Title

Writing Video - Writing the World: Videogeographies as Cognitive Medium

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The initial purpose of my writing, particularly in connection with my video projects, was to elaborate on their socio-political content. I regarded such theoretical elaborations as a way of expanding on those issues I had not been able to address directly in the video pieces. But very soon I developed a need to write about my work on a "meta" level. Reflecting on my motivations and aesthetic strategies became particularly useful for the reception of my videos in the art context, since the prevailing art critical trends were somewhat unresponsive to my emerging concerns as an artist. This kind of self-reflexive writing has been generally helpful in situating my work within the interpretative context in which I think it is best understood. Conversely, the condition of continuously being compelled to write on both these levels has no doubt had a strong impact on my essayist video making. I have used video as a form of writing and a cognitive tool to get to know the world.

In principle, my videos and writings of recent years chronicle two parallel processes: first, the process of discerning a geographical and political area of interest for my art practice – e.g. the gendered division of labor on the U.S.-Mexico border – and, second, the process of tracing out a field of research at the juncture of different forms of knowledge production where this practice could be situated. My simultaneous engagements with current geopolitical and social transformations, and with the form in which these could be addressed in the expanded aesthetic field, are conceptually related. These two ongoing processes are connected and hinge, in my work, on the concept of the border.

In this essay I will focus on *Bordervideographies*. First, I would like to clarify that I see my videos about borders and mobility as geographic projects, if by geography we mean a visual form of spatializing territorial and human relations. I operate with concepts from geography, rather than, say, discourses on human rights or identity. In connection with these ideas, I would like to discuss three of my videos: *Europlex*, an anthropological study of the Spanish Moroccan

borderland; *Contained Mobility*; and *Sahara Chronicle*, a substantial video research project on the clandestine migration systems in the Sahara. These videos are connected by a consistent preoccupation with the politics of mobility and issues of migration, borders, and technology. The differences between them hopefully convey a certain development, not only in my own aesthetic practice, but a shift we can make out in migration discourses at large.

The three pieces pursue my ongoing interest in the transformation of space due to the movement and displacement of people, in order to reach a better understanding of how migration paths and travel routes - both those of people and capital, resources and visual information - have formed particular cultural and social landscapes that eventually inscribe themselves into the physical terrain. These are the abstract ideas I'm interested in, and my art practice consists of going into these spaces and videographing the micropolitics of local people. Geography, I should say from the start, is not thought of as a geophysical science, but rather as a signifying system, a system of meaning-making, that allows us to reconsider the relations between space, subject, and movement. These relations lie at the heart of any thinking about migration. Geography can also be thought of as a cultural practice, as a symbolic way of redesigning space, a spatial ordering system. Image-making obviously plays an important role in the production of border spaces. At the center of the following reflections lies the question of how to insert myself, as an artist, into these meaning-making processes and engage in writing a kind of counter-geography involving the subversive, informal, and irregular practices of space.

Logging the Border

The first project I want to address here is *Europlex*, a video on the Ibero-Moroccan borderland from 2003, made in collaboration with visual anthropologist Angela Sanders. While it isn't one

of my most ambitious projects, it exemplifies some of my major concerns regarding the relationship between people, movement and territories.

When geography is understood as a spatialization of the dynamic social and economic relationships connecting local systems to the transnational, it becomes clear why border geographies are the site of extreme compression at all levels. What we call the border here is not a linear formation. Border areas like the Spanish-Moroccan borderlands that I document in this video are given their cultural meaning by being traversed and actively produced by the movement of people: by container ships en route from West Africa to the Mediterranean, by boats transporting migrants on their perilous nocturnal journeys, by helicopter patrols keeping watch, by radio waves and radar lines, by itinerant plantation workers who pick vegetables for the EU market, by commuting housemaids going to work for the señoras in Andalusia, by border-guard patrols along the mountain paths, by buses transporting Moroccan women to Tangier where they peel Dutch shrimps to be shipped back to Holland, by pirates who procure goods from China, and by women smugglers who tie these goods up under their skirts and carry them into the medina. This is the mobility we were concerned with in this video – the everyday mobility lived out on a local level, to produce micro-geographies that are deeply intermeshed with one another while reflecting a global schema.

Capsized boats and clandestine immigrants washing up on European shores: these are the dramatic images that put Europe's southern border in the news again and again. The media seem to say that these images communicate the essence of the border in its most compressed and climactic form. But there is no defining, dramatic image that can narrate the endless story of inclusion and exclusion. There can be no violent icon to which the event of crossing is reducible, only the plurality of passages, their diverse embodiments, their motivations and articulations. Many artists have expressed a certain fascination with the reinforced border regimes that

emerged first along the US-Mexico border, later along the eastern and southern borders of the EU. From the beginning, I have been somewhat suspicious about the utility of documenting border fences and impressive surveillance technologies. It seems to me that even from a critical perspective, the focus on the line and its militarization cannot help but reproduce and reinforce the divisive force of the border as a concept.

Europlex examines, in a series of border recordings, the circular movement of people around the checkpoint between the Spanish enclave Ceuta, which is basically just a city, and the surrounding Moroccan territory. Interestingly, the aim of the border crossing is not to get into the city of Ceuta but to pursue semi-legal business in the expanded border complex. Again and again, we went to the border at 6 am to observe the peculiar activities.

We call the videographic recordings "border logs." We use the term "log" to refer to travel logs and ethnographic recordings. In video editing, the log, i.e. the chronological list of the filmed material, is considered an indispensable preparation for the editing process.

Border Log I is a meticulous observation of the extensive smuggling activities that circumscribe the border to Ceuta. Because filming is strictly prohibited, images can only be recorded under constant interruption, with a hidden camera or from a distance. The liveliness begins at 6 a.m., when the gates open to the crowd of impatiently waiting Moroccans, and continues throughout the day. Smuggling takes place in the daylight in front of the eyes of the officials, and is part of the everyday culture. Wholesale warehouses and street markets are just around the corner from the checkpoint. Here smugglers rummage around for good deals and buy as much as they can carry. Some articles such as wool blankets are of better quality and still cheaper than in Morocco, even though they are not necessarily made in Spain but imported from China. Still, they will be marketable in Tétuan. On their way back, the smugglers pass, this time heavily loaded, in front of the same officials, who are compensated for their forbearance.

Circumscribing the architecture of the authorities up to eleven times a day, they inhabit the border in a non-linear, circular way, carving out an existence for themselves. To achieve the best possible mobility for crossing, the female smugglers strap shirts and cloths to their bodies, layer by layer, until they have doubled their body volume. This seems to be a technique only women use. Every piece will increase the profit margin of their passage. The economic logic inscribes itself onto every layer of the transforming, mobile, female body.

Border Log II follows the daily journey of the Moroccan maids who live in the Moroccan town Tétuan and work in the enclave. However, it doesn't focus on the difficult conditions young Moroccan women face when they enter the European labor market. Instead, the video takes a look at the curious detail that the workers commute between the Moroccan and the European time zones. Due to the fact that the two adjacent territories are located in distinct time zones with a two-hour time lapse, the domestic worker turns into a permanent time traveler within the border economy. Her life rhythm is off-beat; it is performed through an alternating delay and acceleration with respect to her social context. In the video, the time-traveling maid is staged in front of a pop background, her gesture and her smile appear unnaturally repetitive, going backwards and forwards, they are interrupted by drop-outs, i.e. missing images which stop and restart in a choppy fashion. The animated portrait of the Muslim woman takes on charming robotic features that remove her from our habitual chronology.

Border Log III, finally, enters the transnational zone near Tangier where Moroccan women manufacture products for European subcontractors. The border crossed by these women on a daily basis is a lot less visible than the fortified one around Ceuta that the smugglers and domestic workers pass through. Still, upon entering the transnational zone the worker experiences a distinctive split from her cultural environment. In *Europlex* this fissure comes to expression in a series of female workers' portraits captured at the exit of a factory in the harbor

of Tangier. In terms of image technology, it is performed by means of a brusque freeze of her image; the worker's face and her gaze remain sharp while the background dissolves gradually into graininess beyond recognition. Accompanied by electronic rhythms, the sequence is overlaid by quickly accumulating figures suggesting labor hours and performance statistics. In this fragmented composition her presence is decontextualized, her body entirely technologized.

These logs describe three diverse practices that transform the border space into a translocal reality. These borders show the constant subversion of the national boundary, the clandestine diversion of it. The mapping of these activities is what I call counter-geography. The focus is not on the global players, not on the deconstruction of power, but rather on the accurate observation of counter-geographies and dissident practices, mostly semi-legal, often invisible.

The Itinerant Body

This strategy also determines the mode of operation embodied by Anatol, the main character of *Contained Mobility*, a synchronized 2-channel video I made for the Liverpool Biennial in 2004. Since Liverpool is an important harbor, the idea was to bring contemporary migration into connection with the new technologies used in world harbors since 9/11. As part of its anti-terrorist program, the U.S. imposed a security regime that required the use of new high-tech container traffic control and vessel traffic information systems. But it is clear that these surveillance technologies have an effect not only on goods transported by containers but also on clandestine migration that uses the same routes. *Contained Mobility* juxtaposes these two realities by entering the digital world generated by the control of mobility and the unstable, trans-local forms of life that emerge within and around it. One screen displays the maritime information systems while the other registers the interior of a container inhabited by an asylum seeker. The story of this refugee, Anatol Zimmermann, narrates reality in the state of exception.

A Belorussian, born in a labor detention camp in the Gulag, he has lived in limbo for an indefinite time, suspended in a post-national lapse. He is the kind of person we are increasingly likely to encounter in an ever-growing juridical and spatial reality in Europe and worldwide. Migration is no longer the movement from A to B to settle down and find work. Anatol comes to signify the itinerant body who never reaches a final destination. *Contained Mobility* attempts to grasp this transformative moment where we enter a new phase of migration and also tries to understand the qualities of the emerging subject.

While none of the video images are indexical, referring to an immediate lived reality, the text is strictly documentary. Based on several hours of interview with Anatol in his forever-temporary location in Liverpool, I extracted his complicated itinerant biography with the greatest possible accuracy. This is, in fact, the simple procedure required for every asylum application filed. Yet Anatol assured me that, even after he had been processed by a dozen European countries or more, I was the first person to produce a complete record. Usually meant for the obscure circuits of asylum management (which mostly mean asylum denial), this information, which authorities no longer feel obliged to produce, is now made public through an artistic practice that produces the missing record required to access the human right of asylum. This made me wonder whether the unexpected utility of my act of representation had an impact on its status as an artwork, signifying a contemporary human condition, or whether *Contained Mobility* had inadvertently turned into a document reporting on one case to be resolved.

Territories of Transit

In later projects I have attempted to develop this notion of geography as both social practice and organizing system. *Sahara Chronicle* (2006-2007), for instance, is a collection of videos on the modalities of migration across the Sahara. It chronicles the sub-Saharan exodus towards Europe

as a social practice embedded in local and historical conditions. The project introduces the migration system as an arrangement of pivotal sites, each of which has a particular function in the striving for migratory autonomy, as well as in the attempts made by diverse authorities to contain and manage these movements. In the course of two years, I made three field trips to the major gates and nodes of the trans-Saharan migration network in Morocco, Niger, and Mauritania. Video documents include the transit migration hubs of Agadez and Arlit in Niger; Tuareg border guides in the Libyan desert; military patrols along the Algero-Moroccan frontier in Oujda; the Mauritanian port of Nouadhibou on the border with the Polisario Front; and the deportation prison in Laayoune, Western Sahara.

With its loose interconnectedness and its widespread geography, *Sahara Chronicle* mirrors the migration network itself. It does not intend to construct a homogeneous, overarching, contemporary narrative of a phenomenon that has long roots in colonial Africa and is extremely diverse and fragile in its present social organization and human experience. No authorial voice, nor any other narrative device, is used to tie the carefully-chosen scenes together; the full structure of the network comes together solely in the mind of the viewer, who mentally draws connecting lines between the nodes at which migratory intensity is bundled.

Again, I engaged in this research in response to the repetitive news media representations that focus invariably on arriving boat people. They direct their spotlight on the failure of the stranded migrants. They put forth images of drama, suggesting urgency and emergency. Victorious passages go undocumented. The motivation for my video research was to broaden this tunnel vision. One of the shortcomings of these news media images is that they merely document the capillary ends of a fantastically complex migration organism. We are witnessing a large-scale geographic reconfiguration of the Sahara, and *Sahara Chronicle* tries to offer some glimpses into the operation of this network. So my approach focuses on the systemic aspect of migration,

rather than the experience of individual migrants. I feel that when making images about crisis situations, it is important not to address the viewers on the emotional level, i.e. creating sympathy with the migrant as victim, but on the contrary to show migrants' self-determination, their strategies of resistance and survival, and to display those instances when the control mechanisms are not as successful as their creators would have us believe.

One of the 12 videos that constitute *Sahara Chronicle* documents the terminal of the desert trucks in Agadez, Niger. Agadez is the southern gate for the major trans-Saharan routes coming from West Africa, and it is the capital of the Tuareg tribes. With the increasing volume of trans-Saharan mobility, Agadez has become a hub for migration traffic of international dimensions, handling 50,000 transit migrants a year: a continental dispatch center. It is the last stop before crossing the Sahara: after Agadez no one goes alone. Here migrants group, inform, and organize themselves. The video shows a moment when everything seems possible. The scene is set in the courtyard of STT, the Sahara Ténéré Transportation Company in Agadez, where trucks are prepared, tickets sold, last prayers made. It is an unexcited documentation showing the quiet daily routine of handling life-changing journeys.

Another Sahara video is dedicated to some of the most high-tech surveillance technologies currently being deployed on military missions, from the war in Iraq to the Saharan desert front. Libya has received the newest models of unmanned airplanes from Germany, in return for its active suppression of migration flux to Europe. These drones glide over the desert borders, transmitting televisual data back to a remote receiver in real time. Other observation machines are equipped with night vision and thermal cameras, extending surveillance into realms invisible to the human eye. Lack of source material – Colonel Kadhafi's military department was unwilling to release the footage – meant that I had to artificially construct it from high-resolution satellite images of the Libyan Desert. The soundtrack is composed of many layers of recordings

from Saharan and Middle Eastern radio and TV stations, mixed with electronic sounds, music fragments, and winds. This artificial videography addresses the important fact that migratory space cannot simply be documented by conventional video-making on the ground. We need to enter the more ethereal strata of signal territories created by the streaming of images and the diffusion of sounds and information – territories of relentless and excessive meaning production.

In conclusion, I'd like to say that I understand video as a practice that is at the same time artistic, theoretical, and political: ultimately a distinct aesthetic strategy, comfortably, but not exclusively situated in the realm of art. Investigative video practice is not a lonely undertaking; it relies on the knowledge and contacts of many partners in the field, and on the theoretical and aesthetic exchange with colleagues and editors at the moment of montage back in the studio. There is nothing to be gained by confining this research to an institutionalized art world that strictly polices its own boundaries. My work facilitates, on the contrary, an open visual and discursive field where the artistic is not separate from the social, but faces the challenge of delivering their complex correlation. Images of vulnerable biological bodies adrift and disconnected from social life simply won't do a proper signifying job here. It is vital to recontextualize them within the field of representation.