INTRODUCTION

• EXTRANJERÍAS, OR HOW TO EXIT CULTURAL AUTISM
  Mieke Bal
My idea for this seminar and its publication is simple: it is possible to leave behind the political and academic limitations imposed by tradition through focusing on something I will call, using an untranslatable Spanish word, extranjeras. What are extranjeras, and what is the point of invoking them in this context?

In their proposal for an exhibition held in the spectacular new MUAC (Museo Universitario de Arte Contemporáneo) in Mexico City, from January to July 2012, under the title “Extranjerías,” curators Néstor García Canclini and Andréa Giunta came up with this word. They sum up their topic as “el tránsito de lo propio a lo diferente” – again, somewhat untranslatable, but approximately rendered as the transition from “one’s own” to the different. What does that mean, and how can it help us in our academic research?

If we consider “lo propio” (“one’s own”) to mean routine – what we already know – as well as what is locked up in a narrow conception of our lives and work – what I will provocatively call a “cultural autism” – I would say that the growth of knowledge depends by definition on a move toward difference, or extranjeras. For it depends on a certain discontinuity, that is, a transition, between what we already know and the unexpected. The need for extranjeras also holds for the “own” of the disciplines, and even for the media we use for our research.

Extranjerías are not absolutely different. They are that which goes beyond the “own”, making contact with what seems different from the point of view of the “own” – a true transition, always dynamic, in movement. In the domain of academic research I have called such movements “travelling concepts.” As Jonathan Culler (2006) has argued, Western culture propagates the idea that you have to travel to make your fortune. One needs to undertake exciting, dangerous, and tiring travel to acquire new experiences.

Culler wrote this at the opening of an article that traces the fortunes of the concept of the performative. This concept made a return trip, at first between philosophy (where it was used for the first time) and literature (where it resolved fundamental problems while exposing some
knowledge depends as much on the recognition that enables us to connect what we discover with what we already know, as it depends on the exciting experience of newness.

Another way of bringing movement into research is the development of what I have called “intellectual friendship.” For example, Néstor García Canclini has written a review of Travelling Concepts in the magazine ExitBook, in which he approved of the idea of “friendship” – with its intimacy but also its critical perspective – as a guide for cultural analysis (2011). This idea fits in with Moritz Gansen’s “ontopolitics” according to Latour, in this volume. In this sense, García Canclini is an “intellectual friend” (Bryson 2001). I am happy that Travelling Concepts has been translated into Spanish, so that my conversations with Spanish-speaking colleagues can continue and gain in depth.

According to my conception of concepts that are useful for interdisciplinary analysis, there are connections between art and research beyond the relationships between object – artwork – and subject – the skill of the analyst, capable of “opening” the works up to the gaze of their spectators. According to the definition of extranjерías, I would contend that between the two, a relation of intersubjectivity prevails, in which the two participants can learn from each other because of their differences. I would even submit that this intersubjective relationship is indispensable and that, in consequence, extranjерías are equally indispensable.

Nevertheless, if there is absolute discontinuity, we cannot acquire new knowledge, either. Knowledge depends as much on the recognition that enables us to connect what we discover with what we already know, as it depends on the exciting experience of newness. I saw in the exhibition proposal an opportunity to strengthen an intellectual friendship that already existed: between travelling concepts and extranjерías. I participate in Canclini and Giunta’s exhibition with three collaborative works that I consider experimental documentaries.¹

We have made these films with various motivations, but an important one for me as academic researcher was to go beyond the limitations of what we can do with traditional media such as books and journals. Those media are limited both in terms of data and of their intended audiences – specialists in the narrow sense. Sensing those limitations, we sought to examine what extranjерías remain invisible as long as we docilely respect the limits between disciplines and mediums. An intelligent and open use of different disciplines and media, in contrast, allows us to do much more, and to make visible enriching aspects and nuances; that is to say, we can discover extranjерías.

Audio-Visual Media: Documenting extranjерías

The curators have selected three films for their exhibition: Becoming Vera (2008), Colony (2007), and Elena (2006). All three revolve around a concept that requires interdisciplinary analysis, and at the same time pertain to the idea of extranjería. The first one concerns a three-year-old girl and her “identity”; the second, a multinational company from before the Second World War, and the social aspects of the labour

¹ I am a member of an informal collective of filmmakers called Cinema Suitcase. For a survey of the films, see www.miekebal.org/artworkofilms.
relations it invented and implemented; and the third is a dialogue or, mainly, a monologue by a Romanian woman whose son has left for Canada in migration. It ends up concerning a concept I had never thought of, which I have subsequently called facing (Bal 2006). Below, you see a video still of each of these films.

Figure 1. Still from Becoming Vera (2008) by Mieke Bal, Alexandra Loumpet Galitzine, and Michelle Williams Gamaker. Documentary, 54 minutes.

Figure 2. Still from Colony (2006) by Michelle Williams Gamaker, Mieke Bal, Gary Ward, Zen Marie, and Thomas Sykora. Documentary, 33 minutes.
**Becoming Vera**
celebrates the imagination as a tool against the enclosures the cultural constrictions impose on subjects, including the concepts with which we frame our objects of analysis.

In what follows I will explain how, in different ways, these videos are examples of the use of the audiovisual medium of video to complement the concepts without which we cannot do research; to overcome one of the limitations of our academic work; and to achieve a kind of “translation” beyond the epistemological domain only. In each video there is an “extranjería” that precludes facile conclusions, that transforms the concepts, and that in the end compels us to an epistemological modesty imposed by the ontological difference as well as by a creative approximation between research and art. If you have seen our film *A Long History of Madness* (2011) it is easy to see what I mean by that.²

In *Becoming Vera* we filmed a “multicultural” three-year-old girl – the age we considered to be the pivotal moment when she began to develop a conscious awareness of her identity. We tried to get a better grip on the nature of identity – and how the concept helps and, at the same time, limits our understanding of cultural being. Culturally and ethnically, Vera is Cameroonian (or rather, Bamun), Russian, and French. In terms of social class she is of aristocratic lineage on both parents’ sides; since her parents are also intellectuals, she hears a lot of talk around her, including contradictory things; and economically she lives quite modestly in Paris. Thus summarized, she has three ethnic identities and three class identities. And while Vera is strongly framed by the ambitions and preoccupations of her parents, she positions herself in the stories she invents, fictions in which she integrates her desires into what she has heard around her. Jumping through the world according to her own rhythm, and attempting to see through her eyes, the film *Becoming Vera* celebrates the imagination as a tool against the enclosures the cultural constrictions impose on subjects, including the concepts with which we frame our objects of analysis.

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² This film was screened the evening before the seminar began (December 14th, Barcelona at Arts Santa Monica). In my conception, it was an integral part of my lecture.
In *Colony* the perspective is more historical. This film is about multinational corporations at their beginnings, and the consequences for the workers they employ – the people who live by virtue of, and for, the business of their employers. Here, no satisfactory concept helps us conclude; that of “progress” does not work, and hence, nor does that of “development.” *Elena*, finally, is a very personal document that shows us the experience of a woman belonging to a group never documented before, and about which the media do not talk: the mothers of migrants, women who stay behind in the country of departure, their houses empty of their children. They remain unacknowledged and neglected, as if they did not exist. I will connect each of these videos to the concepts central for the analysis on which they are brought to bear, and will determine to what extent the audiovisual medium is indispensable for the analysis, without dismissing as redundant the traditional information media such as books and journals. Through this commentary I hope to answer the questions to which this seminar was devoted.

*Becoming Vera* questions the limiting aspects of what we have learned to value as “identity politics” in our attempts to break with the hegemony of white, wealthy, and heterosexual men in politics, culture, and the academy. *Colony* aims to question the paternalism in multinational labour relations in the first half of the 20th century, and juxtapose them to the cynical alternatives of today. The film also documents a certain continuity between those two attitudes. That is to say, it questions the historicist idea of progress, as well as the short-term cultural memory that considers the current labour migration as something new. *Elena* aims to make visible what remains silenced simply because it is overlooked in the study of migration. It considers the concept of experience and what the displacement of migrants means for those who stay behind. Hence, these three works, different as they are, all endorse the concepts we work with and examine their limiting effects.

**From identity to cultural citizenship**

When I showed *Becoming Vera* to an international audience in Germany, a French viewer expressed his astonishment that we had made such a “French” film. The remark clearly went beyond the obvious, namely that the child who is the film’s main character is, in fact, “simply” French. She was born in Paris, though brought over from Cameroon for the occasion; her mother is primarily French, and she lives there, most of the time. She goes to school in France, and hence, she is in the process of being shaped by that forceful school system I admire and find confining at the same time, even if she spends much of her summer holidays in Cameroon. As you noticed, all these forms of Frenchness are subject to some qualification, but then again, these are “minoritarian.”

More than identity, what matters in Vera’s life is indicated as “cultural citizenship” – and what the film explores is the ways in which this citizenship is constructed and transmitted. The case of the very young child, happily unaware of the pressure on her cultural identity that our age imposes on its citizens, lends itself very well to such an inquiry. The film demonstrates the first glimpses of the transformation “into” cultural citizenship. But what kind of citizenship is this?

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3. For a more extensive discussion of the issues that this film presents, see Bal 2009.
4. My interpretation of Vera, her life and situation, is my own responsibility only. Her mother participated in the making of the film, and will probably see things quite differently.
Vera’s father says that “contact”, as colonization is euphemistically called, only strengthened the culture of the Cameroonian kingdom of Bamun. Since the confrontation with Europe, he claims, there exist very specific mechanisms ... of resistance and survival thanks to which the kingdom of Bamun survives the major political elements of the history of the 20th century.

Resistance and survival have clearly saved the kingdom from demise. The colonizer, in this case France, has thus strengthened instead of weakened the cultural citizenship of the Bamun. Vera’s father is himself a case in point: having been educated, first, in the French colonial school system, then at a Parisian university, he nevertheless returned to occupy his position in the kingdom. He takes his small daughter’s position as a link in the lineage extremely seriously:

of the ancient organization always based on lineage, a political idea … as long as the Njis survive and the transmission continues the kingdom of Bamun survives, hence she is called to ... ... ensure the continuity

From this perspective, we can see the entire organization of the ritual around Vera’s enthronement as a “French-driven” assertion of Bamun cultural citizenship. Bamun, by the way, is also a political entity without political citizenship in the form of passports; the kingdom is part of the Republic of Cameroon.
Someday, Vera’s “French” cultural unawareness had to change. Her parents were bound to transmit to her some of what they got transmitted to them, fragments of other cultures than Paris, from which at first she can pick and choose elements that suit her own play. We sought to capture that change in the film. Between the ages of three and four, Vera traversed many landscapes, exploring where she comes from, to come into her own. The film’s title refers not to the old idea of becoming as a transition to a permanent state, however, but more to an ontology of instability; more Deleuzian than, say, according to a psychoanalysis-inspired commonsense notion of identity. In and of itself, it questions cultural citizenship.

Clearly, her parents, both anthropologists, look upon their daughter’s status in the Bamun tradition with a double view. Double, not divided; her father’s commitment to her status in Bamun is total, even if he seems not wholeheartedly convinced of the ethnographic “truth” of it all:

she must naturally play her role
even without knowing it
I asked the other Njis
don’t you think she’s very good?
and they answered
“no it’s not she who acts”

Perhaps Vera’s cultural citizenship of Bamun, which complements her Frenchness, will be inflected by this striking integration of complete commitment with the scepticism of anthropological canniness; a canniness he incurred in a French university, through the lens of French higher education.

A similar double allegiance shines through Vera’s behaviour during the ritual, captured with great intimacy. As her father proudly comments on her being “good” and the elders explain that her aptitude is the result of her ritual occupation by the ancestors’ spirits, she sits still for hours while the women and men of her father’s people dance around her. This was quite astonishing and moving indeed. But just when the images suggest a small girl made the object of an incomprehensible ritual, her self-absorbed face suddenly lights up in a smile to someone outside the frame. Clearly, she is both “inside” the situation and distanced from it when it suits her.

Her mother, also an anthropologist and art historian, took Vera to Russia for the first time, to encounter her side of where she comes from. In Russia, in Moscow and surroundings, she visited the estates of her mother’s ancestors, who were exiled during the revolution. Here, Vera runs around in the setting of historical socialites described and sometimes mocked by Pushkin, where strict social rules determined gendered lives. A hospital, a railway station, a town, and a palace, all called after her mother’s name, cannot but astonish the little girl. Thus, as in Fumban, along with her cultural identity, it is her class identity that is mirrored to her. And this, to put it bluntly, is as much in tension with her everyday situation in Paris as is her status as oldest daughter of the Ngi in Bamun. Her Frenchness is bound to a class “normality” from which the two other aspects of her background set her apart.
Clearly, for Vera these visually engaging landscapes seem easily integrated into her rich fantasy world. Equally clearly, and in contrast to the vision of the Elders in Fumban, she takes bits of her being into her own hands. In Russia, she looks at paintings and sculptures in the stately homes her mother shows her, but onto these pieces of fiction she projects her imagined stories. These, in turn, are clearly influenced by her cultural surroundings. For example, in a painting of Cleopatra she points out the black man in the background.5

Vera’s mother Alexandra recounts how her great-grandmother barred the young Pushkin from courting her daughters. In this context she mentions the possibility that slavery was the background of Pushkin’s ancestor’s arrival in Russia:

by the way, they say that Pushkin who was a ... descendant of a young Cameroonian who was probably taken in slavery to the court of Peter the Great was courting the young Galitzine girls hence my great-great grandmother had refused him access to Viaziomy house

At that moment in the film, Vera covers her eyes as if horrified by the story of slavery. When her mother continues suggesting the great-grandmother’s probable racism and/or classism in this interdiction, Vera sits on the stairs making indignant faces.

The most tangible site of encounter between Vera and Pushkin is the bust, which functions as a remarkable target of identification for the little girl. She recognizes it as African rather Russian. Pushkin’s African identity is clear in the bust, most unambiguously in the curly hair. And

5. Here she acts as if practicing the teachings of African-American artist Fred Wilson (Corrin 1995).
that hair is in fact Vera’s one and only clearly “African” feature. Vera’s hair, densely curled, golden-blonde, comes up several times in the film, as a modest motive. It is remarked upon, braided in African style, and changes several times, thus attracting attention. In the little scene with the bust, she is clearly proud of her bunches. In semiotic terms, the encounter is based on a subtle iconicity that Vera’s finger, a true index, points out to the viewer.*

Clearly, even at this young age she is not simply a passive recipient of this cultural nourishment. Toward the end, there is a trialogue when Vera, almost falling asleep, talks into a toy phone:

Figure 6. Still from Becoming Vera (2008) by Mieke Bal, Alexandra Loumpet Galitzine, and Michelle Williams Gamaker. Documentary, 54 minutes.

(to the bandits) bandits, what’s come over you?

I tell you to stop it!
Alexandra:
to whom are you speaking?
Vera:
(to Alexandra) I’m talking to the two gentlemen
(to the bandits)
yes yes but ...
(to the others in the room)
when I am on the phone
one doesn’t make noise!
(to the bandits)
yes, I’m fine
but what are you doing

In this stunning play with fantasy, reality—specifically, her multi-national background—becomes an ingredient for the imagination. And the addressee is the anchor of both domains. The international figures of bandits, obviously, enter Vera's imagination from reading and television. But in shifting addressees, Vera also changes her discourses, with a fine sense of what is becoming in a certain situation. The "yes I'm fine" is a learned phrase of politeness. The bossy request for silence is a case of role-playing. But it also shows that she is not simply absorbed in her imaginary world. This is how she precludes her cultural citizenship to transform into a rigid, singular cultural identity.

Vera’s canny address tells us that such mixtures are not naïve or romantic, but an extremely savvy way of dealing with confinement (in gender, class, or culture, three forms of belonging that lead to a notion of cultural citizenship) to pick and choose and thus constitute, or become, oneself. This, then, is the history Vera demonstrates to us: the history of the present – the intercultural reality in which we live.

Colony: Labour relations

*Colony* is primarily set in Batanagar, India, in 2006. From the present, the film looks back to the past; often with longing and a sense of loss, but also with questions. These questions in turn address the future. Batanagar today is a crumbling outpost of the Bata Empire. In its heyday 16,000 workers lived and worked together for the Bata organization. The Czech-born shoe manufacturer Tomas Bata established his company as an early multinational company alias family business in 1894 with the aim of providing shoes for the people of the world. He envisioned a world where no man need go barefoot and he employed many thousands to make this a reality. His legacy has been passed down the generations to Thomas Bata Junior, his grandson, now the current CEO.

Bata was an experiment in social care as a means of increasing profit – in other words, of merging private and social lives with the work people did. The Bata “family spirit” extended to the work force who produced the shoes in all the satellite outposts of its empire.

The film opens, but does not answer the question so crucial to the contemporary world: is the overcoming of colonialism ever able to avoid neocolonialism? Like all the films from the collective Cinema Suitcase, the film has no voice-over, no explanatory narrative. Instead, the people in it tell their own stories, their own versions and views of what it meant to be involved in this massive enterprise called Bata – a globalized business, we would now call it.
Figure 7. Still from Colony (2006) by Michelle Williams Gamaker, Mieke Bal, Gary Ward, Zen Marie, and Thomas Sykora. Documentary, 33 minutes.

Figure 8. Still from Colony (2006) by Michelle Williams Gamaker, Mieke Bal, Gary Ward, Zen Marie, and Thomas Sykora. Documentary, 33 minutes.
The film is political in its critical presentation of both past ideals and contemporary alternatives. A political film, we found, is not a film that comes up with political conclusions but one that opens up the everyday to its political aspects and then leaves it to its viewers to reflect on how the political of the presented situation speaks to their own politics. The film is "migratory" in the sense of my larger project on migratory aesthetics. This becomes clear in the focus on the transport of the fabrication of shoes to the southern hemisphere, where cheap labour increased profit but at the same time produced jobs for the employed. As a result of this, artisans lost their clients to larger businesses. The film explores, in other words, the dialectic of international commerce. Colony is also "migratory" in its loose aesthetic forms as well as in its multi-voiced content. It harbours the traces of situations and relationships of the past that "colour" the present world. Hence the muted, somewhat dusty colours in present-day Batanagar. And because there is no progress, a film like Elena became necessary.

**Extranjerías of history: On facing**

Elena was made as an element of the video installation Nothing Is Missing. This installation consists of several half-hour videos, with a maximum of seventeen, displayed on old-fashioned monitors. Imagine a living room in a public space. Visitors are invited to sit in armchairs or on sofas. Around them, women speak to someone else. The interlocutors are people close to these women, intimates, but their relationship with them has been interrupted due to the migration of the women's children: a grand-child they did not see grow up; a child-in-law they did not choose or approve of; or the emigrated child itself. The intimacy, which is sometimes fraught with slight uneasiness, is characteristic of the situation. Sometimes you hear the other voice, but sometimes you do not.

Communication unfolds between the woman and her relative, but due to the installation set-up, also between the women, and between the women and the visitors, all at once. The performative aspect on all these levels brings about a merging of communications. The armchairs can be moved or turned, as if one were visiting the women on the screen, concentrating on a single mother or alternating one's attention among them. The women are filmed in consistent close-up, as portraits. The relentlessly permanent image of their faces provides a modest monument to the women who suffered these profound losses. It also forces viewers to look these women in the face, in the eyes, and listen to what they have to say, in a language that is foreign, using expressions that seem strange, but in a discourse we can all, affectively, relate to.

There is no narrative voice; only the mothers do the talking. Any sense of tourism is carefully avoided: while intensely visual, the films show neither monumentality nor picturesque scenery. No spectacle is offered to gratify a desire for beauty. Instead, the films engage intimately with the individuals concerned. All sound is diegetic. Indirectly, the installation constitutes a monument to those mothers who were left behind, bereft of those they most cherished.
Intimacy in the films is enhanced not only by the subject discussed – the departure of the child who left for North America or Western Europe – but also because the mothers talk to someone close to them. Moreover, the filmmaker sets the shot, switches the camera on, and leaves the room, only to return after the allotted time. This gesture of
My primary goal is to explore the possibility of an “aesthetic understanding” which, through intimacy and bridging the gaps dug by globalization, can participate in the political.

In this distinction, politics is the organization that settles conflict; the political is where conflict “happens.” Yet, it is by virtue of the political that social life is possible. It can thrive, be alive, and also be dangerous. No wonder, then, that we usually seek to avoid conflict by means of consensus. Politics comes in to avert the potential of danger and constantly attempts to dampen the political. A positive view of conflict might sound counterintuitive. Since most of us love to hate politics as domineering and menacing, we tend to attribute the negativity of conflict to politics rather than to its counterpart, yearning to be reassured by political leaders that conflict can be eradicated. And true enough, we eschew conflict in our own social environment. Yet, as Mouffe cogently argues, the culture of consensus resulting from politics does not eliminate conflict at all; it suppresses conflict, leaving it to its own potentially volcanic devices and forcing it underground. Politics is in fact highly exclusivist, and lives by “the negation of the ineradicable character of antagonism” (2005, 10). It is also in blatant contradiction to the lived social reality, in which conflict is generally present.

With this distinction in mind we are better equipped to understand the political point of the film’s intimacy. How do two people who, after a life together, are so drastically separated, speak to each other? In this conversation there are moments where the monologue transforms into drama. For example, just when Elena is at the point of complaining about her husband (Simion’s father), the young man interrupts her to ask about something very different.

every time someone would come
to ask for my hand
father would start arguing
saying whatever came to his mind
he would say
“keep your mouth shut, you stupid girl, stay out of it”

that’s how it was for me

after I came here it was the same
with your father I still had a hard life
– can you talk a bit about me?
Clearly, the interview does not only serve to make people talk but also to shut them up. That is what the son is doing here. It is easy to understand why.

Of all the videos of which this project consists, Elena is the clearest example of “facing,” the concept it actually creates. Facing is three things, or acts, at once. Literally, facing is the act of looking someone else in the face. It is also coming to terms with something that is difficult to live down by looking it in the face rather than denying or repressing it. Thirdly, it is making contact, placing the emphasis on the second person, and acknowledging the need of that contact simply in order to be able to sustain life. Instead of “to be is to be perceived” and “I think, therefore I am,” facing proposes, “I face (you), hence, we are.” For this reason, facing is my proposal for a performance of contact across divisions that avoids the traps of universalist exclusion and relativist condescendence.

The perception-image is the result of the viewer’s selection from the visible world of those images that might be useful for her. The action-image presents possibilities to act upon what is seen. In between, the affection-image compels the viewer – who is affected by the perception – to consider action. In Nothing Is Missing, and a priori in Elena, these three types of images culminate in the mitigated close-up of the face that shuttles between perception-image and affection-image without the leap to action. Here, rather than a passive perceivedness that hands over human agency, a rigorously affirmed second-personhood is displayed. The perceivedness that the predominance of the close-up foregrounds leads to an empowering performativity. This brings me to the academic question of interdisciplinarity. With the aim of transforming it from a fashionable term into an intellectually responsible and specific idea, interdisciplinarity can be a model of the meaning of the preposition “inter-” that I am interested in: as a practice of singular relationality.

With this in mind, the face, with all the potential this concept-image possesses, seemed an excellent place to start. But to deploy the face for this purpose requires one more negative act: the elimination of an oppressive sentimentalist humanism that has appropriated the face for universalist claims in a threefold way – as the window of the soul, as the key to identity translated into individuality, and as the site of policing. With this move I also seek to suspend any tendency to sentimentalizing interpretations of Nothing Is Missing.

The abuses of the face that individualism underpins are, in turn, articulated by means of a form of thought that confuses origin with articulation, and runs on a historicism as simplistically linear as it is obsessive. Common origin is a primary ideology of universalism. This involves motherhood: all human beings are born from a mother (even if this universal is no longer true). Creation stories from around the world tend to worry about the beginning of humanity in terms of the nonhumanity that precedes it. Psychoanalysis primarily projects onto the maternal face the beginning of the child’s aesthetic relationality. Both the discourse of psychoanalysis and, as I will demonstrate shortly, that of aesthetics show their hand in these searches for beginnings. Both searches for origins are predicated on individualism, anchored as
Today, with authorities displaying high anxiety over the invisibility of the Islamic veiled face, we cannot overestimate the importance, not of the face per se, but of the ideology of the face for the construction of contemporary socio-political divides. To show briefly the workings of this ideology I look to an art-historical publication that earned its stripes in its own field: a study on the portrait, the artistic genre par excellence where individualism is the condition sine qua non of the genre’s very existence. The point of the portrait is the belief in the real existence of the person depicted, the “vital relationship between the portrait and its object of representation” (Brilliant 1991, 8). The portraits that compose Nothing Is Missing challenge these joint assumptions of individualism and realism, as well as their claim to generalized validity.

The women in this work are, of course, “real,” as real as you and me, and individual – as different from you and me as the world’s divides have programmed. At first sight, they have also been documented as such. At the same time, however, the installation enables them to speak “together” from within a cultural-political position that makes them absolutely distinct and absolutely connected at once. This is the meaning of the silences that suggests they are listening to one another, even if they never met in reality.

As for the documentary nature of their images, again, this is both obvious and obviously false, since the situation of speech is framed as both hyperpersonal and utterly staged. I filmed the migrants’ mothers talking about their motivation to support or try to withhold their children who wished to leave and about their own grief to see them go. The mothers talk about this crucial moment in their past to a person close to them, often someone whose absence in her life was caused by the child’s departure. This is a first take on the universal performance of contact I want to propose, against the more exclusionist universalities. In this performance, I contend, intimacy plays itself out against the odds of globalization-informed separation.

The act and mode of filming itself is implicated in this theoretical move. It is, in one sense, perfectly and perhaps excessively documentary. I staged the women, asked their interlocutors to take place behind the camera, set the shot, turned the camera on, and left the scene. This method is hyperbolically documentary. To underline this aspect I refrained from editing these shots. A slow, unsmooth, and personal talk results – an extranjería.

The relentlessly permanent image of their faces is meant to force viewers to look these women in the face, and listen to what they have to say. This is a second form of the performance of contact. The mothers become the holders of the inter-face. The face as inter-face is an occasion for an exchange that, affect-based as it may be, is fundamental in opening up the discourse of the face to the world. Only when she takes the trouble and the time to participate in the extranjería of this interaction can she achieve, or earn, a sense of participation.
Conclusion: What to Do?

What can we do, in our work of research, to exit cultural autism? In the three films I have briefly discussed, the images work with the unfolding of the affection-image. Close-ups subvert linear time. This is how they inscribe the present in the image. Between narrative images and close-ups, then, a particular kind of intertemporality emerges: one that stages a struggle between fast narrative and stasis. Between the perception of extranjerías that is in a certain way unsettling and an action you still ponder, affect emerges.

The close-ups possess a temporal density, inhabited by the past and the future, while affect (and especially, the affect produced by close-ups) remains an event in the present. This is not an event in the punctual sense but a slice of a process during which the external events unfold more slowly and even remain out of view. “Becoming” refers to the presence of the past, its present tense. If we consider this present in the domain of the social, we can no longer deny our responsibility for the injustices of the past, even if we are not guilty of them. The affection-image binds with a perception that already took place but leaves a trace that can lead to an action in the future.

This enables us, as researchers, to realize the connection, in the present and across cultural divides, between a series of discourses and activities that are routinely treated either as separate or irresponsibly combined. Of the women of Nothing Is Missing, I have learned that the invocation of a disciplinary frame can sometimes do more harm than good to the ideas that we try to develop through it. We need to make the transition from an essentialist conception of a static culture to a performative one, of the confrontation of what we can call “the cultural”;

In order to be able to examine what we can do to understand the contemporary world on its own terms, we must exit our cultural autism.

Bibliography


