PICTURING TRANSNATIONALISM
TOWARDS A CINEMATIC LOGIC OF TRANSNATIONALISM

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ABSTRACT

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This research report addresses epistemological issues confronted in the ongoing process of making an ethnographic documentary about transnationalism. It begins by considering the use of cinematic vocabulary as an analogy to narrativise the complexities of transnationalism. It then contextualises a specific documentary project within methodological debates in the ethnographic film-making community.

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Keywords: ethnographic documentary, visual methods, transnationalism, montage, observational cinema, documentary narrative, ethics of representation

Introduction

This research report addresses some epistemological issues that have arisen out of my choosing to use cinema as a means to think through and represent the complexities of a transnational social field. The transnational field that concerns this project is a network of relations that stretches between Western Europe—specifically Benelux, France and Germany—and West Africa—Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast and Senegal. Initially, the project emerged out of an interest in understanding the complex relationship between European Union integration discourse and immigrants' daily lives, with a focus on West African immigrants living and/or working in Luxembourg. As the fieldwork process progressed, however, I reformed some of the core terms that I was working with. For example, rather than focusing on the relationship between immigrants and European discourses of integration, I have opted to look more closely into the experiences of mobility of the informants themselves. Highlighting the mobile dimension of transnationalism allows the project to go beyond linear or circular patterns of movement between Western Europe and West Africa and consider a more improvised multi-directional mobility. For the time being, I have adopted the terms 'transmigration' and 'transmigrant' as concepts that better capture the incessant and rhizomic movement of my informants than the unilinear implications of simple 'migration' and 'migrant'. One of the proposals of this research report is that focusing on transmigrant practices and discourse allows for a narrative that highlights the social agency of individual people rather than the structural features of power and society. As a result, it leads to a more empathetic and insightful narrative that places the voices and actions of informants at the heart of the ethnography.

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Methodologically, my current project is committed to doing participant observation with a video camera and fashioning a narrative out of the footage that I collect during fieldwork. The expected outcome will be a character-centred ethnographic documentary that will focus on the mundane and quotidian practises that are suggestive of a 'life in movement'. In terms of filming style, I pay attention to scenes that convey action as they unfold in real time, prioritise the voice of the informants, and record material that gives a sense of place and pace. This kind of film-making requires me to engage with the audio-visual dimension of transnationalism, a theme that has historically been addressed discursively. And herein lies one of the first tensions of my project. What are the visual dimensions of trasnationalism? What is the best narrative strategy to articulate these visualities? To what degree can I rely exclusively on methods associated with participant observation—where the documentary's narrative is to be fashioned out of footage accumulated during fieldwork—to communicate a concept that is an anthropological idiom and not my informants'?

This research report will try to address these questions and engage with other provocations that have come to me rather obliquely. I have become interested in the use of vocabulary associated with cinema, specifically observational and montage cinema, as analogies when thinking about and articulating the transnational experience. Furthermore, montage cinema may be conceptualised as an epistemological practice that lends itself to addressing temporal and spatial disjunctions while observational cinema may be associated with maintaining a sense of temporal and spatial integrity. I will be discussing the implications of these approaches in ethnography and showing how these methods resonate with broader issues concerning the production and reproduction of anthropological knowledge. While discussions within the ethnographic film-making community place observational and montage cinema at odds with each other, I will consider their relation in the context of transnational discourse and suggest that the tensions they speak to can be seen as analogous to the transnational experience.

Transnationalism and cinema

Transnationalist research pits structural markers of identity, usually associated with the nation-state, against creative agencies suggested in the discourse and practice of mobility, with the former conceptualised as static and structural, the latter as mobile and fluid. Bringing together the mobile and static provides the transnational text with a bifocal complexity, which accounts for the text's convincing force and is the source of transnationalism's creative tension—where the stable and the mobile, local and global, near and far fold into each other. The simultaneity of near and far questions the understanding of 'place' as a geographical entity. It invites anthropologists to consider place as constituted through a series of practices and affectations that are created through material and social relationships (see, for example, Casey 1996; Low 2003; Merleau-Ponty 1962; Tilley 2004). However, it can be argued that transnational texts that focus on structural markers of identity tend to produce circular narratives that have the curious result of reproducing the binary typologies that they seek to write against. Regardless of critiques of the relationship between place and culture, the question of 'being in place'

and 'being at home'—'being' understood as a physical experience—functions as the narrative tension of transnationalist discourse.

As a means of unravelling the tensions inherent in transnationalist discourse, Basch et al. (1994: 34) argue that transnationalist writing should focus on narrativising 'the context of contention for political power and control of productive resources, including labour power' across national spaces. Coming from another direction, Paul Stoller (2004: 820) argues that 'transnational complexities require a more sensuous approach to ethnography, an approach in which local epistemologies and sensory regimes are more fully explored (...) sensuous descriptions improve not only the clarity and force of ethnographic representations but also the social analysis of power relations-in-the-world'.

Approaching transnationalism from the perspective of cinema, I am reminded of the vocabulary used by montage theorists such as Eisenstein, Vertov and Pudovkin who wrote about the relationship between images in terms of 'clash', 'simultaneity', 'dialectics', and 'coming together of discrepancies'. For Eisenstein (1977), the practice of placing discrepant images in relation to each other constitutes the 'nerve of cinema'. Cinema generates meaning by its capacity to create a simultaneity of audiovisual conflicts: graphic, temporal, spatial, of volume, of light, of rhythmic. Thus montage is more than a cinematic strategy that can be used to convey a sense of narrative complexity. It is a methodological practice by which artists can think through their subject matter and create compelling narratives that invite the audience to empathise with the piece. Eisenstein (ibid.) argues, furthermore, that the principle of montage applies to the arts in general, referencing literary figures (Mauclair and Baudelaire), painters (Renoir and Grünewald), and recalling the musical concept of counterpoint as examples of the creative process as dynamic, irregular and methodologically conflict ridden.

The peculiar character of cinema is that its components (the images) are continuously being blended together in the mechanical process of making and screening a film. The technology that Eisenstein worked with generated a series of photographs which, when viewed at a required speed, created the illusion of un-mediated movement. While contemporary video technology does not rely on film, the principle of a sequence of images being blended together to present a narrative remains valid today. The cinema's blending effect can be seen as an analogy to transnationalist discourse, in the sense that they both speak to the integration of discursively antagonistic images into a single lived experience.

Montage theory has been advocated in ethnography by George Marcus (1990). In Marcus' terms, montage offers the possibility to address the increasingly deterritorialized nature of cultural process on its own terms, where a text can 'show how distinctive identities are created from turbulence, fragments, intercultural reference, and the localized intensification of global possibilities and associations' (Marcus 1990: 6). The juxtaposing nature of montage vocabulary promises the satisfaction of addressing the simultaneities and multiple localities that are emblematic of the transnational experience. From this perspective, the transnational text is not circular but dynamic, and it engages with the conflicts that are embedded in the transnational experience itself, where decisions made by people in one place are informed by events and processes elsewhere.

Ethnographic documentarians that advocate for montage cinema argue that the juxtaposing of shots necessarily suggests an intellectual and creative engagement with

the collected footage. This approach has been picked up by ethnographic film-makers interested in capturing the transnational social field such as Wilma Keiner's in her *Ixok-Woman* (2008). Keiner claims that her use of dynamic editing represents the temporal and spatial continuities and discontinuities of the transnationalist experience. *Ixok-Woman's* narrative centres on one character, Carmen. Carmen is a performance artist who bases her work on her own and fellow Guatemalans' experiences of political violence, which led to her European exile. Carmen's transnationalism is imagined (she does not travel back and forth from Guatemala to Austria nor does she send remittances to her family in Guatemala), and a source of inspiration for her committed art. The film, however, *does* travel back and forth from Carmen's stage to Guatemala by cross-cutting between both sides of the Atlantic, depicting Carmen on stage in Europe along with scenes suggestive of political threat in Guatemala. The intention is to show the 'absences' (i.e. Guatemalans that are absent due to political threat and violence) that are characteristic of Carmen's life as an artist in exile. For Keiner, montage emerged as a necessity to address the simultaneity of parallel cultural regions coming together in a performative act. For documentaries like *Ixok-Woman*, montage lends itself as a consistent strategy for addressing the disjunctions of transnationalism on its own terms—where the form of the ethnography reflects the content.

While montage analogies can speak to the structural dimensions of transnationalism, I propose that montage thinking has the curious, perhaps ironic, effect of taking the anthropologist away from the field-site. For example, in the process of recording the daily life of my informants and being committed to fashioning a cinematic narrative out of the recordings, I find myself in a position to focus on the immediacy of the moment: able to pay exacting detail to the instant movements that are occurring 'in the now'—to record as if I am already watching the documentary. When in this mode, I must give priority to observing. But the kind of observation that I am referring to cannot and must not be passive. It *cannot* be considered passive because of the fact that what functions as my 'data', the footage, is already being narrativised by my camera and sound recording equipment. I *must* not be passive because to record in a disengaged manner (i.e. to leave the camera on a tripod, to have the camera separated from the body, or to be immobile with the camera) is not conducive to constructing a participatory narrative, a narrative where the viewer and film-maker are intellectually and sensually engaged with the piece.

Debates within the ethnographic film-making community have tended to address observational cinema in opposition to montage (see Grimshaw and Ravetz 2009; Keiner 2008). An observational aesthetic is used to suggest realism, naturalism, the present, presence, continuity of space and time, the organic development of events, and corporeal knowledge (see MacDougall 2006). Observational cinema also suggests a working method analogous to anthropological participant observation. Some of the classic tenets of observational film-making call for no preconceived script, giving priority to the voice of the informant, for allowing the film's narrative to emerge out of an empathetic relationship with the subjects, for narratives made up of close observations of daily life—all of which are not unlike the creative ethics of ethnography (see Young 1975). Montage, on the other hand, is presupposed to suggest abstractions, the intellectual, spatial and temporal disruptions, and absence—showing the invisible (Keiner 2008).

Advocates of montage critique observational cinema for its lack of intellectual engagement with the ethnographic materials, and for its lack of theoretical and abstract contribution to understanding social relations. However, the process of observational film-making is obdurately empirical. Recording people's daily lives cannot be separated from the direct lived experience of events and processes occurring live. It seems to me that the abstractions that montage advocates desire of ethnographic cinema are analogous to textual abstractions—a problematic suggestion because it usually suggests asking that cinema do the same as text. On the other hand, anthropological abstractions suggested in mainstream transnationalist writing are not visible, they are interpreted. In the normative process of ethnography, theory must be read into, stood for, symbolised. This practice is potentially antithetical to recording images and sounds because footage is constituted within 'the moment' as it is happening. Footage has a pre-theoretical quality to it, yet it is pregnant with significance. The ethnographic moment can be suggestive, it can provoke emotion and tension, but its meaning is always relative and viewer dependent.

So how can I make a picture of transnationalism? Can a picture, on its own terms, show the simultaneity of the local and the global? Can footage be intellectual and conceptual? The tentative answer is negative. A picture, on its own terms, can only capture the moment; it is a-historical, perhaps context-free. It prioritises the local, the field-site, the practice, it leaves aside the other half of the story—the theory. The agency of the picture operates through the media of the viewer, the technology, the site where it is shown (cinema, TV, museum), audience, broader social contexts rather than as an exclusive property of the picture itself.

I argue, drawing from my experience of recording transmigrants, that the practice of picturing transnationalism asks questions that point more towards a phenomenology of transnationalism. The question that still remains is how to narrativise these questions and answers through the cinematic. While the process of making this documentary is ongoing (and I trust that my process will yield a positive result) I will put forward a tentative, perhaps unsatisfactory answer, that the fissure between observational and montage cinema tends to be exaggerated in ethnographic film-making discussions and that the development of a visual anthropology lies in the tension between achieving cinematic complexity and the ethical and epistemological responsibility of the anthropologist. Analogies to this tension can be found in the tension between participation and observation, local knowledge and anthropological discourse, the local and the global.

I would further argue that, regardless of the cinematic technique used to address anthropological concerns, a successful and convincing documentary must approach the theme through the visual on its own terms, rather than expect the visual to function as a surrogate or illustrator of text. This requires a reflexive assessment of the limits and potentials of the audiovisual, which may entail shifting anthropological concerns rather than making the visual follow the norms of scholarly writing.

Encountering transnationalism: home here, home there

I met Boawéssé Kombia five years ago in Luxembourg. He was giving African percussion workshops at schools and youth clubs in Luxembourg organised by an NGO that

promotes Third World issues. While I did not run into Boawéssé often, we would seek each other out at events. At that time, I was editing my Ph.D. documentary on Caribbean percussionists, so I was interested in sharing my views on his craft. Our conversations moved on to music in general and to reggae in particular as he told me of his Paris-based band and the various West Indian and West African musicians he has played with.

Boawéssé is originally from Burkina Faso and he came to Europe 25 years ago for the first time. He met his current wife working alongside NGOs that promote development projects in Burkina Faso and he spends his year travelling constantly between Benelux, France (where he resides and has citizenship), Burkina Faso, and Ivory Coast—where, incidentally, he trained as a jazz and salsa guitarist. I was intrigued by his cosmopolitanism and was attracted to his lifestyle as a kind of nomad that travels up and down the hemisphere engaged in either music in Europe or development work in his native Burkina Faso.

Our relationship went to another level during my wife's convalescence in hospital while she recuperated from a life threatening car accident. Boawéssé's take on my wife's coma and short-term amnesia was a refreshing break from the medical and neurological lingo that I was surrounded by. He would talk about how her spirit and her consciousness needed to rest from the trauma that her brain had received—and that her 'knowledge' was searching for her body—that I should keep faith because it would be a matter of time until her 'knowledge' would return.

On one of his visits to the hospital, he brought a piece of an elephant's ear. He explained to me that as elephants are renowned for their good memory the ear would be helpful in her memory's quest for her body. He also brought a small calabash containing shea butter—produced in the village he works with in Burkina Faso. He explained that the butter would be helpful in treating the scars and muscle pains that my wife was enduring. On giving me the butter he told me that the butter is but one of many artisan products that he sells in the Benelux area. The revenue generated from the sales is used to finance development projects in Burkina Faso, specifically in his village area. I found the presents uplifting and I was extremely grateful for his attention during those troubling weeks. I was especially inspired by the alternative knowledge and approaches regarding my wife's recovery which were suggested in the presents. I was also interested in how Boawéssé is an agent in an economic and political relationship between his region in Burkina Faso and Western Europe.

After a brief stint back in the Caribbean, I returned to Luxembourg and sought out Boawéssé again. His reggae band had a gig in the suburbs of Luxembourg and I went to check them out. Boawéssé is the front man of the band and they played what was, to my ears West Indian roots reggae. Their lyrics are mostly dedicated to Jah and the philosophy of Rastafarianism. The band is called Sawuri—which corresponds to Boawéssé's stage name, and the one that he uses in Europe, Marcel Sawuri.

Hanging out with the musicians after the gig, I met the pianist who is originally from Ivory Coast, the bass player from the Netherlands, drummer from Paris, and the back-up singer-percussionist from Martinique. I was not as impressed by the cosmopolitanism manifested on stage. I am familiar with writings that take movement, rootlessness, 'living between a lost past and a non-integrated present to be the most fitting metaphor of the post-modern condition' (Chambers 1994: 27). As a researcher of connections between Caribbean music and processes of identity, I am also aware of the dispersed character of

the African experience (see Gilroy 1994). I was more intrigued by the actual process by which these musicians come together physically and collaborate to create and perform.

In the summer of 2009, Luxembourg's Parliament was in the midst of discussing the institutionalisation of double nationality. Previously, all foreigners that applied for Luxembourgian citizenship had to surrender their previous passport. Advocates for the new move saw it as a necessary step in the process of integrating foreign nationals into the political process of the Grand Duchy. Population statistics show that 30 per cent of residents in Luxembourg are foreigners, most of them Portuguese or from Portugal's former colonies. This results in communes of Luxembourg being composed of a majority of non-citizens that are excluded from direct political processes in the country (i.e. voting and running for office).

Participants in the integration debate were confronted with the peculiar complexities of Luxembourg's national identity. On the one hand, European discourse on integration is characterised by assumptions of assimilation—politically through the acquisition of local citizenships and subjectively through the institutionalisation of integration courses that teach European languages and values to immigrants. However, unlike its neighbours, Luxembourg possesses few of the historical and cultural institutions that produce national sentiments, such as imperial histories, literary traditions, scientific traditions, and consistent linguistic discourse. For example, in EU immigrant integration policy, local language acquisition is constructed as the central principle of immigrant integration (Bauer et al. 2000). However, in a multi-lingual society such as Luxembourg, the acquisition of the local language is not a straightforward path to integration. Language competency in any of the three national languages of Luxembourg is related to the social network to which the migrant becomes attached and has significant consequences for integration into the labour market, political participation, and the migrant's social field. While conservative political groups in Luxembourg advocate Luxembourgian language acquisition as a requisite for integration, the ethnographic reality is that the linguistic politics of Luxembourg is a complex phenomenon that intersects with class, ethnic identity and nationalism (Fehlen 2009).

I became interested in these debates because in my observations of Marcel and the other West Africans with whom I interacted in Luxembourg they seemed to me to be fulfilling the 'integration' requirements (being employed, participating in political processes, having families, buying a house, a car, etc.) at the same time as they reproduced a sense of difference in relation to the host country. In other words, looking at this from the 'integration' perspective, these transnationals were achieving economic and social integration by enacting 'difference', by reproducing a narrative and discourse of Africa and not by assimilating to the local discourse, which is the path suggested by integration policy makers. The question of how one is at home-between-worlds, where home is always here and there, intrigued me and it was the initial question that sparked off the idea of making a documentary.

Recording transnationalism

The immediate challenge that I was confronted with was how to show, rather than tell, the sense of nomadic cosmopolitanism, montaged subjectivity, and trasnantionalism that is embedded in Marcel's story. The discourse of transnationalism is very apt to contextualise this story, but transnationalism is invisible. The challenge, then, is to collect footage and edit it in a way that communicates the values and creative agency of these individuals as they live-in-the-world. The questions that I must pose myself do not depart from the cultural comparative project, one that assumes structural difference, but from social agency—from a premise of commonality. These are subtle and abstract questions that posit the inter-subjective encounter as the source of anthropological knowledge and not the 'contentions for power' as suggested by classic transnationalist texts. But still, if I am to maintain that this documentary is about creative agency in the context of transnationalism, I feel the need to keep an eye on the bifocal complexity that characterises transnationalist discourse.

The literature on transnationalist subjectivities focuses on the complexities that migrants experience when they must contend and conform to the different ethnic and identity politics that are presented in the different places they traverse (Basch et al. 1995; Ramos-Zayas 2003). Ethnicity and identity are abstract theoretical concepts that lack immediate visual substance and in order to define and to capture the very moments in which the aesthetic dimension of these concepts is most present, I must follow closely and observe the everyday life of my informants. The term 'observational cinema', however, implies more than a method of inquiry. At its core lies a particular outlook on the world, an ethical stance. It denotes a special kind of relationship between film-maker, subject and audience—a relationship that is based on mutual trust and on an intimate, sympathetic encounter between different worlds (Grimshaw and Ravetz 2009). It is not based on a notion of observing as a passive exercise as associated with voyeurism or spectatorship: 'to look at'. Rather, 'observation' suggests 'to respect', 'to comply with', 'to take notice of', 'to celebrate or solemnize (as a ceremony or festival) in a customary or accepted way' (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary). When applied to cinema, I take 'observation' to be a practice that conforms and complies with the rules that are offered by the ethnographic reality of my informants, in opposition to subjecting my informant's discourse and practice to a non-diegetic logic.

During the conscious process of selecting what to record, the image ceases being merely a record, a representation or illustration of a reality. It opens itself up to interpretation and becomes a metaphor. However, the image never loses its indexical quality. It harbours a double condition of being evidence and a reflection of thought (Cubero 2008). While an observational documentary may not provide in-depth analysis of theoretical concepts such as identity or ethnicity, it can convey a different kind of knowledge which is based on an aesthetic dimension of these notions. Rather than rendering an ethnographic context verbally, the strength of ethnographic documentaries is that they offer the viewer an audio visual exploration of a person's life, its atmosphere and pace, as well as notions of time and space. Ethnographic films can answer questions about how identity and ethnicity take place through time, through space, and about how they are visualised, crafted and embodied by individuals. In order to represent ethnicity or identity, the film-maker has to return to a kind of 'visual theory', using images that embody these concepts.

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