

Hala Elkoussy
Peripheral and Other Stories
By Clare Davies

*That place is different/ One would finally be relieved there/ And one will never feel let down/
Or that he is persecuted/ Or that he's subjected to unfairness/ What is there is beyond the
imagination of people.*

A surprising density characterizes the urban and social margins of Hala Elkoussy's *Peripheral Stories*. A personal and cultural subconscious evokes what it is that lies "beyond the imagination of people" and disorientation offers an approach to a knowledge without authority. The film operates in the mode of a dream, producing a symbolic excess that offers multiple readings and disrupts the production of stable meaning. While it is Cairo's topographical periphery, the frays of an insatiable megalopolis, that appear to be at the center of this work, it is the piece's performance of a peripheral consciousness that suggests itself most strongly in connection to the term "peripheral". Introduced as a series of stories, the allusions to narrative coming in and out of focus throughout the film create a framework for seducing the viewer into a suspension of both disbelief and belief.

Elkoussy created 25 "stories" that unfold within the span of the 28-minute film. There is little to guide the viewer through the piece. The layers of voice (voice over), text (subtitles), sound (music and background noise) and moving images characterizing the film don't necessarily correspond with each other and often appear internally inconsistent. Time is above all, a function of a repetitive movement and the cyclical re-appearance of characters and references, if only for a moment and out of the corner of the eye. The artist's interest in and repeated experiences working with film extras has clearly informed her choices regarding the hierarchy of roles; the weight often afforded to traditional main characters is instead distributed prismatically across 75 peripheral dramatic roles. The density and multiplication of narratives, characters and images contribute to a heightening of a real that appears only to disappear as quickly as it comes into focus, indicating an excess that can neither be folded back into a consistent whole or prioritized so as to determine an "essential". Instead, excess is figured in terms of surface. Depth is transposed into a sequence of landscapes flattened by their fleeting presence, as they pass by the window of a microbus. Movement occurs along a horizontal axis, frequent use of wide angle shots absorb vistas and people into a horizontal spread.

The film opens with a view onto an expanse of new redbrick apartment buildings, a vision of crudely finished low-income housing spreading towards the horizon. Developments in Mokattam, El Warraq, 6 October City, Sheikh Zayed, Bassous, Kerdassa, new sub-cities off the Ring Road: to many Cairenes these sites are simultaneously familiar and anonymous, reminiscent of a floating periphery that seems to slip in and out of vision and what might be constituted as a cultural consciousness. To others, this peripheral topography represents if not a center, then a point of departure, left daily to travel in the direction of socio-economic and geographic hubs. The microbus that appears throughout the film both in visual and textual references disappears only to become the vehicle for the viewer's gaze - a peripatetic point of view from this ubiquitous Cairene mode of cheap transportation.

While minibuses are often used to shuttle between Cairo's interiors and exteriors, this film never arrives at a "center"; locations, destinations, neighborhoods remain defined by a passage along their outskirts. Similarly, the periphery never emerges as a reality subject to translation through the various iterations of central discourses - among the usual suspects: gender, race, class. The burden of producing an anthropological meaning or an account of place, where artistic practice is understood as a vehicle for uncovering the reality of a so-called peripheral position is eschewed. Instead, the film unfolds various languages, various references and possible readings simultaneously.

The stories that emerge throughout are re-imagined/recomposed from interviews, as well as from texts appearing in advertisements, and gleaned from the gossip pages of newspapers. As a result, the abruptly sketched characters and plots resonate with a documentary voice, as

well as the currency of an anti-ideal (and in a couple instances, an ideal) used to define the borders of cultural normativity. The symbolics are recalled fitfully, outside of the discursive contexts that would complete and clarify their familiar meanings. This device constitutes an unhinging of significance from its usual systems of articulation, as in a dream where the everyday becomes a language with which to intimate the existence of that which surpasses the limits of what can be known or seen.

A shared non-linguistic symbolics particular to contemporary Cairene contexts is incorporated without explanation or indication to viewers who wouldn't recognize, for example, snatches of a popular Shadia song from the seventies, or the floriferous dresses of the ululating women as common upholstering material, or the *khayameya* material functioning equally as a temporary shelter to house wedding and funeral celebrations. Even viewers familiar with these references are often left to interpret their often poetic use in relation to other elements in the film.

A disembodied voice speaks throughout, layering a note of consistency on top of the densely structured visuals. Characters appear interchangeable and the singular voice narrating multiple characters adds to the difficulty in parsing each from the other. At the same time, this voice produces incongruities internally, switching for example, between first and third person in the same sentence, and in relationship to the image of the implied narrator that often appears on screen. The voice takes on the authority that it would otherwise be lacking without any overarching narrative framework. In the same way that the narrative voice has the ability to alter an exterior reality and a daydreaming boy conjures a candyfloss kingdom from a bird, the voice serves as a driving force linking a succession of stories, which don't appear to follow any so-called rational progression. The stories referred to in the title of the film lack clear beginnings and endings - are frayed at the edges; without the possibility of confining their significance or placing them securely in relation to a particular discourse they lose an authoritative reading. There are no interstices but rather a suspension of narrative.

The viewer comes away without the certainty of any gained insights. Instead, disorientation functions as a practice of representation that "blinds" the viewer and situates them between worlds. In an early passage a woman recounts her near-death experience in front of a microbus, "Then I went into a bright light. The air was clean I didn't want to go", and the screen goes white. This blinding is a form of sensual and symbolic overexposure wherein borders are blown out, blending into a space devoid of any meaningfulness, or alternately, an excess of meaning. Though this disorientation appears as an extreme at certain moments in the piece, it operates along a continuum, which allows at less intense levels, for new frameworks for the production of meaning.

The series of still photographs that constitutes the film's own periphery offers a different kind of space of engagement for the viewer. Emotionally charged, large-scale landscape photographs appear alongside the film. They provide a static representation of the psychological space connected to the socio-economic and geographic periphery depicted in the film. Printed on wallpaper material, the pieces suggest both the lurid plastic Swiss alpine scenes that are to be found in homes, restaurants and cafes and which appear twice in the film itself, as well as fine art traditions of landscape painting and photography. Dwarfing the viewer while failing to create a complete environment, these pieces are more tributes to a romantic ideal of place than convincing representations of the real.

Elkoussy's new photographic installation is an addition to the *Peripheral* exhibition. Photographs portraying many of the cheap objects of desire to be found in Cairo's open-air markets are arranged in a grid and mounted in a large scale light box. The piece blinks erratically on and off in blues, greens and reds like the rented strings of colored lights signaling festivities in Cairo streets. Shot individually and with careful lighting, the objects are portrayed in the language of sophisticated commercial product-shots. In some cases the objects are intended to facilitate a desired change in the buyer, i.e. clip-on hair extensions. In others, they are simulacra of desired identities that are themselves a kind of social currency, i.e. Barbie-style dolls, a child's officer's cap. Often they are both. At the same time, the installation repeats the assumption underlying these objects' existence; these objects are desirable in and of themselves as inauthentic objects.

The theme of desire highlighted in the photographic installation brings the role of desire in the film into focus. It is a desire for a transformation of circumstances that is repeated throughout *Peripheral Stories* as a cipher for the periphery as a utopian space. "That place is different," comments one of the characters. It is the powerful grasp of this desire that provides a subtext to the ongoing disorientation and allows for the complication of our belief in both reality and illusion.