was highly acclaimed and received the German Critics Award that year, the filmmaker later complained that only about 10,000 spectators were able to view it, a situation he found "laughable" when compared to the number of people exposed to DEFA films in the DDR.

Dresen's struggle to find financing after the collapse of DEFA is similar to a situation faced by many exilic filmmakers. It is an aspect of a mode of production that Naficy terms "interstitial" and is a reflection of their deterritorialized state. As they try to negotiate between their identities as members of their home communities and as filmmakers working in northern/western cosmopolitan centers, they find themselves located at the "intersection of the global and the local, mediating between the two contrary categories." To be successful, these filmmakers are forced to occupy an "interstitial" position, to "operate within and astride the

cracks in the system” (Naficy 46). One of the characteristics of the interstitial mode of production is the necessity for multiple forms of financing (public and private, as well as personal). Another is the multiple roles often played by the filmmaker (as actor, director, scriptwriter and editor), which results in an accumulation rather than a division of labor. Because the filmmaker and a small crew are forced to play several roles, the film’s enunciation becomes collective, an effect that is intensified by a reception that is sometimes limited to a particular ethnic, national or linguistic group. Finally, the exilic existence of the filmmakers is often allegorized by the mode of production of these films, for example by the gap of time that usually occurs between the production of the film and its distribution and exhibition, the use of more than one language in the film’s text, and the small imperfections that result from political constraints during filming. Such imperfections, as well as an “aesthetics [...] of smallness” (Naficy 4-5) and a subversion of narrative conventions and spectator positioning result in an artisanal quality that is another characteristic of exilic films. This quality may include a “lack of cinematic gloss,” the product of low budgets, less than state-of-the-art technology and small casts and crews. It is a style that is shared by other alternative cinemas as they attempt to define themselves against the dominant Hollywood mode of production, however, in exilic films, the use of an artisanal production mode is an expression of the interstitial position of the filmmaker. It is part of the particular “accent” of one type of minor practice of a major language: that of mainstream cinema (Naficy 45-46).

The accented style in films by those who have either voluntarily or involuntarily left their homes is characterized by several features. First, though the filmmakers themselves are deterritorialized, the chronotopes, or space-time settings in which their stories are told, tend to be “place-bounded”: the timeless, open space of the homeland is contrasted with the closed spaces of a contemporary life in exile.¹ Second, exilic films are often “epistolary narratives,” involving “acts of sending and receiving, losing and finding, and writing and reading letters... [They] also involve the acts, events, and institutions that facilitate and hinder such acts and events.” Epistolary narratives are linked with exile because they are both “driven by distance, separation, absence and loss” and by “the desire to be with an other and to reimagine an elsewhere and other times” (Naficy 101). One type of epistolary narrative is what Naficy terms “telephonic epistles” (101), which include telephone conversations that collapse long distances. Such connections are intensely dialogic and communitarian in their attempt to link people and to oppose motifs of transportation that keep people apart. Though impermanent, they both obliterate spatial and temporal distance and intensify the rupture of exile (Naficy 133).

¹ Both the spatial and temporal forms used to depict the homeland are “open,” using techniques like bright lighting, long takes which preserve spatio-temporal integrity, long shots and mobile framing. The filming often takes place outside, with recognizable landscape features like mountains and monuments as part of the *mise-en-scène*, creating a feeling of timelessness and continuity. The characters are mobile, familiar with their surroundings, and in control, which encourages introspection and retrospection (Naficy 153). In contrast, the chronotope of the exiled place is figured in “closed” forms, in settings like small, dark rooms, filmed with low light and little movement. Temporally, the closed form is limited to the present, and represented by images of entrapment, pursuit and escape. Characters are distant from one another, experience loss of control, and feel estranged from their environment. These definitions are not, however, to be considered stable; as Naficy notes, closed spaces can sometimes signify safety, and the exiled place, liberation from authoritarian regimes. In these cases, the homeland is the “chronotope of modernity,” with surveillance, claustrophobia and government control as its defining features (181). The gendering of space in exilic films likewise violates the opposition between closed and open forms. While both homeland and landscape tend to be maternal, so do closed spaces, making all accented films “feminine texts” that “destabilize the binary scheme” (Naficy 154).

Finally, something that is especially significant to filmmakers who exist at the “interstices of other cultures” (Naficy 222), not forced to live in ethnic or linguistic enclaves but able to move between compatriot communities and the host society, is an awareness of the possibilities and the limitations of crossing borders. Naficy identifies three ways in which this border consciousness is demonstrated in exilic films: through themes of journeys (outward journeys of escape and home seeking; journeys of quest and homelessness; and inward, homecoming journeys; 223); images of borders and border crossings; and identity crossings. Stories of homelessness and wandering are sometimes, though not always, transformative (225). Naficy analyzes in particular a film by German director Wim Wenders, *Paris, Texas*. Although Wenders falls outside the category of exiles that the book deals with, his film illustrates themes of homeseeking and quest common in exilic cinema. It is something “quintessentially German,” and in Wenders’ film this *Fernweh* is figured in various tropes of journey and homelessness: deserts, roads and forms of transportation, as well as themes of separation and reunion (Naficy 228). Most important in exilic cinema, though, is the theme of homecoming. The journey home, which for the exiled filmmakers treated in Naficy’s book usually involves a movement from west to east, is a dream that cannot be relinquished, or the state of exile becomes permanent.

The internal transformations that characterize identity crossings experienced by exiles take on another aspect at a time when people have become aware of how identities are constructed, rather than being predetermined by race, gender or ethnicity. If identities are constructed, notes Naficy, they can be “reconstructed, deconstructed – even performed” (269). In exilic cinema, performance is used to counter marginalization through such strategies as mimicry, doubling, or masquerade. Performative strategies like doubling are dependent upon “twoness” (Naficy 270) as well, implying a disunified consciousness that is subject to division and multiplication. This is often expressed through *doppelgänger* figures, used in literature to represent a “projection of the self, the externalization of the unconscious, the internalization of an outsider, or the twin of the other” (Naficy 271). For example, the character Juan Uno/Juan Dos in Fernando Solanas’ *Tangos: Exiles of Gardel* (1985) creates a former self at home (Juan Uno) who is the originator of his creativity. Whether mimicry, masquerade, or doubling, distance is the real motivating factor behind all exilic performance, which attempts to bridge or to make manifest separation from the homeland and division within the self.

In *Halbe Treppe*, Dresen uses modes of production, tropes of exile, and strategies of performance similar to those seen in exilic cinema. The mode of production in the film is in many ways interstitial and artisanal, characterized by multiple sources of funding, an “accumulation” rather than a division of labor, and an “aesthetics of smallness and imperfection” (Naficy 4f.). It was funded in part by prize money from his well-received previous film, *Nachtgestalten* (2000), along with 250,000 Euro from Filmboard Brandenburg. Dresen and his crew of only twelve people collaborated in “writing” (the dialogue was almost completely improvised), filming, and editing, and in fact, according to the credits at the end of *Halbe Treppe*, it is a film “by” Dresen and all of the actors together. In *Halbe Treppe*, this collaboration becomes an extension of the strong sense of community the film evokes in so many other ways. For example, Dresen deliberately chose to use a digital camera so that he might “realistically” reproduce the familiar atmosphere present in the small pubs and restaurants of Frankfurt/Oder; as he noted in an interview, he wanted to capture “naturally” the feeling of the crowd, something he could not achieve if he walked in with “Cinemascope” and a huge crew: “... da wäre das ganze Leben herausgeflogen” (Kohler 11).

The way in which the film was created allegorizes in certain respects Dresen's stated goal of making a film about people "die den Boden unter den Füßen verlieren" (Kohler 11), who experience a sense of exile as well as a longing for freedom. In an attempt to free himself as well, Dresen did not use a script, which had the effect of setting the characters, as well as the actors and the director himself, adrift. In another interview, he describes the intense anxiety he experienced as he began shooting, with nothing in writing to ground him:

Als ich den VW Bus nach Frankfurt/Oder fuhr, habe ich tatsächlich geheult vor Angst. Wir mussten sie allen überwinden, weil wir nur ein Drehbuch mit ein paar Überschriften hatten, an das wir uns halten können. (Knoben 29)

Because the dialogue was entirely improvised, Dresen had to shoot several hours of film for each scene, making multiple versions and later sitting down with his actors and editor and deciding on the one they liked best. This lack of grounding was intensified by the actual physical displacement the production of the film required. Dresen and his crew moved to Frankfurt/Oder, where the action takes place, and lived in the city for three months, sometimes even working (in the case of Axel Prah, who plays the diner's owner, Uwe) at the actual jobs they perform in the film. Dresen's directing style didn't give the actors much to stand on either; in an interview in 1997 he describes his vision of the role of the director " ... als die eines Führers im Dunkeln, der selbst den Weg nicht kennt, aber ihn gehen muss, weil es die Gruppe hinter ihm verlangt... Dazu brauche ich einen Drehstab und ein Klima mit den Schauspielern, wo es Vertrauen gibt" (Richter 15). In *Halbe Treppe*, his original intention was to use the interviews with the actors in their roles to allow them to explore their characters and not to include them in the film. However, the crew decided that the interviews "opened up the horizons" (Dockhorn 30; my translation) of the film, letting the characters as well as the audience escape the claustrophobia of the film's construction (Kohler 11).



Uwe outside the Halbe Treppe

The loss of grounding encouraged in the actors and the director by the way *Halbe Treppe* was constructed is repeated in the film itself through various tropes and strategies that express the state of exile in which each character is found. After the initial scene with the two couples viewing slides of Uwe and Ellen's vacation, the characters are seen the next day following daily routines that highlight their alienation. Each is located in a place in some way liminal, disconnected from both the others in their foursome and from the community: Chris sits in the dark with headphones, announcing his name, "Magic Chris," into the microphone, then answering the telephone with no one on the other end; Uwe walks alone down the empty aisles of a grocery store, throwing supplies into his basket; Katrin is at a toll booth, also in the dark, her face visible only in the mirrors of the trucks that stop to pay; and Ellen cleans her apartment, a place that, as later becomes clear, is her own personal space of exile. From these scattered locations an attempt at communication is made; a cell phone rings. However, the call is a mistake. Chris is trying to reach Katrin, but she has left her cell phone at Ellen's and Uwe's place. The series of morning routines establishing each character's particular place of exile ends at the Halbe Treppe, Uwe's small diner located "half-way up a staircase" from which Chris' radio tower can be seen. Climbing the steps to work, Uwe encounters a musician with bagpipes, playing a loud and irritating tune. Uwe gives him a coin and continues inside, then abruptly turns

around to address the man: “Will you be playing here all day?” When the man doesn’t answer Uwe asks whether he speaks German, to which the musician responds fluently that he does. Uwe tells him that he finds the music a bit annoying and requests that he step away from the diner, promising to buy him a beer later. Though he is at work in his own restaurant, Uwe finds himself in a strange and uncomfortable place, surrounded by outsiders playing music he neither likes nor understands. From this point, all four characters begin figurative and sometimes literal journeys that can be considered homeseeing and, in the process, succeed in redefining the concept of home itself.

Chris and Ellen initiate their journey out of exile by having an affair. After the mistaken telephone call, their movement is depicted through various motifs of transportation and border crossings, both literal and figurative. When Ellen goes to the radio tower to return Katrin’s cell to Chris, she gazes out the window at the Polish border visible in the distance, commenting, “You have a nice view.” She longs to cross such borders in her own life, and the elevator ride down from the tower with Chris, bringing him down from his exile, provides a hint of their future relationship. It is a long several moments, filmed in real time, filled with uncomfortable pauses and awkward glances away. When the two finally consummate their affair, it is under a bridge with trucks and cars passing overhead. These movements foreshadow a literal border crossing that Ellen makes when she travels to meet Chris at a hotel across the Oder in Poland. As in exilic films, these border crossings are filled with intense feeling, which Dresen captures by allowing the camera to linger on the characters so that the audience can experience the awkwardness of the initial attraction between the two and the pure joy of escape. Both Chris and Ellen seek a home from the emotional distance they suffer in their relationships by leaving their physical home behind.

Uwe and Katrin, on the other hand, are stuck in exile, their efforts to cross borders initially less successful. In an interview with Katrin on her moped, the open landscape in the background, she expresses her disappointment at never having seen the world, though as a young girl she dreamt of becoming a pilot. She places all of her hopes on Chris: “Maybe he will get an offer in Vienna!” Yet he is already planning his escape without her. She cannot physically make the journey out of her place of exile; when her moped breaks down at her workplace on the remote toll plaza, Chris comes to pick her up but refuses to lend her his car, since he needs it to keep his “appointment” with Ellen. Uwe explains in a corresponding interview that he was happiest on vacation with Ellen, when she told him she was pregnant. However, he is trapped at the Halbe Treppe, forced to spend most of his time away from his family. When Ellen reveals that she is having an affair, she sends the children away to the diner so that she can meet Chris. They don’t belong there, however; after several mishaps (a beer is spilled on Gregor’s homework), they are ushered out. Uwe’s homeseeing journey brings him first from the Halbe Treppe to his apartment, which he has abandoned for his workplace. His attempts to cross back into the family end in failure: his noxious cigar smoke causes the escape of the family pet bird, Hans-Peter, and when he makes an effort to reconcile with Ellen by installing a kitchen fan she tells him it is too late; she has fallen for someone else.

The distances the characters must cross are figured in other ways similar to exilic films. The voice, for example, is foregrounded as in epistolary narratives in order to express the desire to bridge physical and emotional gaps. The most striking example of this is Chris, the radio announcer. Finding himself forced to speak a “foreign” language (highlighted by his radio name, “Magic Chris” as well as his use of English in the broadcast), he represents the displacement imposed upon local communities by an “accent-free” global culture (humorously summed up in

the person of Britney Spears). Yet at the same time Chris makes every effort to contest this displacement, using the impersonal language of the horoscope to send personal messages to his wife and his lover. Chris' voice is also an ironic commentary on exile in the original, biblical sense, as "exile from God." In Genesis, it is God's voice that leads the Jewish people out of exile, but in the 21st century God has been replaced by Magic Chris. Characters in the film attribute supernatural abilities to the radio announcer, from a politician who believes that Chris has saved him from an auto accident, to Ellen who attributes to his disembodied voice the expression of her unconscious desires, and others who see his horoscopes as true clairvoyance. Another example of an epistolary motif is the use of the telephone in the film. Its ring is the first "call for help" from one of the four exiles, and from that point it plays an important role in the story. The conversation between Ellen and Chris that initiates their affair is certainly "cathected with desire," as Naficy puts it (133), though we only see and hear Ellen's half. Dresen's close-up of her face as she talks and his focus on her alone without including Chris succeeds in capturing her longing as well as her heart-breaking solitude. In addition, there is the device of the diegetic interviews with the actors in the film. Because the characters are unable to "give voice" to their alienation, the voice of the actors bridges gaps that the characters cannot fill within the story itself. The frustration with their state of exile is so intense that only by including these interviews did Dresen feel the characters could break free from the limits imposed on them by conventional narrative. In a sense he went outside the language of the film.

Finally, the homeseeking journeys undertaken by the two couples are depicted through performance strategies in which their split existence is played out. The most frequent manifestation of this theme of a divided self is the use of doubling in the film. The two couples are reflections of one another in terms of their geographical/spatial locations as well as their interactions with their spouses. While Uwe is fixed firmly on the ground, he looks up at Chris' perch at the top of the "Power Tower"; Katrin works on the far outskirts of the city while her counterpart Ellen is in the center of downtown. There are also scenes between the spouses that are deliberate mirrors of one another. In one of these scenes, Ellen meets Uwe on the steps outside the door to their apartment. Uwe begs her to stay, in fact physically grabs her and won't let her go, reminding her of her promises to him. In a corresponding encounter, Chris comes home to find Katrin moving his things out of their room. His response differs from Ellen's. He begs Katrin for more time but says he cannot make promises, to which she replies, "You promised me other things years ago!" At the end, it is Chris who wrestles Katrin to the ground, where they make love. Both exchanges center around the word promise, with its connotations of fixity and inviolability. The characters who have been set free are loosed from all such notions, allowed to remake themselves as they will, while the ones who have yet to begin the journey from exile cling to a past identity.

In his analysis of the chronotopes most often found in exilic films, Naficy contrasts the "closed forms" characterizing the exiled place and time with the "open forms" representing the homeland (152-153). However, he also discusses "thirdspace," a term used by Edward Soja, where open and closed forms intersect, breaking the binary pattern. In these representations, the original cultures of the filmmakers are no longer fixed to a far-off place and time but are presented in a "structure of play of sameness and difference," of "authenticity and translation" (Naficy 213). The problem with the place-boundedness of most of the accented films Naficy deals with, those of deterritorialized postcolonial or Third World filmmakers, is that while it serves to "reterritorialize" them in a sense by giving them a home (even if it is only "40 m² of Germany," a reference to Tevfik Baser's film *40m2 Deutschland*, 1986), it often keeps them tied

to an ethnic or cultural identity that can be easily marginalized. Though admittedly largely open only to exiled filmmakers with more freedom of movement (either because they have educational, financial or class advantages, or because they come from nations with a higher international status), the “thirdspace” allows exiles to go “beyond the sum of its binary antecedents of homeland and host society” and create a new alternative in which identity is no longer bound to place (Naficy 220).

This conceptualization is similar to Peters’ understanding of the differences between exile and nomadism. Whereas exiles are in a sense trapped by their association with a homeland, fixed to a primordial identity that leaves them permanently subject to nostalgia and thus internal division, nomads are free to construct new identities, since home is portable. Peters argues that much of the current thinking about exile is colored by romantic elements, rooted in 19th century nationalist movements that replaced God with “Heimat, Blut and Boden.” These movements also privileged the past, “depreciating the here and now by locating our home in impossibly distant places” (Peters 31). Examples of discourses that today represent exilic thinking include Afrocentrism, ethnic and nationalist movements, and multiculturalism. Nomadism, on the other hand, is the attitude of “poststructuralists, postmodernists, cosmopolitans” who see home as an “accomplishment of sublimated violence, unities pasted together by the will to power and the fear of distance” (Peters 34). Naficy would seem to agree with this characterization, citing the current tendency toward a “heimatism” that results in “citadel cultures” in which the boundaries between self and other are clearly drawn (219). However, like Naficy, Peters also notes that not everyone has the luxury of an extravagant identity that nomadism would allow; many are kept in place by forces such as white supremacy, patriarchy, and capital. The center “feeds at a prissy distance on the wild glamour of minorities” while not alleviating their hardships (Peters 35).

The distinction between exile and nomadism, as well as the contrast between binary chronotopes of homeland/exiled place and “thirdspace” discussed by Naficy, raises the question as to whether the tropes/performance of exile in Dresen’s film are actually closer to an endorsement of nomadism, or could possibly be considered representative of “thirdspace.” The intersection of open and closed forms that Naficy describes with regard to “thirdspace” would seem to apply to *Halbe Treppe*, in which exiled places and home are situated in one space-time setting, and sometimes in the same location (for example, the diner, which changes from a place of exile to home at the end of the film). This would support the argument that the home sought by the characters in *Halbe Treppe* is not primordial, associated with a particular place or an originary self, but instead is envisioned as a portable identity, pieced together from the life experiences of an individual free from the burden of *homeland*. Some of the tropes of exile in the film could easily be interpreted as representing nomadism instead: the slides at the beginning of the film, the map of Asia featured in Chris’ and Katrin’s kitchen, the representation of Poland to the East as a space of sexual freedom, and the images of Katrin on her moped, describing her dreams of travel could all be seen to favor an identity from which the connections to a homeland have been severed. The band that plagues Uwe throughout the film plays songs that sound almost like gypsy music² in a strange way beckoning him to open himself up to experiences of otherness. However, these references to the lure of a nomadic life may also be a tongue-in-cheek commentary on the German notion of *Fernweh*, in the same way that Dresen seems to poke fun

² Though they are actually interpretations of folk tunes originating from traditions all over Europe, by a band called *17 Hippies*. See: http://www.budamusique.com/index.php?page=shop.product_details&flypage=shop.flypage&product_id=686&category_id=&manufacturer_id=40&option=com_virtuemart&Itemid=1

at people's willingness to compensate for their lack of faith in a guiding principle, whether it is religion or Marxism or something else, by putting their trust in Magic Chris and his horoscope, or believing that a new kitchen or set of teeth can make one's life complete.

Instead, the film as a whole seems to be centered around the loss of an originary unity, at the center of the experience of exile, which the characters attempt to regain throughout the course of the film. They do not desire to construct an identity that is "everywhere at home" (Peters 30), nor are they searching for radical freedom. Though they all seek some sort of freedom, it is always within the context of their ties to spouses, children, community, and the specific geography of the city in which they live. Even Ellen, who finally leaves home and her husband, establishes herself and her children in a new apartment, in the same city, at the end of the film. The central position and emphasis given to scenes that focus on the promises one makes in marriage provide grounding for characters that seemed until that point to be drifting. After Chris refuses to let go of Katrin it becomes clear that he will eventually return to her, and Ellen decisively states in an interview after her scene with Uwe that she sees her affair with Chris as an opportunity she will not refuse: she has staked her position regarding her marriage. The children in the film also serve to remind the adults of what is sacrificed in the search for freedom; when Katrin discovers Chris and Ellen in the bath together, Chris' daughter Julia walks in as well, to foreground the effect of the affair on the entire family. Ellen's tenderness towards her children, as she focuses attentively on her daughter's drawing even in the middle of a tense meeting between the two couples, makes it clear that she desires not escape but a new home. Ties to the community also figure strongly in this film, centering on the Halbe Treppe as a gathering place. At the beginning of the film, we are introduced to the diner as a place of exile for Uwe, where he must work long hours, away from his family, surrounded by irritating street musicians. It is unwelcoming to his children as well, filled with sad-looking people who drink too much, and Uwe has a fight with one of the customers. It evolves, however, into something else in the middle of the film, when Katrin, tired of waiting for Chris to come home, suddenly shows up one night. Uwe's reaction to her visit reveals his sense of the diner as a place of exile: "What are you doing in these climes? Are you lost? With a backpack, even..." When he turns on the radio, the gypsy-like music of the band outside is playing, but as he starts to change the station, Katrin tells him, "No, leave it, I like it." The two begin to drink, joke and laugh, transforming a lonely night into a party. At the end of the film, the Halbe Treppe is again the scene of a party, as Uwe invites the street musicians inside to play for the crowd.

The strongest indication of the importance of place in the film is its focus both on the danger that global culture poses to local identity and its insistence on emphasizing the specific geographic features of Frankfurt/Oder as a form of resistance. The exile of the characters is highlighted by the permeation of their local culture by the global language of English and its pop music, the commodification of what was once the heart of a home, the kitchen, and the push to develop Frankfurt/Oder so that it can be incorporated into the global economy. The "Dauerpower vom Power Tower," the line that Chris uses to identify his broadcast, is a direct challenge to the staying power of local identity. Early in the film every radio is tuned to this show that plays hits from the past "24 years, 24 hours a day," an arbitrary mix disconnected from the historical and cultural context that produced the music. This disconnect characterizes the shopping experiences of the characters as well. When Ellen drags Uwe out to look at new kitchens, her final effort to transform their apartment into a place where she can fit

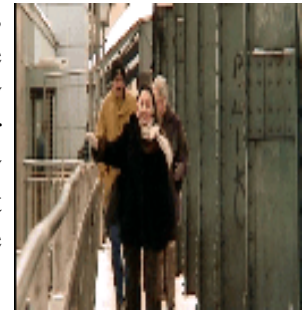


The site of "Asia Cars"

in, the couple's discomfort in the sleek showroom is apparent. Following an interview with the salesman, who claims that he sees the kitchen as a living space, they are filmed through the windows at fast forward speed, pushed past all of the multitude of shiny options until Uwe collapses, exhausted and without a purchase, and Ellen pauses to gaze out of the store window. In another comical scene, Uwe is hired to cater the groundbreaking ceremony for a new auto factory. Standing in front of a large sign announcing the coming of "Asia Cars," the owner gives a speech in which he hails the advent of Frankfurt/Oder as an industrial center. Ironically, he determines that the success of this project has been confirmed by Magic Chris, whose horoscope saved the man from a fatal car accident on the way to the ceremony.

Yet this permeation is resisted throughout the film by Dresen's focus on the quiriness of the local, the small details that make a home different from a photo in a catalog and the qualities that identify Frankfurt/Oder as a specific place in a specific time. The "Dauerpower vom Power Tower," first heard blasting from every radio, is slowly replaced by the oddly eclectic music of the street musicians from in front of the Halbe Treppe. When Uwe smashes his radio after he learns of the affair (not a statement against Britney Spears but out of anger at Chris), he is lashing out at all of the things that have kept him from home. The camera often lingers on the faces of the customers in the diner, their worn features a sharp contrast to the photo of Magic Chris on his promotional flyers. In comparison to the coldly impersonal shopping mall where Ellen and Uwe look for a new kitchen, with its ridiculous mannequins (one dressed completely in aluminum foil) and its framed print of a woman in a chador, we are shown the couples' living room, full of ashtrays, coke bottles and cheap decorations, located in a recognizably East German apartment complex. The city itself, particularly its border areas, is featured significantly, lending the film a specific historicity that resists the homogenizing influence of the "Power Tower." Chris and Ellen conduct their affair in a hotel room across the border, and Ellen's crossing is filmed in a long take that emphasizes the peculiarities of the location: the Pedestrian Bridge, the river, the traffic of trucks carrying their loads across to Poland, signs written in both German and Polish.

However, though the place-boundedness of the film connects it to the theme of exile, the place that it is tied to is an actual, liminal space, opening up the possibilities that such spaces suggest. Dresen's choice of Frankfurt/Oder as the setting for *Halbe Treppe* has many implications. It is the obvious double for the better-known (from a western perspective) Frankfurt am Main, the West German financial center. As the text of an online description of the city notes, it is the "symbolic bridge to Eastern Europe", its leaders devoting much time to "fostering integration and international understanding." Its quality of in-betweenness is further highlighted by the fact that until 1945 Slubice and Frankfurt were one city. Today, Slubice is foreign, on the Polish side of the border. The site of exchange between east and west, its residents "make good use of its Pedestrian Bridge," as Polish children attend the European kindergarten in Frankfurt, and shoppers from Frankfurt cross the border to purchase goods considerably cheaper than in Germany. The Autobahn Bridge, seen in the film as well, is the "most important German-Polish road transport connection."³ Frankfurt's modern identity as a city on the border of east and west, with



Ellen crossing the Pedestrian Bridge to Slubice



View of Frankfurt/Oder from the "Power Tower"

³ <http://www.campus-germany.de/english/4.22.3.117.html>

its “Power Tower” and plans to integrate into the global economy, exists beside its former identity as a place firmly situated in the Eastern bloc. The shift of the imaginary border between east and west that this change illustrates carries with it the understanding that this border could once again shift, as Poland itself becomes more integrated into the European Union. The imprint of the past into the physical space of the city serves to provide liminality with a grounding that, as Andreas Huyssen writes in his book *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*, has been lost as historical pasts have been “reorganized in the processes of cultural globalization.” Cities contain memories of what was there before as well as “imagined alternatives” to what there is (Huyssen 7). To Huyssen’s example of Berlin could be added the city of Frankfurt/Oder, with its old GDR apartment complexes and highways, and its new Viadrina European University, established in 1991 and purposely located in an “historic building on the riverbank, within sight of Slubice.”⁴

In the context of German cinema, Dresen’s film is an answer to Wim Wenders’ call for filmmakers to begin the process of colonizing their own land, following the upheavals of unification (Coulson 213). In contrast to New German Cinema, which was, like the exilic films Naficy discusses, marked by a “preoccupation with homeland (*heimat*) both hated and loved, a utopian yearning for far-away utopian places (*fernweh*), a homesick nostalgia for the past (*heimweh*), a schizoid perception of the present, loss of identity and belonging, and a desire for social others and foreigners (*fremde*)” (Naficy 206), post-unification cinema has been criticized for an avoidance of such topics, favoring Hollywood-style entertainment and diversion from contemporary problems (Hake, 2002; Rentschler, 2000). The result has been a “cinema of consensus” (Rentschler 260) in which the personal identity of characters is not a function of their national identity or the impact of the past, but instead is found in a socio-economic bracket. German films today are about yuppies, who live in the present, who “play with possibility and flirt with difference” (Rentschler 272). This lack of historicity also characterizes the post-wall German “heritage film”; as Lutz Koepnick notes, these popular films “reinvent the past” simply through the “accumulation of visual and sonic signifiers,” or what tourists expect to see in exotic places, “uncontaminated and perennial locality” (199). Using as an example Vilsmaier’s *Marlene* (2000), Koepnick laments the creation of Germany as a “global tourist attraction,” in which Dietrich becomes an icon “whose popular appeal preceded Hollywood, undermined Nazi power and therefore can retrospectively heal the open wounds of German history” (199), symbolizing a sort of wishful thinking about Germany’s past.

Yet *Halbe Treppe*, though concerned with questions of a lost identity and alienation from an authentic self, differs from much of New German Cinema, which “escaped its own internal exile by giving in to...a yearning for an idyllic place and time elsewhere” (Naficy 206) and was characterized by its focus on a “traumatic past and the wreckage (both physical and psychic) that remained in the present” (Rentschler 271). Neither is it an example of the deterritorialized cinema of Monika Treut, which some argue “leaves the nation behind” as her characters express an “unwillingness to occupy a unitary, stable identity—in body...in sexual orientation...or in the world” (Levin 133). Instead, the characters in Dresen’s film, which takes place very much in the present time and in a city that exists physically and psychologically on a border, do not seek to escape their liminality but to find a home in it. By offering a liminal space as a potential home, Dresen seems to be commenting on the traditional notion of *Heimat*, creating an alternative to other filmmakers’ reconceptualizations of the problematic term in the process.

⁴ <http://www.campus-germany.de/english/4.22.3.117.html>

In the German context, any association between identity and geographic space, as the idea of exile suggests, brings up questions regarding Heimat. According to Peter Blickle, in *Heimat: A Critical Theory of the German Idea of Homeland*, the notion is somewhat different from the concept of homeland in other cultures: “Language, identity, geography, and notions of self and reference intermingle in Heimat in a manner that rationally trained thinkers find discomfiting. The German idea of Heimat is emotional, irrational, subjective, social, political and communal” (Blickle 8). It answers to a desire for a sense of belonging that is anti-Enlightenment, erasing the separation between self and other through a kind of pre-Oedipal bond. As Blickle puts it, “It is a joyous discarding of Enlightenment values to lock arms with the man or woman who by chance is sitting next to you in the beer tent or the *Biergarten* and join in the *Schunkeln*, the traditional rocking right and left to the beat of the music...” The idea of Heimat is thus closely connected to the maternal and the local rather than the paternal and national, a place of innocence and childhood distinguished by its timelessness, a quality also remarked upon by Naficy in his study of representations of homeland in exilic films. At the same time, Heimat has “...historically proved formative for nationalistic and often racist sentiments” by encouraging a distrust of “outsiders” (Blickle 6). It is a concept that Germans have turned to for security in times of upheaval, when a new self-definition has been required: “Whenever deep shifts in the self-definition of Germany as a nation took place, Heimat was there to counterbalance (in the case of loss of territory) and to help integrate (in the case of expansions)” (Blickle 47).

The works of those artists associated with New German Cinema express an ambivalence towards the idea, from the anti-Heimat plays and films of the 1960’s and 70’s that portray the provincial life as decadent to Edgar Reitz’ affectionate tribute to the villagers of Schabbach in his popular 1980’s series *Heimat*. According to Blickle, this ambivalence represents an attempt to rehabilitate the term by some of those, especially on the Left, who wanted to promote a “New Regionalism” that would counter American political and cultural dominance (144). At the same time, Thomas Elsaesser notes in his comments on Reitz’ series, the attention to Heimat was also an example of an effort by New German Cinema to find history by turning to the family and the home. While some filmmakers were able to do this more effectively by looking at this history through distorting mirrors like family violence and terrorism, Reitz’ attempt to repossess German history cinematically “...encounters the fact that photographic memory is especially selective; what it preserves is often a conservative, nostalgic sense of loss” (Elsaesser 278). The concept of Heimat, already loaded with nostalgia and burdened with a malevolent past, is problematically wedded to New German Cinema’s project of *Trauerarbeit*.

According to some critics, more recent German cinema has reinterpreted Heimat to fit modern subjectivities as well as the new reality of a united Germany. David Coury, for example, argues that Monika Treut’s films express a “nostalgia for Heimat” that is resolved through relocation to another place (typically the United States) “historically open to otherness,” unlike Germany. Her protagonists seek to dismantle a male-oriented “Vaterland” and replace it with one more tolerant through the development of a relationship with another woman, either an exile or a displaced person (Coury 77). Heimat then becomes deterritorialized, a state of mind rather than a deep connection between identity and place, or even language (as some intellectuals have understood it). However, this reading is premised on the ability to separate Heimat from its grounding, a vital aspect of the concept (Blickle 121). Another trend, according to Leonie Naughton, has been to envision the former GDR as Heimat. Especially immediately following unification, West German filmmakers viewed former East Germany as a “mythological version

of its own past,” giving in to nostalgia and ignoring the problems in the East (Naughton 126). Based on a 1950s West German genre, the new “Heimatfilme” were used to provide a framework for understanding the East and its identity following unification (Naughton 137-138). Generally comedies, these films featured gnomes and figures from fairy tales as common symbols for the GDR, which was often associated with childhood, particularly through the portrayal of its citizens as dependent on the state (Naughton 192).

On the other hand, former DEFA directors, like Dresen, were not inclined to treat unification as a laughing matter; in fact, for the most part it was not even a subject for fiction film, though many documentaries were made (Naughton 206). An exception to this was Dresen’s first feature, *Stilles Land* (1992), which was not only a fiction film about the *Wende*, but a treatment of the concept of Heimat as well. Set in a provincial East German town just before the *Wende*, it is the story of a theater troupe led by a director from Berlin who tries to stage a production of *Waiting for Godot* at the local theater. He is frustrated by the small-mindedness of the townspeople whose quarreling and drunkenness emphasize the “threatening aspect of corpulent provincial people” (Locatelli 215). At the same time, in his desire to enunciate for the people, which was the role of the artist in the former socialist state, the director loses sight of the fact that the actors are trying to make the play their own. Filmed on location with a focus on local landscape features, *Stilles Land* is a film about the GDR but not only the GDR, Heimat as well: “...the provincial idyll intended as a space of childhood and of never-realized dreams, as a space of immobility and timelessness.” However, this immobility is critically examined in the film; in one particular scene, an actor cries out in frustration over the moral collapse of socialism: “Das Land ist still!” which is followed by a cut to a view of the silent fields (Locatelli 216). *Stilles Land* is not a story about Heimat infected with nostalgia or cultural superiority, but one that, as Dresen explains, tries to recognize the doubts and ambiguities of the people and to remind the viewers of how much they belong to a specific time and place (Coulson 230).

Dresen returns to a critical examination of Heimat in *Halbe Treppe*. Though not generally associated with city or town life but rather the provincial, Dresen uses its tropes to highlight the feelings of exile experienced by his characters, specifically through representations of folk traditions, the position of outsiders, and “die Küche,” the heart of Heimat, which involves a reflection on the role of women (Blickle 84-85). The kitchen in particular plays a central role in Dresen’s story; as previously discussed, its appropriation by the impersonal forces of global capitalism is the point of the comical scene with Uwe and Ellen in the department store. Yet as a reflection on Heimat, the loss of the kitchen underlines the ambivalence many women feel towards Heimat itself. According to Elisabeth Butfering, a German historian, Heimat is a male-centered concept, rooted in the exclusion of women from the “line of ownership and control” of family farmsteads (Blickle 83). In *Halbe Treppe*, this ambivalence can be seen in the female characters’ attempts to both escape and reclaim their kitchens. Ellen is unhappy with hers because she can’t get rid of the smell of her husband, and in the end must abandon it entirely in order to establish her own space. Katrin tries to reclaim hers from both her intrusive stepdaughter and her stepdaughter’s boyfriend, who take food from Katrin’s refrigerator without asking. After she discovers that Chris and Ellen are having an affair together, she tries to find comfort by going to the refrigerator. Yet her kitchen also includes a reminder of the desire for escape that both she and Chris feel: the large world map that hangs above the table. It is both a prison, like Ellen’s, and a refuge. Katrin’s failure to abandon her kitchen reveals a stronger investment in her relationship with her husband than Ellen is able to make in her own.

Uwe's kitchen, on the other hand, evolves from a simple workplace, where the man of the house is exiled from his family, to become the heart of a new community. Significantly, this evolution reflects Uwe's own; he begins the film as an outsider in his own family, whose lack of sensitivity towards the home is signified by his slovenly habits and his disregard for the feelings of his wife (most hilariously, when he puts the sides of pork in the bathtub for Ellen to discover). As Ellen puts it, he is a typical male who recognizes only the injury he has suffered without reflecting upon how his own behavior might have contributed to it. By the end, however, he has become "feminized": not only is he a "mother" to his children but his kitchen has become the site of a new "Heimat" for the community.

Heimat is also represented by the folk traditions that are featured in two important scenes. In the first, we see the four main characters dressed for *Fasching*, a celebration similar to Mardi Gras in which participants wear costumes, sing, dance, and drink before the advent of Lent. In *Halbe Treppe*, this night of partying and fellowship becomes an ironic comment on the falsehoods and deception upon which their friendship is based. The singing and rocking that Blickle refers to only serves to underscore the true divisions between them, and the fact that these divisions are emphasized in a context of a false celebration of tradition is further evidence of the connection between personal alienation and exile from the community. A tradition that should feel familiar and comfortable has become uncanny. The second scene has the opposite effect. At the end of the film the beer drinking and singing mark the rebirth of community feeling among those gathered at the Halbe Treppe, whose catalyst has been Uwe's invitation to the musicians standing outside to finally come in and play. By doing this Uwe has initiated a new relationship between inside and outside, a difficult move within the context of Heimat and one that may signify an attempt at its redefinition. The music of the *17 Hippies*, rooted in folk traditions not only from the vicinity of Frankfurt/Oder and Germany but from all over Europe, represents an aspect of the local that calls to Uwe throughout the film (even from inside the toilet!) to revive his own lost sense of Heimat. When the group is finally invited in, the community is also asked to become part of a new Heimat, one with a man in the kitchen and strange songs to accompany the traditional toasts.



Uwe invites the 17 Hippies into the Halbe Treppe

Through its themes, its tropes of exile, and the way the film is constructed, *Halbe Treppe* attempts not only an examination but, in a sense, a performance of exile, and to a certain extent can be compared to exilic films that both embody and narrate the story of the loss of home. By putting together a film almost entirely without the use of a script and immersing himself and his actors in the life of the community he was filming, Dresen undertook a project that, as he admits, was simultaneously liberating and the source of tremendous uncertainty. Though Dresen himself is not an exile (he may have experienced some of the same feelings of displacement after the demise of the GDR, but he was not physically relocated nor was he alienated from his culture and his native language), the homeseeking journeys that his characters undertake, so closely associated with the physical space and time in which they live, reflect the intense connection to place characteristic of many exilic films. While seeking a new home they do not leave Frankfurt/Oder, but its identity as a city on the verge of remaking itself, with all of the possibilities and anxieties this implies, mirrors the transformation of the characters themselves. The apparently contradictory association between the rootedness of home and the constant potential for change inherent in liminality is nevertheless a resolution of the characters' longing for personal freedom and their concurrent desire to remain connected to family and community.

In his analysis of the development of the modern German nation-state, Norbert Elias points out that the German-speaking tribes were never protected by natural boundaries. The uncertainty about borders found an “equivalence in the inner identity constitutions of Germans,” contributing to their attachment to Heimat as a way to compensate for this insecurity (quoted in Blickle 49). Whether or not this is an overstatement, Heimat is widely understood as an idea that does not recognize borders such as the line between self and other (Blickle 63), preferring to “absorb only if it can dissolve what is foreign,” or to work toward the “elimination of all differences” (Segelcke 167, 169). This idea of Heimat has made integration difficult for immigrants in Germany, particularly the more than three million of Turkish descent originally brought in as guest workers (*Gastarbeiter*) beginning in the 1960s. Until recently, these immigrants could not become citizens, based on an outmoded law that made “German blood” a criterion for citizenship. Thus ethnic Germans living in Eastern Europe who had never been to Germany were (and still are) considered citizens, while the children of Turks born and living in Germany their whole lives were not. Now, those born after 1999 to parents who have resided in the country for at least eight years are automatically Germans, while those born before 1999 may choose between Turkish and German citizenship. However, serious divisions remain between ethnic Germans and those of Turkish background. The ghettoization of the Turkish community is exacerbated, according to author Betigul Ercan Argun, by political events such as the racist attacks on immigrants in the towns of Solingen and Mölln in 1993 as well as by organizations within the community that maintain strong connections to the homeland, such as those that oversee property in Turkey and bring in Turkish brides (Argun 69). Many ethnic Germans have also remarked upon what they see as an almost unbridgeable cultural divide between the two groups. Helmut Schmidt, for example, famously commented that Turkish culture is “totally different” from European, since its “Heimat” is in Asia and Africa (Konzett 47-48).

At the same time, the recent critical and box office success of such filmmakers as Fatih Akin, whose 2004 film *Gegen die Wand* dealt with the difficulties faced by Turks in Germany, may signify that the situation of the Turkish community is of increasing interest to the nation as a whole. Akin, who considers himself a German director,⁵ honored his country by being the first German in eighteen years to be awarded the Golden Bear at the 2004 Berlinale. *Gegen die Wand* was also the sixth largest grossing film in Germany the week it was released, though it appeared in only 79 theaters (the largest grossing film that week, *Along Came Polly*, appeared in 511 theaters). As a result of the film’s popularity Akin has followed it with the release of a documentary, *Crossing the Bridge: The Music of Istanbul*, which showcases the musical subculture of Istanbul and is narrated by Alexander Hacke, a member of the avant-garde band Einstürzende Neubauten. Akin explains his reasons for making it: “We are foreigners in Germany even though we’ve been living there for 30 years. If this film and this music can get into cafes and bars, maybe people will hear us. This is my hope, and my ideology” (*The International Herald Tribune* online, May 16, 2005; 16).

In choosing a border city as the setting for a film that explores notions of exile and homecoming, in which the story centers around a pub located in the middle of a staircase that becomes a new Heimat for the community, Andreas Dresen seems to suggest that borders should be embraced rather than denied, allowed to fluctuate, their permeability becoming a cause for celebration. As Zafer Şenocak, a well-known Turkish-German writer, put it in his comments on

⁵ “... I live and work here, mostly with German money. This makes me, from a totally practical point of view, clearly a German filmmaker” (from an interview with Fatih Akin, *Film Dienst* v. LV no. 23, Nov. 2002; 11; my translation).

German history, in order for Germans to free themselves from their “‘community of fate,’ the nation’s personal experience to which others have no access,” they must “say farewell to an ‘all-too-common notion of unbroken identity’ and to replace it with an identity with ‘gaps through which what is different and foreign could come and go’” (quoted in Segelcke 168). This concept of Heimat would permit movement and change, becoming more accepting of immigrants and liberating women from their traditional position as the powerless center and symbol of home. In the same way that the *Halbe Treppe* welcomed a band whose music transforms an eclectic mix of folk traditions into an original style, a new understanding of Heimat would provide a defense against the homogenizing influence of global culture through the promotion of local traditions, yet would not advocate false purity or operate under the illusion that identities are, as Şenocak points out, “easily distinguishable from one another” (quoted in Segelcke, 171).

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