



OPPOSITE and FOLLOWING SPREAD Ulrike Ottinger, *Exile Shanghai* (1997), film stills. Courtesy the artist.

ULRIKE OTTINGER'S EXILE SHANGHAI

Since last November, the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAMPFA) has offered online access to the works of queer, German-Jewish filmmaker Ulrike Ottinger. The film series, one of several recent tributes, revisits Ottinger's impressive oeuvre upon the release of her new film *Paris Calligrammes* (2020)—a vibrant yet critical portrayal of the filmmaker's life in Paris, where she moved at the age of 20 in 1961. Ottinger's education took shape between two spheres of Parisian political consciousness, which together mark out a key interval in twentieth century culture. One was composed of aging German émigrés, the other of vital, young activists eager to at last abolish French colonialism. Traces of this awakening appear in Ottinger's later films, in particular her travelogs and ethnographies. Colonial legacies are never far. Neither are histories of exile and diaspora.

Ottinger's 1997 documentary *Exile Shanghai*, which screened as part of the BAMPFA series, is a provocative example. The film examines a Jewish community that flourished in midcentury Shanghai—China's largest city and a colonial outpost for European powers. Jewish immigrants had arrived from Iraq and eastern Russia beginning in the nineteenth century and moved about the French Concession and International Settlement (European districts in Shanghai's port, built after the Treaty of

Nanking) in much the way they moved about Europe and the Middle East. They created a lively, extraverted world of social clubs and foundations, yeshivas and salons, fashion houses, community banks, broadsheets, and journals. The Jews remained a minority, but led secular lives, conducting affairs in English (rather than Yiddish, Hebrew, or Arabic). They were not secluded, in other words, but socially mobile within a cosmopolitan and ultimately supremacist colonial milieu.

The divisions and hierarchies of colonialism were in fact central to their lives. One of Ottinger's interviewees recalls a busy schedule of piano lessons, ballet, French and German tutoring—before remarking on the atrocious poverty, and the spread of diseases, like typhus and elephantiasis, suffered by destitute Chinese people living in the shadow of occupation. She describes abandoned infant children, beggars in the street. "Looking back and seeing things as an adult," the interviewee says, "I realize how horrible it was for the Chinese people, who were very suppressed." There was also a servant class. Wealthy Jewish families resided in penthouses in the International Settlement, hiring live-in cooks and valets, even personal dressmakers, all Chinese.

In the 1930s, a wave of Jewish refugees from central and eastern Europe began to arrive. They were mostly welcomed into

the existing Jewish social world, where they recreated Viennese café culture and the garrulous literary and intellectual life of Berlin. With the start of Japanese occupation, however, things changed dramatically. In addition to facing food rations and curfews, the refugees were confined to a ghetto in Hongkou without electricity or basic sanitation (though Chinese-born Russian and Sephardic Jews remained fully enfranchised). Allied victories transformed life again, but nothing returned to its prewar state. The eventual ascendance of Chinese communism prompted virtually all the Jews to emigrate. Many moved to the new state of Israel, which the British had hastily created in occupied Palestine. Others moved to the Americas.

Ottinger presents the bygone world of Shanghai Jewry with the curiosity and verve for which she is known. Her camera searches the remains of the International Settlement for repurposed synagogues, department stores, and hotels—now crisscrossed with electric lines and neon Chinese lettering—lingering on the people who live and work in these spaces sixty years later. The imagery will seem familiar to viewers of western documentaries about China. We see masses on bicycles, chefs pulling noodles and shopping at the market. But the film also challenges this passive gaze with attention to postmodern cultural mix, at times employing a camp sensibility: a young couple models chintzy wedding attire while eating American fast food. TV screens glitter all around.

The film's panorama, accompanied by a romantic score ranging from traditional Chinese opera to Marlene Dietrich, is intercut with grainy footage of colonial Shanghai and interviews with several Jews who lived there. Their reflections are heartfelt and often astonishing. They tell dark stories of flight from Europe, abandoning family in concentration camps, spending months in passage to China. They acknowledge the hardships they suffered in the ghetto, as well as the sense of community that sustained them. Yet Ottinger, for the most part, declines to interview Chinese people who lived and worked among the Shanghai Jews (a single exception, the daughter of a carpenter who worked for Jewish families, is quickly drowned out by the film's soundtrack). Chinese people are on screen for much of the film's duration, populating shots of the city and appearing in historical photographs, usually as servants, but they have no real voice in the story that Ottinger presents.

Critics of Ottinger's work have seized on such omissions, for example declaring that her earlier film about China (*China*,

Die Künste – der Alltag, from 1985) exhibits a "pure exoticism" in its embrace of a "deeply foreign culture" (literary critic Katie Trumpener's words). But here Ottinger's only partial encounter with local people may disclose immediate practical and political contingencies. According to Laurence Rickels's study, *Ulrike Ottinger: The Autobiography of Art Cinema*, Chinese officials forbade the director from interacting directly with locals. After preliminary conversations, she scheduled formal interviews but "the people with whom she had spoken before couldn't be found or, if they met up again, suddenly remembered nothing from back then." (Her sole Chinese interviewee offers a vague recollection: "They [the Jews] were very good to my father. To us children, too.") Rickels's claims, if they are true, suggest that *Exile Shanghai* is more than a tale of a forgotten world. It is a document, albeit incomplete, of China's porous relationship with global civil society—from colonial treaty in the 1830s, to world war in the 1930s and 40s, to the uneven liberalization of the 1990s.

This expanded view of Ottinger's political interests puts into focus a separate but, to my mind, more pressing issue. Ottinger shows an large, multi-ethnic Jewish diaspora thriving in Shanghai just before the founding of modern Israel and the dispossession of Palestinians, including Palestinian Jews, from their own land. National Zionism was hardly the only path for Jews fleeing Europe, the film implies. Shanghai was a place where they could live peacefully without harassment. This is not to say the arrangement was in any way just. While the Shanghai Jews did not pursue political power, as in Israel, they consorted in exclusive spaces governed by European consulates, taking part in an apparatus of colonial settlement that profoundly afflicted their Chinese neighbors. And when the political situation changed, their proximity to European identity meant they could get out.

Exile Shanghai, in narrating this history, poses a challenge to the bluster of nationalism and the romance of diaspora, putting these dominant modes of modern Jewish politics in the context of shifting colonial paradigms. The film's engagement with elderly Shanghai Jews who ultimately relocated to suburban California (more unceded land) urges us to ask if the colonial project spared any patch of ground on earth, and to consider the ways that displaced people become surrogates for the oppression of others.

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