

## **Autobiographical Filmmaking and the Potential of Embodied Encounters of Female Travelers between Egypt and Germany**

This is me, on a market in Aswan, southern Egypt, about 100km from Sudan, May 2014. In German I would say that I look like a canary bird, ein *Kanarienvogel*. Out of place, *ein Fremdkörper, un cuerpo extrano* - A Foreign body in a foreign place.

Over the last ten years I have traveled extensively and always felt that my travel experience was different from that of fellow male travelers. Whether it was my interaction at transportation hubs, border crossings or encounters with others, I felt that much of this difference was ascribed to the gendered female body. This body marked me with a sense of confinement. I, as a woman, was not supposed to circulate freely in some of the places that are dominated by men. Filmmaker and scholar Trinh Minh-ha speaks to this limiting of women's mobility in a male economy of movement. She says:

Women are trapped [...] within the frontiers of their bodies and their species, and the general cliché by which they feel exiled here is the common consensus (in patriarchal societies) that streets and public places belong to men (Minh-ha 33).

This video essay sets out to shed light on the travel experience of women by focusing on lived realities captured through the medium of film in an autobiographical documentary. In spite of various explorations at the intersection of gender studies, postcolonial studies and embodiment in alphabetic writing, little work has so far been done on this topic in video form. Exploring my own travel experience through film, I want to draw attention to the ways in which autobiographical documentary filmmaking can enrich our scholarship in those fields in general, but *especially* in the context of encounters with other cultures and foreign places.

Within the field of rhetoric and composition, documentary filmmaking is a growing practice that is increasingly recognized to afford us the possibility for richer scholarship. As Geoffrey Carter and Sarah Arroyo highlight: these ongoing investigations can carve out "paths with which future scholars might engage in an inventive fashion." Scholars like Alexandra Hidalgo, Jacqueline Rhodes, and Jody Shipka have explored video's richness in their scholarship, and demonstrated how it

can help us to make sense of the various intersections between rhetoric, gender, race, culture, and sexuality.

In the introduction of her video essay “Vanishing Fronteras: A Call for Documentary Filmmaking in Cultural Rhetorics”, Hidalgo points out how using documentary filmmaking can help us better understand Otherness as it brings elements to our scholarship that allow us to capture the ways in which culture defines our experiences. She also highlights how documentaries can afford us an understanding of how others perceive us and thereby open up unique and important perspectives for Cultural Rhetorics.

In this video essay, I hope to continue the conversations created by these scholars and build on their written and filmic works. I depart from the notion that our bodies ground us in time and place and that our physical experiences play an important role in the negotiation of selfhood and the way we mediate ourselves in relation to others. This renders the body not only as an anchor which determines our identity, but also as a medium through which we speak in our autobiographical accounts.

Catherine Russel distinguishes between three different ways by which the filmmaker’s body is inscribed into autobiographical film-work. Number one: the “I” as the “speaker” usually in the form of a first person voice-over that is explicitly subjective.

Number two: the “I” as the “seer”, referring to the origin of the gaze. Number three: the “I” as the “seen”, alluding to the body image of the filmmaker (Russel 277).

ANNE: ¿Lista? [Ready?]

MARIA: ¡Lista! [Ready!]

ANNE: Lista, nos vamos.[Ready, let’s go]

Now, let me introduce you to Maria Perez Escala, my Argentinian friend and collaborator. Together we produced *Wanderlust*, a feature length bi-autobiographical documentary from which I use several scenes in order to make my arguments.

*Wanderlust* is a film that documents our experience of traveling by land and water from Egypt to Germany, crossing 13 borders and 14 countries in two and a half months. The film is conceptualized, directed and produced by Maria and me, and although neither the collaborative spirit nor the bi-autobiographical quality will be the

focal point of this video essay, I wanted to acknowledge her role in what you're watching.

Maria and I spend two and a half months on the road filming each other through our joint experience of traveling. When we arrived at my parents' house in Germany, we sat down for a week and watched the footage. Minute by minute, clip by clip. During this process I realized that we ended up with a record of ourselves navigating the world. Seeing my gestures, body postures, and reactions and hearing my voice in conversations, I realized how foreign certain parts of myself are to me. While this general feeling of self-alienation wore off a little after the first days of watching the footage, I continued to discover foreign aspects of myself as I was watching the audio-visual evidence of how I operated in a variety of different settings and contexts.

MAN: Do you speak English?

ANNE: No

MAN: Arabic?

ANNE: No, tampoco [No, neither]

The first lesson I learned while working with autobiographical filmmaking is that it afforded me a position from where I was occasionally able to see myself as an Other. Rupturing a notion of subject and object division it forced me to see myself as an object, observing my strangeness, unfamiliarity and foreignness.

Let's return to the video essay's opening scene: Me walking down a market in Aswan, Egypt. As I started this video essay I claimed that "this is me." I identified myself as a subject that lived through a very specific experience and is going to recount this experience. However, as I look at myself and utter these words "this is me, on a market in Egypt" I simultaneously start to visually examine myself as an object to which my thoughts and words are directed.

I knew, for example that upon traveling to Egypt, I would stick out as a white, Western woman with a camera in my hand, but it was not until I saw the footage of myself that I realized just how much I looked out of place. Hidalgo points out that one of the advantages of using documentary film in our scholarship is that it lets us "see and hear people." While this may seem obvious and trivial at first sight, film as a medium is unparalleled in giving us the unique opportunity to explore the many

identity markers - like, gender, race, class or age - that shape our experiences. Film can also help us understand how these identity markers operate in different contexts. It allows us, for example, to document and explore how our skin color and features work differently in distinct cultural contexts, and it grants us the opportunity to later draw on footage as a record of these lived experiences.

The early 20th century displayed a fascination with the exotic theme of native people's bodies. Examples include anthropological accounts like *Trance and Dance in Bali* by Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead (1952) or early travel documentaries like *Moana* by Robert Flaherty. These films were strongly marked by visual objectification, dividing the filmmaker and the object of the gaze into two clearly separable categories, in which the camera constitutes the apparent frontier between the filmmaker and the filmmatter.

Autobiographical filmmaking and its inherently necessary inscription of the filmmaker's body into the film has the potential to break down this binary division of subject and object as films unique perceptual opportunity opens up an imagination of Otherness that is marked by non-binarity. Especially in the context of documenting foreign places or encounters between cultures, this rupturing of the subject/object division espouses hopes for a more nuanced and complex representation of the Other and the self, including one that might absorb the antagonism altogether.

One of the main challenges on our journey was to figure out how we would get from Israel to Cyprus without flying. The border between Israel and Lebanon is shut down, traveling via Palestine to Syria or Iraq did not seem like the best idea and the few cruise ships that made the journey from Israel to Cyprus were incredibly expensive. We called several cargo ship companies, but none of them agreed to take us. Finally we walked to the marina in Tel Aviv, asking around if anyone knew a private boat that would be able to take us. We met Elad and Bashir, two Israeli men who were planning to travel to Cyprus a few days later and who agreed to give us a ride in exchange for splitting the costs.

We spend a total of four days on Elad's small sailing boat, taking turns navigating, sleeping when it was possible and often found ourselves at the verge of seasickness. When I remember this trip or recount it, these tiresome aspects seldom enter my narration. I usually point out the beauty of the stars at night, the numerous

sunsets and sunrises we saw, and the fact that we made it safely to Cyprus. I believe that this is the narrative that was more familiar to me, the one that was expected. Looking at the footage of this episode however gives a slightly more complex account of this experience.

ANNE: Ya pasamos...¿Cuanto dijiste? [We already passed...how much did you say?]

MARIA: 38 más los 20 del día anterior, son 58. [38, plus the 20 from the previous day, that's 58.]

MARIA: 58 horas [58 hours]

ANNE: Y todavía no vemos tierra [ And we still do not see any land]. Según el GPS no estamos tan lejos [According to the GPD we are not that far]. Tal vez [Maybe].

MARIA: ¿Cómo te sentis? [How do you feel?]

ANNE: Un poco cansada [A little tired], con calor [I am hot] y me siento un poco, ehm, no se como decirlo, como desconectada conmigo mismo [sic] [and I feel a little, ehm, I don't know how to say it, disconnected from myself].

Nervous laughs, absent gazes, and my desperate attempts to escape this interview situation remind me, that those four days we shared on the small sailing boat where those with the biggest distance between Maria and me. I shrug, signaling that I have nothing else to say.

ANNE: No, es que me cuesta hablar en español ahora...la verdad [No, it's to be honest just that it's hard for me to talk in Spanish right now].

MARIA: Y habla en Aleman [Well talk in German then].

ANNE: Ok.

These Images tell a story of how I did not want to be there anymore, neither in front of the camera answering questions, nor on the boat.

ANNE: Gut fertig, ya [Ok, finished... already].

The second lesson I learned working on this filmic autobiographical account is that images tell their own story due to their indexical relationship to lived reality. Jutta Brückner, a German autobiographical filmmaker said that “the photographic image portrays external reality before the question of what you want to say about this reality has even been asked (Brückner 2).” She points to the signifying potential of film to a

specific lived situation in the past and its ability to express this lived reality in ways we cannot do with words. "Film", Brückner elaborates, "can work with the muteness of the flesh".

This is not to suggest that documentary film is a more authentic, objective or more truthful medium than alphabetic writing, but that it offers a direct indexical relation with lived reality, which written language simply does not have. Grounded in the materiality of the *bios* of autobiography, - self-life-writing - the bios leaves a trace on the filmic image and enables its own emerging in the encounter between the film and the viewer.

In everyday life, we experience the world as embodied subjects, by means of our haptic relationship to it. Film scholars like Vivian Shoback and Robin Curtis, however have pointed out that it is not necessary that our bodies come into direct contact with the material world. This is because our vision can retain the experiences of the other senses. Shoback says:

My sense of sight, then is a modality of perception that is commutable to my other senses, and vice versa. My sight is never only sight — it sees what my ear can hear, my hand can touch, my nose can smell, and my tongue can taste. My entire bodily existence is implicated in my vision (Shoback 78).

It would follow from this that film can emerge as a body on its own to which the viewer relates and responds, that the sensation of embodied selfhood, which is based on impressions, could also be reproduced in film. To further explore film's ability to affect viscerally and transmit a physical sense of an experience, I draw on Laura Marks and her research on the palpability of cinematic experiences by exploring another example from our documentary.

When we were crossing the border from Egypt to Israel one of the police officers at migration held on to Maria's passport and did not return it before making her acutely aware of the fact that he was turned on by her appearance. As many other experiences we have had at border crossings we were not able to film this moment. The only record we have, is one of Maria filling in the migration form with the said police officer visible in the background. A few days later in Haifa, Israel we talked about that incident in an interview:

MARIA: Había un policía que es el que me daba la carta de migraciones para que la llene... [There was this police officer who gave me a forms so that I would fill it out...].

For this scene we wanted to create a filmic account that would allow a visceral access to the experience we lived through that day and turned to Marks' theory of haptic visuality. Marks draws on Alois Riegl's notion of the haptic and the optic. She describes optical images as demanding separation so we can perceive the objects in them as distinct forms. In contrast to this, she describes haptic images as incomplete or unclear often requiring the viewer to contemplate the image as material.

MARIA: Bueno mi experiencia en la frontera de Egipto fue un poco rara. Había un policía que es el que me daba la carta de migraciones para que la llene, pero enseguida me di cuenta que estaba un poco, jugando conmigo de alguna manera un poco, ehm no se como decirlo... porque en Argentina diríamos baboso, muy baboso. Me empezó a mirar, me empezó a reír, ehm... tuvo que volver mi pasaporte, el entrego todos los pasaportes, se quedó con el mío hasta el final. Y cuando me lo iba a dar en verdad no estira su brazo sino que se queda con el pasaporte muy cerca suyo, como de su pecho, y bueno hace yo tenga que acercarme un poco más a él para tomarlo, y me sigue mirando de una manera muy fuerte. En estos momentos hay una sensación muy extraña. Es como que tienes ganas de ponerte dura, y mala cara, o decirle algo, y por otro lado sentís que hay un abuso de autoridad, que no sabes que puede llegar a pasar si haces algo de este estilo. Entonces bueno, es como en estos momentos es feo pero siento es como hay que bajar la cabeza y bueno seguir. [Well, my experience at the Egyptian border was, a little strange. There was a policeman who gave me the migration form to fill out, but I realized right away that he was 'playing' with me. IN a way, well... I don't know, how to say it, because in Argentina we would say *baboso* [sleazy/smeary]. He started to look at me, laugh at me. he returned all other passports but kept mine until the end. And when he finally returned it he kept it really close to his chest and so I had to get closer to him to take back my passport. While he kept looking at me in this sleazy way. In those moments I

felt a strange sensation. On the one hand you want to be hard, put on a bad face and say something to him. On the other hand you know this is abuse of authority, but you don't know what might happen if you say something. So under these circumstances it is painful, but you feel like you have to lower your head and well.. move on.]

This latest version of the border crossing scene makes use of an interplay between optical images that situate the audience by means of establishing shots and haptic images that seek to access the situation in a more visceral and tactile way. The blurriness of the image is meant to represent the blurriness of the situation and a degree of disorientation that we felt being there, not being sure how a reaction to his harassment might affect our plan of crossing the border.

As a knowledge domain the range of intuitive, sensory knowledge is often attributed to the primitive, while the distanced, rational, optical view is ascribed to the apparently enlightened and civilized. Repudiating this strict separation, an exploration of the haptic qualities of images in combination with an optical, more distanced approach, enables a more dynamic, less rigid relationship to our objects of enquiry and opens up access to visceral knowledge.

As we are editing and making sense of our experience we are employing a type of life writing that resorts to images, sounds, music, oral interviews and voice over. The self in our filmic autobiographical account is projected in the audio-visual material, as well as constructed through our editing decisions. Similar to alphabetic writing, the making of selves in filmic autobiographies happens by means of aesthetic choices, with the difference that the filmmaker may make use of recorded material like images and sounds.

Throughout the editing process, I learned that working with film can expand our understanding of how the self is created and mediated in spatial ways: As a "seen", the "voice" or as the "seer", our bodies are inscribed in our autobiographical work and create a spatial dimension of the self and the places this self inhabits. Now, we might ask ourselves why does this spatial dimension matter? And what is gained by thinking about space in the context of encounters with others and foreign places? Geographer and social scientist Doreen Massey provides an intriguing answer to this question. In an interview for the podcast *social science bites* she says:

If time is the dimension in which things happen one after the other, it's the dimension of succession, then space is the dimension of things being existing at the same time: of simultaneity. It's the dimension of multiplicity [...]. And space is that cut across all of those dimension. Now what that means is that space is the dimension that presents us with the existence of the other; space is the dimension of multiplicity (Massey "Space").

Film with it's unique ability to simultaneously present image, sound, music and combine different temporal dimensions, performs this element of multiplicity better than most other media. It allows us to create works that shed light on social relations and the way these relations shape spaces. Hidalgo makes a similar argument as she highlights how documentary film can let us experience female and intercultural relationships as they unfold in ways that the written word cannot. Her documentary *Vanishing Fronteras* is an example of this as it captures how four women from different cultures and races relate to each other as they share the same discursive spaces and physical places.

When trying to gain insight into a specific set of lived experiences, as for example that of female travels, film can help us expand our conception and perception of the self by addressing it in particularly spatial and material ways, acknowledging that one's situation in a place, is not just a geographical one, but also shaped by social relations between people and specific cultural, political and social contexts.

Placing emphasis on this dimensions of selfhood, autobiographical documentary film can help expand our understanding of the complexities involved in our encounters with ourselves and others. Our sense of selfhood is an embodied one and film - perhaps more so than other media - is able to afford to this.

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