Culture and Politics

Identity and Conflict in a Multicultural World

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Photograph by Reinhart Cosaert, Moskou 1994

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'Flow Between Fact and Fiction': Analysis of Identity Dynamics in Visual Representation

An van Dienderen

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Introduction

The picture presented on page 116 is the 'original' print of the image reproduced on the cover. At this point in the fabrication of the volume, I have no idea as to what the impact of the mode of production on the photo might be. The decisions made by the editors, the graphic designer, the marketing team, and others are left in the 'interval' between the moment when I write and the moment when the reader perceives the book. In this interval decisions are taken, meaning will flow, and perceptions change. Yet I want to start this contribution by analysing the differences between both pictures, since it seems a reflective way to roughly take up some of the issues elaborated in what follows. I therefore invite the reader to compare and weigh the importance of the changes.

What attracted me in viewing the image was the immediate closeness of the conversation between the man and the woman: the daily sharing of some thoughts, the movement of the man's head towards the woman as a way to make their space more intimate. But on a closer look, I noticed that what is in focus is not this cosy gathering, for the faces of the people are somewhat vague; it is the background: the wall with the two torn advertisements, the window with the reflection of a strip light. It becomes clear that the space defined by this sharpness of focus is a public space. It might be a bus, a train, or an airport hall. What this image suggests, then, is a moment grasped and defined by the communal character of the space. The tension between the intimacy of the two, and the sharpness of the background, is what makes this picture interesting. Public spaces are generally laden with cultural meanings, where the identity construction of a community takes place. Even though in recent times the analysis

might be slightly different, as public spaces seem more segmented and priva-
tised than they were decades ago, there is still a sense of marking going on. This
marking or labelling throws us immediately into the discussion with which
Pinxten and Verstraete started this volume. Shall we perceive this image as typ-
ically Russian, as the advertisements seem to suggest? Can we treat this image
as a vehicle that is filled with ideological issues? Seemingly, this image is apt to
do so. With the advertisements written in Russian but representing the Statue
of Liberty, one can embark on topics such as the Cold War, power relations and
deterritorialisation.[1] One could suggest that the hats indicate a cold climate,
thus referring to Russia. Obviously, this kind of argument is rather weak in try-
ing to classify a cultural identity. One may also argue that the central position
of the persons is a typically Western approach of depicting figural scenes. How-
ever, as the aforementioned authors argue, the culturality dimension is only one
of the parameters in defining identity dynamics. In this case, the identity of the
people photographed is not only marked by the supposedly Russian characters
– that would be a reduction of the perception induced by the image. The nar-
rative of public spaces also consistently marks the persons. The public space is
recognisable by all who have experienced urban environments and this identi-
fication might start off a sociological analysis. Moreover, the psychological and
gender traits of this image are familiar to the viewers: the performances
expressed by this man and woman construct a space of conversation which is
common and so will be recognisable to many.

The picture on the cover and the one next to this article differ, although the
image in itself is the same. The mode of production has shifted the interpreta-
tion. Is this an important shift? Do these differences change the reading of the
image? Of course they do: a colour that is added, a shift in composition, a blur-
ring of sharpness, all change the perception of an image drastically. In this
example, the difference between the two images is such that the one on the
cover is reduced to a mere illustration. The image next to this article is a com-
plex reading that can be started with the shift in focus of the lens, defining a
communal space, which leads to a composite identity dynamics characterised
by urban, cultural and psychological elements, among others. The image on the
cover has lost this complexity because it is impossible to view this shift in
focus. Due to the blurring of the print and the reduction in focus, the viewer
cannot see that there is an interesting tension between the people and their
environment. The identity represented in this image is mainly characterised by
its 'Russianness', the cultural identity marker to which the complexity of the
picture as a whole has been reduced.

The above analysis is an example of the impact of the mode of production on
identity dynamics in visual representations. As Pinxten and Verstraete argue,
identity construction is based on the interplay of narratives and labels within a
certain sociocultural context. In this view, labels are fixed identity markers and
narratives are constantly mobile through the dynamics caused by the inter-
twining of fact and fiction. This contribution complements their theory on iden-
tity dynamics, in dealing with the dense and rich relationship between the
construction of identities and the influence of visual media, particularly docu-

mentaries. The construction of the self (of an individual, a group, a community) and the construction of selves in visual representations are highly interlaced.

Arjun Appadurai provides a solid ground for the examination of the impact of electronic media in relation to migration, deterritorialisation and 'self-making': 'The importance of media is not so much as direct sources of new images and scenarios for life possibilities but as semiotic diacritics of great power, which also inflect social contact with the metropolitan world facilitated by other channels' (Appadurai 1996: 53). In order to further scrutinise this tangible affiliation between identity dynamics and visual representation, I will explore the mode of production of documentaries as a site of critique. Most often the mode of production is not taken into account: what is shown is perceived as real, as factual. The question of how the footage is filmed and edited is usually not traceable in the documentary itself. My aim is to look for methodological strategies in documentary production in which the mode of production functions as a site where the viewer can question the identity dynamics produced in the film. To legitimate methodological perspectives it is necessary to scrutinise the image itself. This research starts from the inherent *underspecification* of the visual. I will first present two paradigms on this important aspect of the image in order to contextualise the analysis of documentary footage. Thereafter I will turn to some methodological strategies developed in the seminars on visual anthropology at Ghent University, which were organised by Rik Pinxten and myself.

One paradigm is offered by the relativists Nelson Goodman and Catherine Elgin (1988). These authors developed a challenging theory in which they differentiate symbolic systems: representational or pictorial, linguistic and notational systems (1988: 9). They offer a comparison between those systems based on semantic and syntactic qualities by which the open tokenness of images is established. Cognitive linguists Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner have conceived another paradigm. Their theory on 'mental spaces' (Fauconnier, Lakoff and Sweetser 1994, Fauconnier 1997, Fauconnier and Turner 1999) offers challenging perspectives which allow for analyses of documentary as a blend between mode of production, content and form on the one hand, and a blend between fact and fiction on the other.

The Underspecification of Visual Representation

> *I will explain how a focus on visuality as such is really the first step toward dismantling of the classic epistemological foundations of anthropology and ethnography.*
> Rey Chow, *Primitive Passions*, p. 179

At the heart of the discussion on how to think of a methodological framework for representing others in images, there are several epistemological assumptions waiting to be challenged. One is on anthropology. Urged by Appadurai's invitation to anthropology to open up to cultural studies,[2] a redefinition of the disci-

pline in function of the relationship between the world and word is being proposed (Appadurai 1996: 51–52):

> ... *word* can encompass all forms of textualized expression and *world* can mean anything from the means of production and the organisation of life-worlds to the globalized relations of cultural reproduction discussed here. Cultural studies conceived this way could be the basis for a cosmopolitan (global? macro? translocal?) ethnography. ... What the new style of ethnography can do is to capture the impact of deterritorialization on the imaginative resources of lived, local experiences. Put another way, the task of ethnography now becomes the unravelling of a conundrum: what is the nature of locality as a lived experience in a globalized, deterritorialized world?

Visuals and electronic mass media provide possible links between the different states of locality. The rich potentiality and importance of visuals in the construction of the self, on the one hand, and the formation of sodalities through those media, on the other, are important challenges to anthropology (Appadurai 1996: 7). Moreover, these transformations confront anthropology with the limitations of its methodologies in relation to the 'world'. It is not only the 'word' that is fruitful in exploring human transactions. Other types of symbol systems should be methodologically explored. According to Sarah Pink (2001: 5):

> social sciences should, as Mac Dougall has suggested, 'develop alternative objectives and methodologies' ... rather than attaching the visual to existing methodological principles and analytical frames. This means abandoning the possibility of a purely objective social science and rejecting the idea that the written word is essentially a superior medium of ethnographic representation. While images should not necessarily replace words as the dominant mode of research or representation, they should be regarded as an equally meaningful element of ethnographic work.

The Relativistic Approach

Goodman and Elgin (1988: 4) support a relativistic approach to epistemology. According to these authors, epistemology comprises understanding or cognition in all of its modes – including perception, depiction, and emotion as well as description:

> The mind ... is actively engaged in perception just as it is in other modes of cognition. Moreover, things do not present themselves to us in any privileged vocabulary or system of categories. We have and use a variety of vocabularies and systems of categories that yield different ways in which things can be faithfully represented or described. Nothing about a domain favours one faithful characterization of its objects over others. To choose among them requires knowing how the several systems function. (Goodman and Elgin 1988: 6–7)

Important then is to compare the symbolic systems and to evaluate their differences. The authors argue that an object can be presented in different symbolic systems: representational or pictorial, linguistic and notational (ibid.: 9). Comparison between those systems is based on their semantic and syntactic quali-

ties. An important difference between pictorial systems and linguistic systems is the alphabet: languages have an alphabet, pictorial systems do not. Linguistic signs spelt in the same way are syntactic equivalents. Pictorial elements, on the other hand, can be similar but cannot be considered as syntactic equivalents. Therefore languages are syntactically differentiated, representational systems are syntactically dense. As far as semantics go, both of the systems are dense: which means there are many ways offered by both systems to describe a certain object. Goodman and Elgin claim that these semantic and syntactic differences are important because they influence the manner in which the systems are producing an order (1988: 9–13). As languages are syntactically differentiated, the exact repetition of articulation and inscription is possible. Representational systems are syntactically and semantically dense. A pictorial representation of an object can refine infinitely but loses a strict and precise description. There is no such thing as a visual alphabet to allow for the exact comparison of units. An image can therefore be described as an open token, a text cannot. The underspecification of visual representation is thus at the core of its characteristics:

> It is worth emphasizing that there is no single or 'correct' answer to the question, 'What does this image mean?' or 'What is this ad saying?' Since there is no law which can guarantee that things will have 'one, true meaning', or that meanings won't change over time, work in this area is bound to be interpretative – a debate between, not who is 'right' and who is 'wrong', but between equally plausible, though sometimes competing and contesting, meanings and interpretations. The best way to 'settle' such contested readings is to look again at the concrete example and try to justify one's 'reading' in detail in relation to the actual practices and forms of signification used, and what meanings they seem to you to be producing. (Stuart Hall in Rose 2001: 2)

Blending Fields

> Blends allow very generally for what Talmy (1995) calls *fictive* constructions, which are cognitively efficient because they remain linked to the relevant input spaces, so that inferences, emotions, and such can be transferred back and forth. 'Fictivity' is a crucial component of cognition and shapes everyday thought – scientific and artistic alike. (Fauconnier 1997: 164)

Gilles Fauconnier, George Lakoff, Eve Sweetser and Mark Turner have developed a theory of language from a cognitive point of view. This view is embedded in empirical experiments and investigates the evidence for basic mental operations that underlie language and which are indispensable to human understanding. It therefore goes 'beyond both a philological interest in the history of words and a formal interest in the patterns of grammar' (Fauconnier and Turner 1999: 416). In comparison with linguistic research, where the focus is on the structure of the signal itself (the language), they perceive language data as a way to access the nonlinguistic constructions to which the signal is connected (Fauconnier 1997: 4). The aim is to research the rich meaning constructions upon which language operates. The science of language they present

breaks away from a type of research centred exclusively on syntax and phonology, and instead concentrates on analysing meaning construction. The latter 'refers to the high-level, complex mental operations that apply within and across domains when we think, act or communicate. The domains are also mental and they include background cognitive and conceptual models, as well as locally introduced mental spaces, which have only partial structure' (Fauconnier 1997: 1). Instead of assuming a priori and everyday-life conceptions of how human beings reason, talk and interact, this approach takes into account cultural and situational data as well as computational and biological evidence, in view of discovering some of the models, principles of organisation, and biological mechanisms that may be at work.

'Language, as we know it, is a superficial manifestation of hidden, highly abstract, cognitive constructions. Essential to such construction is the operation of structure projections between domains' (Fauconnier 1997: 34). One of these structure projections is mapping. In the most general mathematical sense of the term, mapping refers to defining a correspondence between two sets by assigning to each element in the first, a counterpart in the second (ibid.: 1). 'There has been mounting evidence for the central role played by various kinds of mapping at the very heart of natural language semantics and everyday reasoning' (Ibid.: 8–9). Other cognitive operations are analogy, metaphor, mental modelling, categorisation, framing and conceptual blending.

'Essential to the understanding of cognitive construction is the characterization of the domains over which projection takes place. Mental spaces are the domains that discourse builds up to provide a cognitive substrate for reasoning and for interfacing with the world' (Fauconnier 1997: 34). Mental spaces (Fauconnier, Lakoff and Sweetser 1994) are partial structures that proliferate when we think and talk, allowing for a fine-grained partitioning of our discourse and knowledge structure (Fauconnier 1997: 11). Mappings link mental spaces in several ways to construct meaning.[3] However, a description may originate in many mental spaces. Therefore a given sentence does not have a fixed set of readings; rather, it has a generative potential for producing a set of interpretations with respect to any discourse mental-space configuration (ibid.: 58). Moreover, 'The multiple possibilities do not stem from structural or logical ambiguities of the *language form;* they stem from its *space-building potential*: The language form contains *underspecified* instructions for space building' (Fauconnier 1997: 65; italics in the original). Thus, mental-space constructions generally deal with a considerable amount of underspecification in the process of meaning construction. There are no precise indications of properties; they are negotiable in further elaborations of the conversation (ibid.: 159).

Meaning can also be constructed through conceptual blending. 'Blending is in principle a simple operation, but in practice gives rise to myriad possibilities. It operates in two input mental spaces to yield a third space, the *blend*. The blend *inherits partial structure* from the input spaces and has *emergent structure* of its own' (Fauconnier 1997: 149). 'It plays a role in grammar, semantics, discourse, meaning, visual representation, mathematics, jokes, cartoons, and poetry. It is indispensable to the poetics of literature because it is fundamental

to the poetics of mind' (Fauconnier and Turner 1999: 417). Blending is not restricted to language. It is common in visual representation, where it evokes conceptual blends (Fauconnier and Turner 1999: 406). Visuals in this approach are thus considered data, such as language evidence, in order to analyse the nonlinguistic constructions to which the signal is connected. As Shweta Narayan (2000: 47) notes in her study on conceptual mappings in *The Sandman* of Neil Gaiman: 'Again, this Case Study shows that visual manipulation of conceptual mappings in Comics is extremely sophisticated. It involves methods of evoking frames and creating mappings that cannot be exploited to the same extent in spoken language, and can therefore tell us something about conceptual mappings that language cannot reveal.'

Challenging about this is that the authors provide us with a theory on how to ground blended spaces. As Narayan remarks, in a genre like comics, different spaces within the representation can be blended to form a space which exceeds the meaning construction of the separate spaces: 'The three types of linguistic input (narrative boxes, speech bubbles and sound effects) are, therefore, blended with the visual space…' (Narayan 2000: 23). In this sense, the question is not whether there exists a hierarchy between words and images, but how the mind forms conceptual blends to construct meaning through several mental spaces induced by different data, and what this meaning construction might signify in the 'real' world. This view on the underspecification and the space-building potential of both words and images offers a refreshing challenge to the discussion. Throughout this article I will present some concrete examples of how this theory can be applied in the analysis of visual representation.

The Mode of Production as a Site of Critique

Analysis of Documentary Images

In view of these observations, it would prove interesting to analyse the use of documentary images. How do documentary filmmakers, television makers and the audience treat this underspecification of the image? And what is the significance of exploring the mode of production in this context?

Flow Between Fact and Fiction

> Inevitably, the distinction between fact and fiction blurs when claims about reality get cast as narratives. We enter a zone where the world put before us lies between one not our own and one that very well might be, between a world we may recognize as a fragment of our own and one that may seem fabricated from such fragments, between indexical (authentic) signs of reality and cinematic (invented) interpretations of this reality. (I use *indexical* to refer to signs that bear a physical trace of what they refer to, such as fingerprint, X ray, or photograph). (Nichols 1994: ix)

Documentary images are imbedded in an intangible relationship between the real and the imaginary. The mode of production is most often omitted. In this sense, the reconstruction of the real (this fiction) is perceived as fact. A deeply

rooted confusion exists between the presented and the experienced reality, which blurs the urge for scrutiny. Because of the referential or indexical quality, images are wrongly taken for reality and, therefore, the production or constructionist level that is located between the experienced reality and the representation is neglected. The mode of production that allows for a representation of the reality is not taken into account because of the referential interpretation of images. As a result, the analysis of the process of identification in the visual system is much more complex than it appears at first sight. Conceptual blending offers an explanation for perceiving represented or filmed reality as the real: the content of those images is frame-blended with the form whereby the form only induces the cognition of the 'real', whether or not the form is actually factual. The typical documentary techniques are then blended with their 'original' content, which is claiming to reveal reality 'as it really happened'.[4]

> The very authenticity of the image testifies to the use of source material from the present moment, not the past. This presents the threat of disembodiment: the camera records those we see on screen with indexical fidelity, but these figures are also ghosts or simulacra of others who have already acted out their past. (Nichols 1994: 4)[5]

I used a super8 camera in my film *Visitors of the Night* (1998) to illustrate the reactions of the Mosuopeople in China on my digital camera. The super8 images can therefore be presented as more 'real', more authentic in relation to the mode of production of this film as they evoke the scene of filmmaking. However, the medium itself (super8) can work as an imaginary process, evoking memories of the early 1970s when it was used to produce home movies. The super8 images filmed on location in China projected this nostalgic remembrance of (Western) time past. The complexity thus created reveals an approach to the real in a multilayered way. It refuses to perceive reality as a good–bad fiction. 'A documentary aware of its own artifice is one that remains sensitive to the flow between fact and fiction' (Trinh 1990: 89).

Reconstruction Through Narratives

> [Narrative] is a means of symbolizing events without which their historicality cannot be indicated… because historicality itself is both a reality and a mystery. All narratives display this mystery and at the same time foreclose any inclination to despair over the failure to solve it by revealing what might be called its form in 'plot' and its content in the meaning with which the plot endows what would otherwise be mere event. Insofar as events and their aspects can be 'explained' by the methods of the sciences, they are, it would seem, thereby shown to be neither mysterious nor particularly historical. What can be explained about historical events is precisely what constitutes their non- or ahistorical aspect. What remains after events have been explained is both historical and meaningful insofar as it can be understood. And this remainder is understandable insofar as it can be 'grasped' in a symbolization, that is, shown to have the kind of meaning with which plots endow stories. (Hayden White, cited in Nichols 1994: 3)

In textual forms methodologies of critiques are inscribed within. Self-reflective methods, a bibliographical list, footnotes etc. are developed to present to the

reader a frame of reference in order to be able to judge the work. The account-ability of the scientist can be located through these different strategies. In visual systems of representation, those critical forms are lacking. A subject filmed does not have a forum to question the standpoint of the director. The viewer is not ini-tiated in the mode of production. There is no space within a visual system of representation to question those production aspects. The importance of the matter becomes obvious when one imagines the consequences of the mode of production, the selectivity, the framing, and the impact of the film crew on the 'raw' material. These aspects are essentially inherent to the production of film.

Additionally, a film project is deeply rooted in an economical framework, where decisions need to be taken for reasons of audience ratings, entertainment qualities, funding, etc. When I was working as a documentary maker for the National Television in Belgium, I once was asked to make a piece on immi-grants in search of a home. Before I started, the editorial staff gave me a written scenario in which the struggles of a veiled woman living with her ten children in a small house were described. 'This is the family we need.' The experience taught me that first a script is written down in order to guarantee funding, and then a researcher is approached and assigned to find the character on display. In other words, because of economic restrictions, the filmed reality needs to be remodelled. As a result, documentary images are generally interpreted in a con-ventional way. These conventions are mainly based upon systems of belief of dominant cultural groups. Political relations are reflected in those interpreta-tions. Although the representational system is essentially a system of open meanings, contextual interferences narrow the scope of interpretations into stereotypes. The codes of representation are generally obscure constructions by which cultural hegemony is maintained. Documentary reality can therefore better be described as a site that constructs identities as opposed to represent-ing them. In this sense, narratives dominate the reconstruction of the real:

> Rather, ethnography must redefine itself as that practice of representation that illu-minates the power of large-scale, imagined life possibilities over specific life trajec-tories. This is thickness with a difference, and the difference lies in a new alertness to the fact that ordinary lives today are more often powered not by the givenness of things but by the possibilities that the media (either directly or indirectly) suggest are available. (Appadurai 1996: 54)

Selection and Intrusion

Documentary film is, more than anything else, a matter of selection and intru-sion. As a consequence of the selective nature of documentary making, and thus of the time–space linearity of film, a certain type of narrative is developed to guarantee the viewer the representational qualities of film. By means of this type of narrating, 'reality' in film is supposedly being assured. Raoul Ruiz uses the concept of a 'central conflict theory' to illuminate this idea. He defines it as an all-encompassing narrative and dramatic guideline that is ruled by conflict (Ruiz 1995: 14). He argues that the criteria according to which most of the characters behave in today's films, documentaries etc. are drawn from one par-

ticular culture in which conflict is a pivotal idea. *According* to Ruiz, this theory has turned into a *predatory* theory, a system of ideas that devours and enslaves any other idea that might restrain its activity (ibid.: 15). Yet there is no strict equivalence between stories of conflict and everyday life. People fight and compete, but competition alone cannot contain the totality of the event that involves this.

Furthermore, he states that this theory yields a normative system. The products that comply with this norm have not only invaded the world but have also imposed their rules on most of the centres of audiovisual production across the planet, attempting to master the same logic of representation and practising the same narrative logic (Ruiz 1995: 21).

As a consequence of the 'intrusive' part of filmmaking, an exaggeration of performative behaviour can be ascertained. When a camera enters a room, certain types of acting or staging are being stimulated: a sort of amplified form of common behaviour. Moreover, it is as though the camera itself leads to a situation where not only the person in front of the camera but also the people behind it act in an almost programmed way. One of the students on our seminars wrote an entire thesis on the 'trap' a camera could be. Even with 'good intentions', lectures in visual anthropology and a good deal of common sense about what urban life might be, he found his own film 'trapped' into a stereotype. His conclusion was never to underestimate the power of a camera.

All these aspects constitute the mode of production, but are out of sight for the audience and the people who are represented. The essential elements of film are thus being covered up. When, why, and how selection and intrusion has taken place is being camouflaged by means of an Ancient Greek view on drama. By submitting the flow of experiences to the structure of a classical drama, one confides in a certain appropriation and an ideology-laden use of images. The viewer cannot locate censorship or accountability. Form (the type of narrative, the scenario) in and of itself thus carries a highly sophisticated ideological meaning. To ignore the mode of production of this form is to confine it in an ideological drama:

> What is presented as evidence remains evidence, whether the observing eye qualifies itself as being subjective or objective. At the core of such a rationale dwells, untouched, the Cartesian division between subject and object, that perpetuates a dualistic inside-versus-outside, mind-against-matter view of the world. Again, the emphasis is laid on the power of film to capture reality 'out there' for us 'in here'. The moment of appropriation and of consumption is either simply ignored or carefully rendered invisible according to rules of good and bad documentary. The art of talking-to-say-nothing goes hand-in-hand with the will to say, and to say only to confine something in a meaning. Truth has to be made vivid, interesting; it has to be 'dramatized' if it is to convince the audience of the evidence, whose 'confidence' in it allows truth to take shape. (Trinh 1990: 83)

Methodological Strategies

Introducing Seminars of Visual Anthropology

Six years ago Rik Pinxten of Ghent University, the documentary film department of Sint-Lukas (the School of Arts in Brussels) and I initiated a series of workshops in visual anthropology. We assist students from both schools in the production of documentaries on Belgian society. The interdisciplinary groups comprise both anthropology and film students. In general, the workshop explores the creative and critical use of cinema, focusing on the relation between aesthetics and cultural politics in a practical and theoretical manner. It challenges conventional notions of the mode of production, subjectivity, audience, and interpretation in relation to filmmaking, film viewing and the cinematic apparatus. Our main concern is to research avenues that may question the accountability of images in a way relevant to the epistemology of visual representation. We argue that the mode of production of documentary images, their format, adds meaning and alters interpretation. Individuals change their behaviour to 'perform' for the camera – and for an imagined audience. Moreover, filmmakers use specific conventions and techniques – such as camera angle, framing and editing – in representing the 'reality' that they are conveying. These codes of representation form, in fact, an artificial representational system:

> The documentary can easily thus become a 'style': it no longer constitutes a mode of production or an attitude toward life, but proves to be only an element of aesthetics (or anti-aesthetics), which at best, and without acknowledging it, it tends to be in any case when, within, its own factual limits, it reduces itself to a mere category, or a set of persuasive techniques. Many of these techniques have become so 'natural' to the language of broadcast television that they go 'unnoticed.' (Trinh 1990: 88)

In the following, we propose some methodological strategies in developing a critical and self-reflective space within visual systems, based on our empirical experience.

Visual Diagnosis of Interaction

As Pinxten and Verstraete argue, identity construction is based on the interplay of narratives and labels within a certain sociocultural context. Narratives are constantly mobile through the dynamics caused by the intertwining of fact and fiction, creating fluid identities: 'identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results' (Butler 1990: 25). In other words, identity is a performance; it is what you *do* at particular times, rather than a universal *who you are*. The concept of identity proposed is free-floating, and not connected to an 'essence', it is instead thought of as a performance. The construction of the self (of an individual, a group, a community and the like) is also highly interlaced with the construction of selves in visual narratives. This view on identity dynamics is fundamental in our visual anthropology seminars.

We developed some methods grounded in interactive research. Instead of claiming the truth, we are researching the interaction of the research process (Bourdieu 1980: Chap. 3). Ethnography is necessarily doublybiased (Pinxten

1997: 9). We conceive a 'fact' in ethnography as an item of knowledge usually expressed in a statement, which is, or can be, agreed upon by both the community of ethnographers and by the consultants of the culture concerned. The statement should be a true, correct or viable description of such cultural 'data' (Pinxten 1997: 9). This also holds for visual data. It is not the reality of the subjects that can be visualised, nor are we aiming at depicting our own ethnocentric interpretation either. It is the visual diagnosis of the interaction between researcher, subject and the impact of the system of representation that is searched for.

> Ethnographic films (which readily blur the boundaries between subjectivity and objectivity, observer and observed) address as their referent our relation to the historical present, usually the moment of filming. … In viewing the scene in *Silverlake Life* when Tom Joslin lies dead and Mark Massi mourns his passing, the tremendous impact of such a moment lies, I believe, in the remains of an ethnographic referent that is not in the image, not in the visible evidence of death, not in the authentic location footage or in the historical moment now marked by it, but in the relation between all these aspects and the experiential moment of the encounter itself when this event unfolds again, not only as it was experienced at the time of filming by Mark Massi, and hence ethnographically, but also as it unfolds for the first time, for us. We experience the extraordinary indexical bond of history and the future we construct from it as they intertwine in the referential force field shaped in the present moment of historical consciousness. (Nichols 1994: xii)

It is the experience 'in-between' that is to be visualised. It is not the truth, nor the authenticity of the other that is being traced but the 'interval' as Trinh Minh-ha (1990: 96) describes it: 'Meaning can neither be imposed nor denied. *Although* every film is in itself a form of ordering and closing, each closure can defy its own closure, opening onto other closures, thereby emphasizing the interval between apertures and creating a space in which meaning remains fascinated by what escapes and exceeds it.'

In the year 2000 we were encouraged by the curator of 'Brussels 2000' Guido Minne to join a group called *Crossing Brussels*, organised by Eric Corijn of the Free University of Brussels (VUB) and funded by Brussels 2000. This group researched different public spaces in Brussels by means of three public buses. The buses were reorganised into an exposition space, a cinema and a café and parked in the researched public spaces in view of improving the collaboration between scientists and members of the community. The films produced by our students were shown in the bus located in the area where the films were made, in order to enhance the interaction and discussion of the production of the images. The preference for public buses was carefully thought out: the recognition and familiarity of these spaces lowered the gap between researcher and inhabitants. Also, the location of the buses 'on the spot' was perceived by the residents as a strong invitation to the lively discussions in the buses. The confrontation of students and their work with the residents lies at the heart of the engagement one needs to practise visual anthropology.

What we suggest as a methodological framework is a form of collaborative negotiation. An image can be perceived as a true image when participant and

filmmaker share the meaning of this image (its truth). We do not expect more truthfulness or authenticity than this. If this image represents a recreation of the real which is agreed upon by researcher and participant, then we can assume that we evoke something of the interaction between them. As cited by Nichols: 'ethnographic film might, according to Stephen Tyler, respond to the call for evocation rather than representation in order to 'provoke an aesthetic integration that will have a therapeutic effect. It is, in a word, poetry." ' (Nichols 1994: 82)

Fatimah Tobing Rony found interesting evidence in relation to *Nanook of the North* on how the lack of collaboration and negotiation created pertinent different perspectives on the film. The perception of the Inuit on the production of the film differed dramatically from the Western view. 'Recent research has shown that the Inuit found Flaherty and the filmmaking a source of great amusement, and this amusement may well account for Nanook's smile. The enigma of Nanook's smile allows the audience to project its own cultural presuppositions: from the point of view of an outsider he is childlike, from the Inuit point of view he may be seen as laughing at the camera' (Rony 1996: 111). Apparently, Nanook was having a good laugh when Flaherty tried to turn him into an actor performing 'a primitive man'. He was asked by Flaherty to wear clothes dated ten years ago, was asked to lick a gramophone, showing his ignorance of Western technology. 'Like a museum display in which sculpted models of family groups perform "traditional activities", Nanook's family adopts a variety of poses for the camera' (Rony 1996: 112). These acts all reinforced the image of a *primitive savage* the Western audience knew very well from exhibitions, zoos and museums. At that time, the Inuit were popular performers in those places, as they were treated as specimens and objects of curiosity (ibid.: 105).

In our workshop we encourage our students to develop a collaborative framework in their research in order to produce a film process that is appreciated by both parties, the researchers and the participants. The book that accompanies the documentaries contains photographs of the production process. The edition on the fishermen of Ostend three years ago presented a rectangular photo shot by one of the students showing the subjects of the film. This photo was presented next to a cubic photo that was taken by one of the subjects and showed the group of students. In this way, the form generated the representation of the maker, a more sophisticated way of revealing the production process.

Furthermore, to enhance this interactive view, the subjects of the workshops are chosen within subclasses of Belgian society. The reason for this type of research is also to identify the 'other' as part of the same culture in pointing out the differences-within-the-same. Projects include the multicultural experience in Genk (1999), the fisher community in Ostend (1998) and the First World War trauma in Vinkt (1997).

Formal Play

In our workshops we suggest looking upon the mode of production as a site of critique. Because of the previously elaborated reasons, we think it is crucial to include the production mode and responses to it in the film. In this way the

codes of representation are to be found in the film itself, therefore enhancing the accessibility of the subject's image. I do not, however, want to imply an academic formalised system of feedback within the film. I prefer to consider it as a formal play in which this type of self-reflection needs to find its own place in the film. Or in other words: I believe it is necessary to explore artistically the formal aspects of imagining cultural groups.

For example, when the film on Public Space in so-called Matonge, a neighbourhood in Brussels, was shown in the buses, the students were accused of stereotyping the African community. These reactions were recorded on a minidisc player and used as a tool to deconstruct the original film in another editing.

This kind of formal playfulness was stimulated by the tradition in experimental filmmaking of the film school. In this tradition techniques of deconstruction and reconstruction in a plastic and textural way are elaborated. Experimental filmmakers mostly work in an independent way. They refuse affiliation with the predominant modes of production, and they manage to organise their own circuits, their own festivals and most of all their own forms and formats. A wide range of film and video makers, including Maya Deren, Peter Kubelka, Jonas Mekas, Su Friedrich, Bill Viola, Kidlat Tahimik, Tracey Moffatt and Chantal Akerman, are regarded as sources of inspiration here. Experimental film and ethnographic film have long been considered separate, autonomous practices on the margins of mainstream cinema. Catherine Russell explores the interplay between the two forms (Russell 1999).

Our workshops can be regarded as a play field within this intertwining of traditions. We think it is important to open up this self-reflective and critical stance to a playful and explorative mode. In our view, formal renewal challenges conventional modes of object–subject relationships, perception of audiences, and content–form divisions. For instance, while researching the fisher community in Ostend, the students came across a stereotypical and deeprooted expression: 'The fishermen are the Negroes of the city.' They used this phrase as a tool to provoke reactions within the fisher community and in the city of Ostend as a whole. In their documentary they assembled these recorded phrases with photos in black and white of the people who were responding. This process created a very strong image that deconstructed the stereotype but nonetheless located its background.

Epilogue

The construction of identities in visuals plays a central role in imagining subjectivities. In this contribution I have tried to expand the theory on identity dynamics developed by Pinxten and Verstraete by bringing in issues related to identity construction in visual representations. By peeking over disciplinary boundaries, abundantly citing authors from cultural studies, cognitive linguistics and film theory, and referring to the experience of the seminars in visual anthropology at Ghent University and my own fieldwork, my aim was to take up Appadurai's invitation to examine the relation between the 'word' and the

'world'. One avenue in this contribution explored the interlaced dynamics of the flow between fact and fiction in documentaries; one could name this 'the world'. Although a highly sophisticated mode of production fictionalises representation to a certain degree, the content of the images is mostly perceived as 'fact'. In questioning this, I have elaborated certain methodological strategies in documentary film production. In my view, at the heart of this flow between fact and fiction lies the inherent underspecification of images.

Another avenue therefore deals with the relation between the image and the word. Goodman and Elgin situate this underspecification as the main aspect of representational systems. By understanding the pictorial as an open token, the textual in documentaries is analysed as a way to reduce the complexity images can reveal. This reduction is intertwined with ideologies and political assumptions. *In order to question* this reduction of information, this stereotyping, I turned to cognitive linguists to elaborate on 'the word'. *According to Fauconnier, Lakoff, Sweetser and Turner, both words and images induce mental spaces in the mind. Mental spaces are characterised by their space-building potential,* thus mental-space constructions generally deal with a considerable amount of underspecification in the process of meaning construction. There are no precise indications of properties; they are negotiable in further elaborations during the communication. This view is a challenge for the analysis of identity dynamics in visual representation in as much as it invites an exploration of the dense and blurred relationship between images and texts used in visual representation.

Notes

1. Arjun Appadurai (1996: 49) 'There is an urgent need to focus on the cultural dynamics of what is now called deterritorialization. This term applies not only to obvious examples such as transnational corporations and money markets but also to ethnic groups, sectarian movements, and political formations, which increasingly operate in ways that transcend specific territorial boundaries and identities'.

2. 'British cultural studies situated culture within a theory of social production and reproduction, specifying the ways that cultural forms served either to further social control, or to enable people to resist. It analysed society as a hierarchical and antagonistic set of social relations characterized by the oppression of subordinate class, gender, race, ethnic, and national strata. Employing Gramsci's model of hegemony and counterhegemony, British cultural studies sought to analyse "hegemonic", or ruling, social and cultural forces of demonination and to seek "counterhegemonic" forces of resistance and contestation' (Durham and Kellner 2001: 16).

3. *Projection mappings* will project part of the structure of one domain onto another ... the general (and deep) idea is that, in order to talk and think about some domains (*target* domains) we use the structure of other domains (*source* domains) and the corresponding vocabulary. Another important class of domain connections are the *pragmatic function mappings* ... The two relevant domains, which may be set up locally, typically correspond to two categories of objects, which are mapped onto each other by a pragmatic function ... A third class of mappings, *schema mappings*, operate when a general schema, frame, or model is used to structure a situation in context' (Fauconnier 1997: 9–11).

4. My thanks go to Eve Sweetser, who offered this insight through our conversations on the subject.

5. Conceptual blending presents a clarification for perceiving represented or filmed reality as the real: the content of those images is frame-blended with the form whereby the form only induces the cognition of the 'real', whether or not the form is actually factual. The typical documentary techniques then are blended with their 'original' content, which was claiming to reveal reality 'as it really happened'. (Again, thanks to Eve Sweetser.)

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