

Documenting What? Auto-Theory and Migratory Aesthetics

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Introduction

This chapter emerged from a practice I have been calling “auto-theory.” With this term I refer to a spiral-like activity: as a scholar, I was confronted with the shortcomings of written documentation especially for the understanding of contemporary culture, which is by definition still “in becoming.” As a way out, some 10 years ago I began to make documentary films. These films and what they showed me became, then, secondary objects of analysis. Learning from and theorizing what I learned by reconsidering my own films, yielded insights brought forth by the people “in” them. This became an ongoing, spiraling form of analysis-theory dialectic, and since my own films are the subject of my examination, I call it auto-theory.

Let me begin with an example. In my video installation *Nothing Is Missing* (2006–2010), 17 mothers of migrants, all living in different countries, explain in their own language what happened to their lives when one or more of their children decided to leave. We see a Mexican mother whose son left eight years ago and refuses to disclose his whereabouts out of fear of deportation, and a Tunisian mother whose son never told her of his plans to leave, until one phone call from the airport revealed to her what she had lost. The son was too afraid of her grief to tell her to her face. The videos consist of single-shot films in which these women tell their hitherto untold stories to someone close to them.¹

Before anything else, these videos document a relationship, but not the one between maker and subject. The maker, here, is rather a facilitator, and the relationship that is documented, the one between the mother and someone close to her that has been modified by the migration of a child, is transformed in the process. The videos

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document this transformation itself, in the performance of it, on which more below. For now, I propose this installation as an “extreme” case of the potential for informing us on a deeper and more affective level that documentary holds (among other things). It changes the “what” of the content of documentary from events to the relationship itself. In my practice I have found generalizing this idea a helpful tool to approach social, political, and ethical questions.

To put briefly how these questions translate into the practice, in this case, what happened is the following. After agreeing to collaborate in the project, the mother chooses a place in her house, the clothes she wants to be filmed in, and the person to whom she talks, always someone close to her. The maker sets up the shot, switches the camera on, and leaves the room. The single-shot video remains unedited. The mother sees the tape immediately after filming and agrees to the specific distribution conditions, in this case, as an artwork to be displayed in galleries and public spaces, not on television or Internet. In cases where she cries, falls silent for a while, or gets angry, I point these effects out, explain that I won't take those moments out, and ask again if she has objections.

My initial question, which has haunted me ever since I started to make documentaries, may sound naïve: what do documentaries document? On the basis of my own practice I contend, however, that this question remains relevant. I suggest that we can benefit epistemically and socially from a relationship of *congruence* between documentaries and the societal context in which they function *qua* documentation. Taking relationality as the key characteristic of both documentaries and social life in today's essentially mixed societies will help us to deepen our understanding of the medium and its object: that which documentary documents is that double relationality.

I had never thought much about the “of what?” question until I started to make documentaries. Intuitively I began to make films, the first one simply because something happened to a neighbor, and this compelled me to buy a camera in the hope I could be a witness to the blatant injustice perpetrated by the French state. I found some young artists interested in participating, and we traveled to France to meet the family and in-laws of my neighbor, now a friend. The project grew, the friendship deeper, the film longer, and the resulting 45-minute documentary *Mille et un jours* (A Thousand and One Days) seemed to just “happen.” It marked the start of the collective Cinema Suitcase and sparked the desire to make more films. Today, I continue to make films, mostly in collaboration with Michelle Williams Gamaker, the only other remaining member of the collective.²

At first, I took the film to be a document of something that scholars had not documented (enough) – the affective fabric of intimate life. But the density of the “slice of life” and the issues it raised became much greater. For reasons it took me a long time to understand, the films have ended up being received in the art world rather than in environments such as television. This is related to the kind of documentaries they are. It is not because they are “fictionalized” – they are not, and during the last decade, the art world has been keen on documentary works *per se*. On the contrary, the films are what a conference convener once called “extreme documentary” – a

phrase I like to use adjectivally, as “extremely documentary” films. My videos are “extreme” in their documentary nature, which I explain below as an adherence to the point of view and maximal empowerment of their “subjects.”³

Mille et un jours, for example, the first documentary I (co-)made, was immediately invited for an exhibition, entitled *New Masculinities*, at the Neue Berliner Kunstverein in 2005. This exhibition included documentary and fiction film and photography. We as makers found the choice of our film, which we considered to be essentially on migration, for the topic of the exhibition rather surprising, but in the end it turned out to be a very appropriate context for the film. Many details of the film do indeed question traditional masculine roles, or rather, Western prejudices about Arab men. Hence, after finishing the film, we continued to learn from it and about it.

After a large solo exhibition in Tampere, Finland, in 2008, titled *Going the Distance*, and a smaller one in Murcia, Spain, in early 2011, called *La última frontera* (The Last Frontier), a large exhibition of all but one of my documentaries to date took place in October 2011 in Saint Petersburg. The title of that exhibition, *Towards the Other*, raises my initial question again: what do the films document? Is it that very move towards the other? Or do they in fact *perform* that move, thereby showing that documenting and performing are inseparable? My answer leans toward the latter. But saying that now is skipping several stages.

What, and For What?

My work on migratory culture – both cinematic and academic – tries to achieve two seemingly contradictory goals: to celebrate the positive aspects of the cultural transformations that migration has brought about in Western culture, and to understand, and sympathize with, migrants and the difficulties they experience upon entering Western countries. The first goal essentially targets people who are used to living in Western culture, and perceive it as, until recently, monolithically “Western.” They are sometimes ill at ease with the mass migration that they mistakenly believe is a recent phenomenon. Foregrounding the conceptual, aesthetic, and sensual pleasures these transformations offer, the videos aim to encourage a positive, indeed festive, mood. My very first documentary, *Mille et un jours*, is the best example, because here the “subject” and its performance in film overlapped strongly.

Mille et un jours (Figure 6.1) celebrates the successful attempt of a young *sans-papiers* to sort out his situation in France through marriage. Tarek came on a tourist visa from Tunisia in order to study. Due to some quirk in the administrative system we have never understood, he failed to get the student visa all his peers got, and he was in danger of being deported. This went so far that the afternoon before his registered marriage was to take place, the ceremony was canceled and the police started to hunt for Tarek. He tried a “paper marriage,” got an “arranged marriage,” and ended up being simply married – he and his bride referred to this last marriage as “the real marriage.” The marriage of the immigrant and his second-generation



Figure 6.1 Video still from *Mille et un jours* (Mieke Bal, Zen Marie, Thomas Sykora, Gary Ward, and Michelle Williams Gamaker, 2004).

French-Tunisian bride is the temporal “now” of the film. The film was shot during the celebration of the young couple’s wedding, which was at the same time a celebration of their victory over state terror. As filmmakers, we were guests at the wedding. The family embraced us with total trust. That trust was the starting point: we were bound to reciprocate it. This was the first insight into what, for me, documentary is about; what it can do in contemporary society: build and mediate trust. The idea that as filmmakers we were guests, which had practical consequences regarding what we could film, also stimulated us to reflect on the question of what documentary documents.

Trust is the ethical basis of documentary, fraught as it is with the risk of manipulation. For us, precisely by trust, by voluntarily yielding control – trusting us to make a documentary that would be truthful in their eyes – the family had surely earned their right to self-control! This is when we realized this project was about *self*-representation, hence, the power to influence the edits, and to control what they wished to say and what not, was theirs, by birthright, so to speak. We wanted the film to approximate, as much as possible, a “first-person” documentary without being one. (Lebow, 2012a) As a consequence, the so-called subjects, the people who populated the images, were actors who enacted themselves, their own stories, and determined what was going to be recorded. They chose to tell their stories to us, who had rapidly become friends, and although fully aware that the recordings were meant for a film that would have a wider audience, their engagement with the camera was personal, intimate, and confidential – features more typical of home video. What we celebrated together, in the end, was the way the film honored their celebration – the positive outcome of the main character’s long plight and the victory that empowered him as well as the community of which he was part.⁴



Figure 6.2 Video still from *Lost in Space* (Mieke Bal and Shahram Entekhabi, 2005).

The second goal of our documentaries is meant to contribute to a social climate that would benefit immigrants who feel they are met with suspicion, tension, or even outright hostility. Here, sympathy may help to change a reticent ambience into a hospitable one. This is visible in the darker moments in *Mille et un jours*, and becomes more central in *Access Denied* (2005) and *State of Suspension* (2008), which both deal with the conflict between Israel and Palestine where, in my view, paranoia towards the other is particularly strong. It is also central to *Lost in Space* (2005), a film that questions the dominance of English as the quintessential international language (Figure 6.2). In these films, too, the *relationship* between filmmakers and the people whose stories are being represented is primary, and overshadows the events on an anecdotal level. The provisional answer to my initial question, “what it is that is being documented?” would then be: the relationship between makers and subjects; and the answer to the question “what for?” – the question of the goal – would be the improvement of the relationship between the two and the different groups they represent. I am suggesting here that the “what?” and the “what for?” questions are intimately entwined. Indeed, they cannot be separated.

The relationship between makers and subjects varies enormously, however, according to the situation that is being documented. The installation *Nothing is Missing* with which I began this essay is an extreme case that demonstrates what the main issues of relationality are. Here, the self-representation, although obviously also qualified by the circumstances of filmmaking, is emphatically made primary and performative. In other instances, the relationship documented is that among the subjects themselves. In *Becoming Vera* (2008), we followed a three-year-old girl in her travels through different countries, caught between two parents with very different backgrounds and ambitions. The child resisted the identity they, and the

environment, attempted to impose on her, primarily through her imaginative relationships with very different people, situations, and stories.

Small and thus dependent as she was, she often took over, telling us to follow her fantasies. For example, after talking about ghosts in a cemetery, she told us to come with her to see the ghost with whom she had struck up a friendship. Like most children, she used fiction to strengthen her sense of self. Deploying fragments of stories that have been read to her, she transformed those into her own vision. For example, sitting on her father's knees in their home in Cameroon, she talks about pretty witches. Too quickly, her father fills in: "Like Snow White." Vera resists: "They had colors in their hair. You have to see the story with me, *I made it up*." Although the child is too young to decide upon a considered self-representation, she still manages to do so, and thus to determine the relationship between herself and her surroundings, including the filmmakers.

Of course, the relationship made visible in the documentary can be less intimate and strong than that between parents and their children. In *GLUB (Hearts)* (2004), for example, the relationship documented is that between migrants and long-term residents of Berlin as it transforms aesthetically, sensorially, and politically through a changing relationship with the urban environment itself (Figure 6.3). Here, the people appearing on screen are many, and are not related to one another. Still, relationality remains a key issue, because the trust between makers and subjects must be constantly safeguarded.⁵

I propose, then, that in an ethical practice of documentary-making in and about an unequal world, the primary object of documenting can be considered to be relationship, and that the kind of documentary this entails is determined by the kind of relationship, its poles, and the way it is performed and transformed. This relationship, different as it will be according to circumstances, subject, and subject-matter or



Figure 6.3 Video still from *GLUB (Hearts)* (Mieke Bal and Shahram Entekhabi, 2004).

topic, will always account for what happens when one person documents the lived reality of another, and where possible, foreground that accounting. Secondly, the situation documented, which largely determines that relationship, is a further object of documenting, but in my view and practice, only in the wake of the primary relationship. As a consequence, the question of documentary is no longer that of truth versus falsehood, spontaneity versus reenactment, reality versus fiction; nor that of categories of subject matter. The question of documentary resides in the performance of the relationship between maker and subjects.

This primacy of relationship I advocate is not limited to documentary. Conversely, though, this documentary aspect permeates fiction as well. Thus, our more recent film, *A Long History of Madness* (2011), which is a fiction – it is enacted by actors, and contains impossible, unreal, and explicitly fictional figures and events – is also stubbornly documentary in two respects, which concern relationality. First, in an attempt to empower the subjects, most of the dialogue comes from real, historical sources. The psychoanalytic case histories staged are based on actual session notes, and the anachronistic figures of famous “madmen” deliver lines from “their” own texts. Second, the most overtly fictional, imaginative sequences are documentary takes of staged events, but they were not staged by us as filmmakers. Two social events – a festival in Turku, Finland and a carnival in Basel, Switzerland – show collective, socio-cultural fiction-making as a mode of addressing reality, in a documentary mode that refrains from intervening in the sense of staging. The film is overtly and explicitly fictional, but this aspect cannot be opposed to the “real” subject matter of documentary.⁶

Instead, documentaries can be considered and analyzed as films that foreground relationships that are always relevant in any film, including fiction films, but that, in the kind of documentaries I am discussing here, are the primary object that is being documented. This conception of documentaries facilitates a different understanding of the genre without undermining its most crucial characteristic, which is that it presents, and offers for understanding, documentation of something real. However, on this view the “what” of that documentation is relational rather than objective or monolithic, and as such, I would like to suggest through the notion of “congruence” mentioned at the beginning, a model of and for contemporary society, as well as of and for the social relevance of art. In the current social climate, this idea is a guideline for documentaries experimenting with forms of relationality, under the name of “migratory aesthetics.” My own position, as both a Westerner and a scholar, impacts on the kind of documentaries I feel able to make. With the term “auto-theory,” then, I indicate the relation between making, seeing, and analyzing documentaries as productive and useful.

Migratory Aesthetics

The subject of all my documentaries is what I call “migratory culture.” The movement “towards the other,” as the title of the Saint Petersburg exhibition has it, implies a necessity to approach the making with openness to both form and content. The

ethical obligation to avoid prescriptive content extends to the need to let subjects determine the way they present themselves and their stories. This has consequences for the filming and, where possible, the editing. In *Mille et un jours*, we went back to the family with several drafts, and the feedback they gave us was always incorporated. In the last eight years I have made what I call “experimental documentaries,” not so much *on* as *with* migrants, or about issues pertaining to migratory culture such as “mixed” identities, language, and the strictures of the law as it impinges on everyday life. With this phrase – not on but with – I am implicitly alluding both to Johannes Fabian’s attempt to explore social meaning in his book *Power and Performance* (1990), and with Trinh T. Minh-ha’s project of “filming alongside,” from her first film *Reassemblage* (1982) onward. It cannot be a “cinema of me,” a first-person-singular documentary, but a heterogeneous first-person-plural, where tasks are divided but collaboration replaces objectification.⁷

Migration is a movement of people with an often undetermined destination and duration. While I do not wish to circumscribe the migration from which “migratory” is derived with ontologically dubious definitions, it is not the same as tourism – voluntary, usually short-term travel with a return ticket. Nor can the experiences of exile and diaspora, or of politically or economically-driven displacements, be conflated in our understanding of those phenomena. In the context of this chapter, however, I consider the traces of migration of all these kinds of displacement together, as traces of the movement of people. It is through the effort of tracing those traces, so to speak, that relationality can be shaped and foregrounded even in documentaries set in public spaces with many different people. The space in which such traces occur is “migratory” – whether one is a migrant oneself or not. This is visible in, but not limited to, public spaces, while the degrees and forms of visibility also vary greatly.⁸

From the vantage point of the countries of arrival, it is never emphasized enough that the emergent mixed societies as a result of migration have benefited enormously from the arrival of people from different cultures. Cities have become more heterogeneous, music and cinema have been enriched, and philosophy productively harnesses the potential offered by thinking along the lines of – and through metaphors relating to – what I call “migrancy.” With this modification of the word I seek to move from the actual experiences of migration to a culture where movement is standard. These metaphors can be questioned for harboring an appropriation and idealization of the condition of migrancy. On the receiving end of the migratory culture of today, then, my documentaries embrace the enrichment that newcomers bring but at the same time attempt to avoid such naïvely positive gestures.⁹

Meanwhile migrants also change, so that their double relationship to host and home countries produces an aesthetic in and of itself, which, in turn, further contributes to changes in the host countries and their cultural expressions. My project is about the aesthetics – plural – that emerge from this situation; it is not, or not necessarily, about the theme of migration itself. In the exhibition *2MOVE*, which was devoted to migratory culture and video art, some works were “about” migration, treating it as an urgent topic for reflection. Others brought the same sense of urgency to the exploration of the medium of video. Exhibited together they start

speaking to each other. For example, an abstract video by Roos Theuws that explored the difficulty of seeing and the participation of the unconscious therein, was juxtaposed to Mona Hatoum's famous *Measures of Distance* (1988). By means of that juxtaposition Theuws's allegedly purely aesthetic work gained levels of meaning that poignantly brought separation and danger to the foreground, whereas Hatoum's masterly epistolary film (see Naficy, 2001) gained a more emphatic attention to conditions of visibility.¹⁰

The term I propose for the way documentaries concerning migratory culture can be fruitfully considered, especially those made not as "first-person" auto-documents but rather as intercultural encounters, is "migratory aesthetics." Again, this term suggests congruence between the relationality in the making and that within the society from which the films emerge and which they serve, inflecting this relationality toward the specific domains of aesthetics and migrancy. In this phrase, I use "aesthetics" not so much as a philosophical domain, but rather as a term to refer, according to its Greek etymology, to a plural experience of sensate binding, a connectivity based on the senses. "Migratory" refers to the traces, equally sensate, of the movements of migration that characterize contemporary culture. Both terms are programmatic: different aesthetic experiences are offered through the encounter with such traces. Migratory aesthetics is an aesthetic of geographical mobility beyond the nation-state and its linguistic uniformity. Migratory aesthetics has a particularly overdetermined connection with the moving image.¹¹

For those who perceive these movements, the people called migrants constitute, we could say, a moving image. Like video, they form images that move. The task of the filmmaker is to actualize, also, the connotative meaning of the verb, as in (emotional) moving. Take, for example, Spanish video-maker Gonzalo Ballester, who made a documentary based on relationality, *Mimoune* (2006). The relationality is both the motivation – Ballester's desire to do something for a migrant friend – and the subject matter of his film. In line with Naficy's (2001) claim about the epistolary nature of "third cinema," in a move that turns metaphor and poetry into a literalized concretization, the artist made a video postcard or letter. He documents what Mimoune wants to say to his family, and takes it from the man who, paradoxically, cannot leave Spain, to his family in Morocco, and brings their greeting back to him. The authorship of the film is entirely Ballester's, but the relationship between him and Mimoune is foregrounded as one of friendship.

This epistolary act, a small gesture of friendship and an attempt to help, appears deceptively simple. When we realize that the artist filmed the act on different levels, what seemed an urgent form of simplicity becomes more complex. After a shot of the sea in the wake of a boat – a key image in the visualization of migration – and a view of the houses in the Moroccan countryside, Mimoune sits down in front of the camera when saying his greetings. The family greets him back, also in front of the camera. The parties seem to have very little to say to each other. The point for them, clearly, is not *what* they say but *that* they speak and see each other. The point for the filmmaker may well have been to bring this limited "video agency" to visibility. It is the act of sending videos back and forth that is less

the medium than the message itself. Thus, the epistolary aesthetic becomes thickened with layers of “video-agency.”¹²

The specific contribution that documentary as defined above, in terms of relationality, can make to the necessary affective improvement of migratory culture stems from the fact that looking at (moving) images is steeped in memory, guided by acts of remembering and forgetting. Memories of things seen, and of childhood experiences of pleasure and danger, infuse the viewing experience of anyone watching documentaries. Memory and the veil of forgetting that inevitably obscures or contradicts it is another key to migratory experience and its traces in the aesthetics of the migratory world. Memory in video often concerns someone else’s past, someone else’s memories, which as a viewer you cannot recall at all. These memories happen for the first time. Yet, they are inalienably anchored in the alter-memory or hetero-memory that the exposure to the film stages for us. This aspect makes such documentaries particularly apt for installation in exhibitions, where the viewer is master of her time, rather than, say, watching them on television where programmers set the clock.¹³

Samuel R. Delany (1995) writes on the installation aspect of video:

Two characteristics that video shares with much contemporary art, especially installation art, are a lack of permanence – the “timelessness” that for so long had seemed essential to “serious” art – and movement – that motion in excess of the contained cycles and oscillations of the mobile, the sweep of movement and image that film, video, and certain large-scale mechanisms alone can provide.

In the context of my project, these two features merge. It is the movement that makes the images impermanent, again in the dual aspect of moving within the frame, or screen, and of displaying the movement resulting from the migratory aspect of culture, with the qualifier “(emotionally) moving” as mediator between the two. Everything changes constantly, the look of space as well as the look of the collectivity that constitutes the population of cities, sports events, restaurants, and streets. This impermanence is best captured on video, itself a medium of impermanence; and thus, video is emblematic as a medium fit to examine, understand, and relate to migratory culture.

Auto-Theory

In order to learn about documentary-making and about migratory culture, about how to produce knowledge ethically and how to deploy film to do so, I consider films, including my own, as *theoretical objects*. Hubert Damisch, the creator of that term, explains in an interview with Yve-Alain Bois, that a “theoretical object”:

obliges you to do theory but also furnishes you with the means of doing it. Thus, if you agree to accept it on theoretical terms, it will produce effects around itself ... [and] forces us to ask ourselves what theory is. It is posed in theoretical terms; it produces theory; and it necessitates a reflection on theory.¹⁴

In the dynamic between the works as objects, their viewers, and the time in which these come together, accompanied by the social buzz that surrounds both, a compelling collective thought process emerges. Events of viewing are the sites of these thought processes, the tripartite theoretical activity Damisch mentions.

In the case of documentaries, these thoughts inevitably concern the relation of modesty required when one seeks to gain knowledge about others; and, apart from “first-person” documentaries in the strict sense of filmmakers documenting their own life or situation, the so-called subjects of documentaries are by definition “other” to the maker herself. To put it succinctly, documenting migratory culture requires a care to avoid all the traps of intercultural analysis, such as exoticization, reduction of individuals to numbers and statistics, or an unqualified empathic approach that comes close to or indeed enacts emotional appropriation. My alternative approach is based on three premises.

- 1 Migration and/as movement. This premise requires an understanding of migratory culture as a culture of movement, best grasped in the moving image, as well as the ways the movement of images and the movement of people mutually illuminate each other; this was the tenet of the exhibition 2MOVE.
- 2 Art as “theoretical object.” Here we must understand works of art and other material artefacts as objects that can harbor, stimulate, and compel the development of thought; this reflects my academic view of the participation of artworks in the analysis one performs “on” them.
- 3 Auto-theory. Here I introduce the reflexive modality which allows me to reconsider my own theoretical convictions in view of encounters with otherness to which I am myself a party. The term “auto-theory” indicates a form of thinking that integrates my own practice of art making as a form of thinking, and reflecting on what I have made as a continuation of the making.

These premises can only work because the videos are performative. They establish connections with people who are immersed in migratory culture but do not necessarily take critical distance from their own position in it. They are made in close collaboration with their “subjects” and deploy aesthetic experimentation in order to get closer to a shared understanding. It is in this process that the performativity can exert itself. Consider the aesthetics of everyday life in *GLUB (Hearts)*, a 31-minute video and installation on changes in the “look” of Berlin under the influence of internationalization. This starting point is a truly, literally “bottom-up” exploration, beginning with the shells of sunflower seeds on the streets of the city, to the internationalization of the art world, which has done the city a world of good.¹⁵

Mimicry, a form of envious imitation famously brought to bear on colonial discourse by Homi Bhabha (1994), is this time practiced by the earlier residents who imitate the migrants’ habit of seed-eating. The results are far-reaching and much more incisive than the humble habit can account for. Documenting this practice of mimicry further enhances the phenomenon that hitherto had passed unnoticed, so that the practice formerly seen as foreign and even “dirty” becomes a new stylish

habit, enviable and the subject of emulation. This helps along the unlearning of automatic contempt for foreignness and stimulates instead the enjoyment of novelty. Reflecting on this performativity made it possible to understand better the important contribution of “bottom-up” processes to the transformations in Western culture.

Another example of the making of documentaries on the basis of my three premises is the experimental documentary *Lost in Space* (2004) on “routine violence” – the imposition of universalized English as the sole means of international communication. Reflecting on the experimental video, the analysis demonstrated to me – as maker and then practitioner of “auto-theory” – the pain of not being able to speak, yet being forced to do so; and facing the ethical requirement of cultural translation. Three connected thoughts occurred on the basis of the many statements made by the interviewees, put together as a film. First, there was the idea of “cultural translation,” not as a specific linguistic activity but as a process that takes place all the time instead. Second, in the face of the predominance of English around the globe and the subsequent apparent homogenization with built-in inequality – a trend that must be resisted – cultural translation is ethically bound to integrate a strong sense of foreignness that estranges viewers from this seemingly self-evident homogenization. Third, the way to achieve this resistance through the preservation of foreignness is to keep visible what translation theorist Lawrence Venuti calls “the remainder.” The strong presence of the remainder guarantees an aesthetic of cultural translation that is integral to but not identical with “migratory aesthetics.” The remainder consists of, so to speak, the traces after the described emulation has attempted to naturalize them.¹⁶

In the film, this form of migratory aesthetics is made tangible through a simple but radical intervention. The film is entirely based on the deepening of the discrepancy between sound and image. First, the speakers and interviewees are presented, with their names, professions, and provenance. Then, their statements are presented, both through voice and through large subtitles that traverse the entire frame. As a backdrop to these texts, which due to their scale work like slogans rather than subtitles, images of disturbing cityscapes of Berlin tell the story of the increasing xenophobia in Western European cities. These three levels of representation, kept apart rather than brought together in the normal cinematic synchronization, make the film experimental in more ways than one. It is formally different from the norm; it is un-unified and it refuses to pronounce.¹⁷

A third “case study” of auto-theory would be a reflection on the difficulty of visual representation in a cultural clash between iconophobia and iconophilia. An Irish filmmaker and a Palestinian student set out to film the latter on his first visit back home to Gaza (*Access Denied*, 2004). When Amsterdam doctoral student Ihab Saloul embarked on his first trip “home” to Gaza after four years of exile, he wanted to bring a witness. He thought there would be such dramatic changes that he said he could use two pairs of eyes to see it, and friendly support to bear it. Also, the changes he expected to see would make a record of the moment such as the filmmaker could provide, a useful *aide-mémoire* (Figure 6.4).

That project stalled when filmmaker Gary Ward was denied access to Israel, for no other reason than that he held an Irish passport. Not that he would ever have



Figure 6.4 Video still from *Access Denied* (Mieke Bal, Thomas Sykora, and Gary Ward, 2004).

gotten into Gaza – in this sense the expectation of the project was naïve. This prohibition also amounted to a prohibition of the development of an intercultural friendship. This dual prohibition – to take sustenance in friendship and to record a fast-disappearing livable place called “home” – became a performative symbol of the difficulty of understanding across cultural divides. This impasse, then, rather than the filmed family reunion, became the subject of this film.

The theoretical question, then, remains: are there any solutions other than cultural transgression to the difficulties of such representation? And to what extent do these solutions do justice to the difficulty itself? Rather than answering this question with a monolithic view that can only belie the complex reality, the film poses that question. Its form – a duality of imagery during the middle part of the film, where the images from Gaza, transferred from NTSC footage, alternate with, and are visibly different in quality than the ones where Gary kills his time waiting for his return flight as a tourist in Egypt – poses the insuperable quality of the conflict.¹⁸

Performing Contact Against All Odds

To do “auto-theory” in this sense – to learn from making documentaries while challenging the traditional interpretation of the genre – it is inevitable to call on the notion of interdisciplinarity. Here, this notion is extended to comprise intermediality as well. My final example argues for a cautious deployment of interdisciplinarity in our thinking about documentary and the issues this “genre” can proffer.¹⁹ My example concerns psychology or, as is frequent in the humanities, the invocation of psychoanalysis. The first woman I filmed for the installation *Nothing Is Missing*, Tunisian

Massaouda Mehdi, offers a striking instance of a culturally specific reluctance that cautions us against psychologizing or psychoanalyzing her. Not coincidentally, this is at the most explicitly performative moment of the video.

The situation is this: Massaouda and her new daughter-in-law, Ilhem Ben-Ali Mehdi, get along very well indeed. But in their relationship remains the stubborn gap that immigration policies have dug. When Ilhem married Massaouda's youngest son in Sens, France, the mother was not allowed to attend the wedding: the French authorities had denied her a visa to travel from Tunisia to France. Hence, not only had Massaouda not been in a position to meet Ilhem before the wedding, to witness who she was, but even more egregiously, she had not been able to fulfill her maternal role as her culture prescribes it, which is to help her son choose his bride. At some point, Ilhem ends up asking with some insistence what Massaouda had thought of her when they first met, after the choice had been made without her and she had been unable to have a say in the matter.²⁰

First, Massaouda does not answer, which makes Ilhem anxious enough to push the question: did she find her ugly, plain? The older woman looks away at this point. The young woman insists. We will never know what Massaouda "really" felt, but the power that the filming bestows on her, as if in compensation for her earlier disempowerment, is to either withhold or give her approval. She does the latter, but only after some teasing. When I saw the tape and understood the speech I was convinced Ilhem would normally never have been allowed to ask this question and thus vent her anxiety – an intuition she later confirmed. Hence, Ilhem was empowered by the filmic situation as well. As for the mother, she was given and then exercised the power she had been denied, and she used it to first mark the gap, then to help her somewhat insecure daughter-in-law (Figure 6.5).²¹

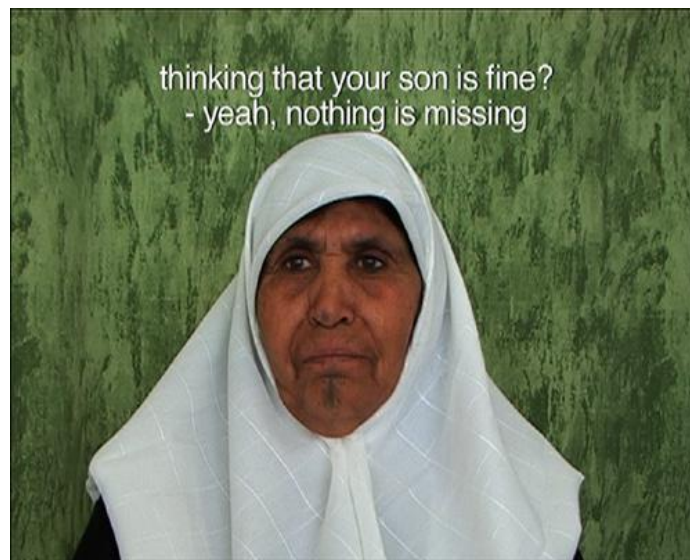


Figure 6.5 Video still with Massaouda Mehdi from *Nothing Is Missing* (Mieke Bal, 2006–2010).

“We” – global, mostly Western, adult viewers – can easily relate to this moment. This potential for identification helps us overcome the tendency to “othering.” Such insecurity, for example, can easily be construed as universal, with the unconscious as provenance. This interaction between Massaouda and Ilhem is, however, thoroughly social, performative, as well as culturally specific (to migratory culture, not Tunisian or Arab), but also bound to the medium of video – to the making of the film. Whether or not there is something in Ilhem’s childhood as the oldest daughter of migrant parents that has made her insecure, what matters is that the situation of migration directly gave both women cause to enact this moment. The scene does not allow for a universalizing psychoanalytic interpretation. That would not only be futile, but it would be overstepping the bounds of the modesty the relationship of trust required. Precisely because the trust lifted all limitations of access, the compulsory other side must be modesty. It would also overlook the cultural constraints that enabled the conversation, and the migratory alterations that allowed for its excesses, or “remainders.”

As a maker I did not have any influence on this occurrence – it was not my “intention”; I was not even there when it happened. We cannot construe it either as a realistic, documentary moment in the sense of Richard Brilliant’s Gadamerian analysis of portraiture (1991), where an “occasion” was recorded – it would never have happened outside of the situation of video-making. Thus, it contradicts and suspends the universalizing myths of realism and documentary “truth,” thereby bracketing common views of documentary itself as well.²²

This moment goes against the traditional expectations regarding documentary. At the same time, it is “extremely documentary” in nature, because it is in the documenting itself that it happened. There would never have been an external reality the film could have documented. It is a moment, in other words, that was staged, yet real, thus thoroughly challenging that distinction. We cannot pinpoint a psyche offering symptoms for interpretation. For this to happen there was, instead, a need for a culturally specific relationship between two women related by marriage and separated by the gaps of migration, and for a relationship to the medium that allowed the women to overstep cultural boundaries. If, after this realization, the potential for identification with a young woman’s insecurity remains actualized, so much the better.

Thus, I felt compelled to extend my willful abandon of mastery from the filming to the editing, to the installation, and to the critical discourse I am offering – the reflection on what I have learned from this experimental filmmaking. An installation of voices, intermingling and alone, and of faces facing women none of them has ever seen: I did this, but I could not master how I did it. I did not edit the tape, left translating it to the people concerned, and relied on local curators for the installations of this project.²³

The making of art, in other words, is not an instance, an example to illustrate an academic point, nor an elevated form of cultural expression. Instead of these two things, which are equally problematic for a productive confrontation with the alleged otherness of migratory culture, it is a form of *facilitation*, so that things can happen

in intercultural contact that would not easily occur otherwise. I propose the validity of the performance in its non-universal singularity, including, for instance, the moment of slight tension between Massaouda and Ilhem. The performative moment is the product of an act of filmmaking that required the absence, or in other cases, passivity of the filmmaker.²⁴

Of course, this yielding is itself still steeped in a position of power. But this is not opposed to the power held by the participants. For, it also required the willful surrender of the two women to the apparatus standing between them and its cultural status. This surrender entailed a cultural transgression – to ask, and insist on, a question that would be unspeakable in the culture of origin. This, more than her linguistic pronunciation of Arabic as a second language, is Ilhem’s “accent,” in the sense in which Hamid Naficy (2001) evocatively uses that term. The “accent” emblemizes the productive, innovative, and enriching potential of intercultural, that is, migratory life. In this case, it could occur thanks to the absence of the filmmaker – but also of the two husbands – and the situation of displacement for both women. This interaction – between the people performing and the critic reflecting on how to understand what they did – happened outside of any psychological pressure, and should not be reframed in a psychoanalytic context, for example, that would stifle the beauty of it.

This is as useful a lesson for a scholar interested in interdisciplinarity as any. It takes us out of the somewhat despairing “anything goes” posture that the flag of interdisciplinarity seems to cover too often (and which the use of the indifferent term “multidisciplinarity” betrays). The insight is the result of the shift from an essentialist concept of culture as static to a performative, confrontational concept of what we are better off calling “the cultural.” In this adoption of Fabian’s concept of culture as a process of contestation (2001), and in analogy to Mouffé’s distinction between politics and the political (2005), I see a possibility to articulate an intimate cultural dynamic in the globalized world: the intercultural, then.

This adds a retrospective gloss on the contrasting out-of-sync-ness as aesthetic principle in *Lost in Space*. Massaouda’s and Ilhem’s performance of intercultural contact was done on the basis of a close collaboration of the face and the word. Indeed, the spoken word is central to a performance of contact across divisions as well as to the installation. The word is deployed in an attempt to turn a condescending act of “giving voice” into an affirmation of our need to be given that voice. More directly than film, video binds the images we see to the sounds we hear. In *Nothing Is Missing*, that sound is primarily and almost exclusively the human voice and the spoken words it utters. Speech, then, becomes the occasion for a positive deployment of interdisciplinarity, one that operates through intermediality. To underline its importance regardless of the question of languages and their understandability, translations of the women’s speeches are foregrounded in two ways.

One foregrounding of translation is the placement of subtitles as “supra-titles,” above the faces. Thus, I seek to emphasize the importance of speech in relation to the face – it is easier to read and see in this way. Second, idiomatic phrases are translated literally as long as they can be understood. This is to foreground the “remainder”;

and conversely, the fact that English is a tool, a prosthesis the viewer needs, rather than the “natural” language it is so often seen to be. This makes the discrepancy between sound and image in *Lost in Space* more meaningful, and certain translation decisions in the other films become part of an aspect of documentary – to document relationality itself – that is more striking.

Through these examples I would like to propose the effectivity of documentary, not to get at the truth but to achieve perceptual change: in the making, in the viewing, in the reflection. In each example discussed here a different issue arises that bears on academic questions, on issues of the medium and of documentary as a genre, as much as on social ones. It is the refusal to separate these three domains as different “levels” that informs my thinking about documentary. Lately, this practice has been recognized as such, when the 2011 exhibition of these films in the Museum of the History of Saint Petersburg was not only titled after the effort to make and consider documentary as performative of relationality – *Towards the Other* – but also, since it was commissioned and organized by an institute belonging to a university, seen as academically, as much as artistically, relevant.²⁵

If documentaries are meant to document something, the object of documentation is not, or not necessarily, the situation described. They are also, simultaneously, agents of the act of documenting as well as of the point of doing so, rather than documents of a slice of reality. It seems obvious that the act of documenting a social situation is performatively invested in producing change in that situation – perceptual, conceptual, political, and indeed behavioral. The question is how that change might be produced. In my view – and in my practice – this is not, as might be expected, by describing, and where necessary, indicting a situation of which the public, once properly informed, is hoped to change its opinion. An endeavor like this, while sometimes useful in fields such as journalism, might also come close to propaganda.

Instead, the practice of filming itself, with its aspects of encounter and contact, performs the change. It is this change that, once visible, entices viewers to participate and expand that change to their own lives. This, I speculate, is why the films have found their outlet in art circuits, rather than in those information circuits like television where journalism is the primary model and knowledge the goal. However, to allude to a phrase Freud used to explain the workings of psychoanalysis, insight alone can never be enough.

Notes

- 1 For more on this project, see Bal (2012).
- 2 Cinema Suitcase consisted of three other members: Zen Marie, Thomas Sykora, and Gary Ward. The collective may have dispersed due to migratory events, but its mode of collective filmmaking has had a decisive influence on Michelle’s and my practices of making. For information on my own documentaries, see <http://www.miekebal.org/artworks/films>; for Michelle’s other video work, see <http://www.michellewilliamsgamaker.com/works.html>.

- 3 The phrase “extremely documentary” was used in an invitation letter from Mark Reinhardt for a conference of documentary makers in 2006. I immediately took to it, feeling it explains quite precisely the paradoxes of my work. The title *Towards the Other* was primarily chosen for its translatability into Russian. But for my purpose here, it does express an indication of what is at stake in documentary-making. When I write “solo exhibition,” I refer to shows where I was personally asked to select the films to be included. Obviously, since filmmaking is never a solo activity and I have nearly always worked with others, there are by definition multiple authors involved. All information on co-authors is on the website (see n. 2).
- 4 Home video is characteristically profoundly different from other forms of video in that the subjects respond, not to the camera but to the person behind the camera. See Moran (2002). Of all my documentary works, *Separations* (2009) is the most clearly based on a home-video aesthetic. The film explores the havoc wrought by transgenerational traumatization in a migrant family where the specter of the Holocaust still lingers.
- 5 On *Becoming Vera*, see Bal (2009). *GLUB (Hearts)* is both a film and a larger video installation consisting of eight screens, props, and the film itself. On this project, see Bal (2005) and Aydemir (2008).
- 6 For this project, which also comprises exhibitions, see www.crazymothermovie.com and <http://www.miekebal.org/artworks/exhibitions/landscapes-of-madness>.
- 7 With Miguel Á. Hernández-Navarro, I have curated a traveling group exhibition that explored the different meanings of the notion of “migratory culture” for filmmaking. The videos in the exhibition all played with, but could not be captured under the label of documentary. The exhibition catalogue includes a DVD which contains clips of all the works. See Mieke Bal and Miguel Á. Hernández-Navarro (2008). For a discussion of first person singular and plural, see Alisa Lebow (2012a).
- 8 For a very helpful analysis of the definitions of these terms, see James Clifford (1997: 244–278). On tourism, see Jonathan Culler (1988: 153–167). On invisible, hard-to-notice, and emerging traces, see Bal (2005).
- 9 For migration and cinema, see Hamid Naficy (2001). For migrancy and philosophy, see Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1988). For an incisive critique of naïvely positive gestures, see Inge E. Boer (2006). Paul Patton (2006) offers an understanding of Deleuze’s – but not his followers’ – use of notions such as nomadism and migration as not metaphoric.
- 10 *2MOVE* was such an exhibition of videos speaking to one another (Bal and Hernández-Navarro, 2008). The 2012 exhibition *Estranjerías* in MUAC, Mexico City, in which I participated, is another example. That exhibition was curated by Néstor García Canclini and Andréa Giunta.
- 11 The notion of aesthetics as sensorial engagement is loosely derived from Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (1970). The connection between the movement of people and the moving image, on which *2MOVE* was based, is more generally discussed. See, e.g., Kaes (1998) and, analyzed in more detail, Lebow (2012b).
- 12 For the idea of an epistolary aesthetic, see Naficy (2001). For this video, see http://www.gonzaloballester.com/?page_id=9, accessed July 22, 2014.
- 13 On this conception of memory as a politically active intervention in the present, see Miguel Á. Hernández-Navarro (2012).
- 14 Bois, Hollier, and Krauss (1998: 8). Damisch’s concept of the theoretical object sometimes seems to suggest these are objects around which theories have been produced.

At other times, as in the interview quoted here, he attributes to the artwork the capacity to motivate, entice, and even compel thought. It is this meaning of the term that I endorse.

- 15 On this project, see Murat Aydemir (2008: 7–25). The benefits of the internationalization of the art world do not, of course, neutralize the problems (such as exploitation, undue generalizations, and tokenism) that accompany this phenomenon as well.
- 16 See Lawrence Venuti (1994: 214–215; 1995; and, for the depth of the consequences of this view, 1996).
- 17 On *Lost in Space*, see my “auto-theoretical” essay (Bal, 2007). On cultural translation in general, see Mieke Bal and Joanna Morra (2007).
- 18 On the many issues pertaining to Palestinian cultural memory, see Saloul’s analysis (2012). In another video, *State of Suspension*, we approached the conflict through comedy, in an attempt to break out of the routine indictments and effectuate a stronger impact on the viewer.
- 19 The question of interdisciplinarity is too complex to broach here. See my article on this through a work by video artist Eija-Liisa Ahtila (Bal, 2011c); and on the issue more in general my book *Thinking in Film* (2013).
- 20 When Massaouda was denied a visa to attend her son’s wedding – the one central in *Mille et un jours* – I decided to visit her, and this was the beginning of the project.
- 21 The situation is further explored through *Mille et un jours* in Bal (2011a).
- 22 For a more complex view of portraiture, see Ernst van Alphen (2005: 21–47).
- 23 This yielding has in fact fine-tuned the project as it developed. Each installation taught me more about the local migratory culture in the country where the installation took place. At the same time, the unpredictable “look” of the installation also “documents” the constant transformation and the local–global tension in each of the cultural settings.
- 24 Perhaps it is useful for some readers to recall the basic three sources of this concept of performativity: John Austen, Jacques Derrida, and Judith Butler. For an excellent account, see Jonathan Culler (2006: 137–165).
- 25 See the catalogue (Veits, 2011). I am deeply grateful to the director of the NIP, Mila Chevalier, for her initiative that broke the boundary between academic and artistic projects.

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