



Through the Screen: Notes to *Permanent Transit*

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0.1 Caveat lector

The following text is not intended as an explication of the content of the video *Permanent Transit*. It is instead a theoretical exploration of the thought processes involved in making the work. For the most part, this discussion will be conducted within the framework of existential phenomenology as applied to film theory, especially in the work of Vivian Sobchack. I am also happily indebted to the writings of Trinh T. Minh-ha, whose structure provided a model for the format of this text.

1.1 Means

In making *Permanent Transit*, I was speaking a language partly invented, partly dreamed by the theoreticians named here, and partly learned from those artists who have been my greatest influences. This project is particularly indebted to the work of Mona Hatoum, Hollis Frampton, Martha Rosler and Ken Kobland. Rosler's collage series *Bringing the War Home* was the impetus behind a series of videos (of which this project is in some ways the culmination) in which I sought to demonstrate the interpenetration of spaces with opposite political charges. Kobland's cinematography and editing have a combination of looseness and rigor which speaks to the tics of human perception and especially human memory of place. The structure of audio experience in the installation of *Permanent Transit* is an homage to Hollis Frampton's film *Nostalgia*. And finally, Mona Hatoum, besides being the reason I believe in the possibility of rigorously

conceptual art with an emotional charge, gave her one-woman show at the Tate Modern the title *The Entire World as a Foreign Land*, starting me on a train of thought that culminates here.

2.1 Motive

To survive the Borderlands
you must live *sin fronteras*
be a crossroads.

Gloria Anzaldua ¹

When I began shooting *Permanent Transit* in May of 2001, I was in search of a political identity to anchor my self-imposed wanderings through the homes available to me on three continents. I hoped that somewhere -- hidden behind the sandbags of the West Bank, or glimpsed through the south fences of Lebanon, or felt as a shudder crossing the invisible line between East and West that lurks somewhere in Istanbul -- would be the name of my true home. Finally, I would receive the instructions detailing once and for all where my allegiance should lie, and I would be able to relax in the knowledge that I had found the place where I was most easily and absolutely myself. But after three months of experience filtered through the camera, I had to admit that I had found that elusive home only temporarily, in the transient moments of interconnectedness felt in the process -- not the destinations -- of my travels.

¹ Gloria Anzaldua, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987) p. 195.

In the realm of culture, outsidership is a powerful factor in understanding . . . [because] a meaning only reveals its depths once it has encountered and come into contact with another, foreign meaning: they engage in a kind of dialogue, which surmounts the closedness and one-sidedness of these particular meanings, these cultures.

M.M. Bakhtin²

In retrospect I'm not surprised that my most intense and sincere moments of engagement with, awareness of, and comfort in my environment occurred when I was in transit from one stop of my journey to another. I've seen at first- and second-hand how nationalist movements eat their young and wring out their women; when the politics of identity become the politics of statehood, I grow uneasy. Even as the colonizing gaze pins me like a specimen to a background of unrelenting flatness, my eyes are moving to the next view, the one through the window on the opposite wall; my ears are straining to detect through the glass the murmurings of other lives on the other side. I've moved – sometimes by choice, sometimes not – sixteen times in the past twenty-three years. In the circle of people I call my fellows, that's not even a high number. Maybe that's why the first time I read Bakhtin's theory of the importance of outsidership in cultural dialogue was also the first time I could imagine my own potential cultural production to be of any significance.

The screen itself is the cerebral membrane where immediate and direct confrontations take place between the past and the future, the inside and the outside, at a distance impossible to determine, independent of any fixed point . . .

Gilles Deleuze, describing the films of Alain Resnais³

² M.M. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, trans. Vern W. McGee, ed. Caryl Emerson & Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986) pp. 6-7.

The difficult position of the first generation born in the new country after immigration, exile, or expatriation is to embody the crossroads where different cultures meet to negotiate their claims – not on geopolitical territories but on the minute events, actions, and reactions of our everyday lives. We are compromised bodies; hearing one language with one ear and another with the other, we are equipped to understand only half of what's said everywhere we go.

In many ways this position parallels that of the contemporary documentarian, especially if the documentarian is in the guise of “domestic ethnographer.”⁴ By turning her equipment upon herself and/or people like her (family, friends, people with similar background, upbringing, or orientation), the domestic ethnographer seeks to act as a translator: she makes an obscure moment of culture clear and bright for an audience in another moment. Her documentary is a mediation, a compromise between the codes that govern one set of lives in one context and the codes that are readable to audience members in their context(s). This compromise is brought about through the on and off-screen actions of the body of the artist/translator, which becomes in some transubstantial way the body of the documentary produced. When you watch, her eyes become your eyes, her ears your ears, and even when you see her separate body it becomes like seeing yourself, transposing yourself into her situation. This bodily

³ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson & Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1989) p. 125.

⁴ Cf. Michael Renov, “Domestic Ethnography and the Construction of the ‘Other’ Self,” in Jane M. Gaines and Michael Renov, eds., *Collecting Visible Evidence* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1999) pp. 140-155.

identification, generally more characteristic of fiction film experience⁵, is near complete but still open-ended; at the same time you are relating what you see and hear to the body of your own experience, which remains outside the body of the film.

This condition is both the best and worst thing about being a crossroads: you feel both sides. So how can you choose? No wonder I feel most at home in the interstitial spaces of airplanes, train stations, borrowed cars, temporary rooms, movie theaters and conference centers – as long as I can see far enough through the window/screen to imagine my next frame of reference.

3.1 Method

Phenomenological analysis does not end with the “thick” description and thematization (or qualified reduction) of the phenomenon under investigation. It aims also for an interpretation of the phenomenon that discloses, however partially, the lived meaning, significance, and non-neutral value it has for those who engage it . . . Cinema is an objective phenomenon that comes – and becomes – before us in a structure that implicates both a sensible body and a sensual and sense-making subject. In its visual address and movement, it allows us to see what seems a visual impossibility: that we are at once intentional subjects and material objects in the world, the seer and the seen. It affirms both embodied being and the world. It also shows us that, sharing materiality and the world, we are intersubjective beings.

Vivian Sobchack⁶

⁵ Cf. Vivian Sobchack, “Towards a Phenomenology of Nonfiction Film Experience,” in Jane M. Gaines and Michael Renov, eds., *op.cit.*, pp.

⁶ Vivian Sobchack, “The Scene of the Screen: Envisioning Cinematic and Electronic ‘Presence,’” in Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and K. Ludwig Pfeiffer, eds., Materialities of Communication (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), p. 93.

Permanent Transit began as a collection of spaces. Each space was represented in the project's video database by the moving, yet supremely flat image of a window and by a stereo audio file of sound recorded at and around that window. Roughly half of the collected spaces were in motion through a landscape at the time of recording, and roughly half of the landscapes were in the Middle East and Eastern Europe, with the other half located in Western Europe and the United States. Each window was filmed from the inside of a self-contained space looking out towards a world visibly bounded by the frame of the window, whose position almost never changes within a single shot. At the same time the sound recordings suggested further dimensions both to the visible, framed outside and the invisible inside behind the back of the camera.

Creative understanding does not renounce itself, its own place in time, its own culture; and it forgets nothing. In order to understand, it is immensely important for the person who understands to be located outside the object of his or her creative understanding – in time, in space, in culture.

M.M. Bakhtin⁷

The collection began as part of a journey. The journey was driven by my intense curiosity as an artist about the abstract ideas of borders and homelands. At the same time, I had a number of personal reasons to travel, which dictated my specific choices of destinations. What linked the destinations for me was their correspondence to a network of interconnectivity based on personal relationships. So, in actuality, the center of the journey was not the pursuit of an abstract idea, but rather the pursuit of a particular kind of encounter: an encounter where, despite some borderline dividing me from the other, a Bakhtinian creative understanding was reached through exchange. And the video, as a reconstitution of the journey, became a record of connections

achieved and failed as well as a document of spaces altered by the presence of the camera.

The cinematic inscribes and provokes a sense of existential “presence” that is as synthetically centered as it is also mobile, split, and decentering. . . . Further, the very mobility of its vision structures the cinematic subject as always in the act of displacing itself in time, space, and the world – and thus, despite its existence as embodied and centered, always eluding its own (as well as our) containment.

Vivian Sobchack⁸

The video does not only reconstitute a journey, but also constitutes a new body: the body of the subject whose point of view/audition it re-members. Every cut in the video seems to displace this body from one geopolitical location to another, yet despite its high degree of mobility it is radically fixed to a center point by the immutability of the window frame – to such an extent that we must question whether it is the subject or the landscape that is truly moving. This subject is me and not me: it is my fallible and license-taking memory that structures the flow of events, and it is my physical body (one of the only bodies seen in the video image) that appears briefly before the lens at the beginning and end; but still my body is singular. The perception of the film’s subject, meanwhile, is multiple and simultaneous, and this flexibility allows the subject’s body to re-form itself in relation to each new body of spectators that it encounters. Moreover, the subject’s body is transparent: it is not looked at but looked through.

Experimental cinema as far back as Dziga Vertov . . . through specific exploration of devices like repetition, partial repetition, permutation and system, prefigures many of the structural principles inherent in the technology of random access memory. What is more important in the

⁷ Bakhtin, *op.cit.*, p. 7.

⁸ Vivian Sobchack, “The Scene of the Screen: Envisioning Cinematic and Electronic ‘Presence,’” pp. 88-89.

artistic context is that they represent the development of philosophical constructs which constitute more appropriate models for contemporary experience than do those offered by the singular and fatalistic structure of classical narrative.

Malcolm LeGrice, in Millennium Film Journal No. 28 (Spring 1995)
*Interactivities*⁹

The structure of *Permanent Transit* may at first appear to be a random sampling from a database, or a highly organized system of retrieval governed by arbitrary and obscure rules. In fact, the edits mimic the connections of my human memory, rather than those of a program operating on blocks of RAM: they are not truly random, but neither are they strictly chronological or geographical; instead they are primarily associative. Occasionally the cuts are also motivated by the need to maintain narrative suspense within a particular space, although the overall structure is not narrative. Even more rarely the cuts are informational, in the traditional documentary mode. Perhaps because the editing is primarily associative, different viewers (bringing their own associations to the piece) identify interpretive cuts in different places than I do. The structure of the video does not impose a singular meaning on each cut; instead it suggests that the path I took as an editor through the database of available material is only one of multiple possible paths. At the end of *Permanent Transit*, as daylight seeps out of the frame and the world grows hushed and uncertain, this potential for structural mutability becomes clear when images and sounds begin to pile up on top of each other and spaces formerly kept separate suddenly slide together.

Sound must be understood as primarily experienced, or at least at times experiencable[sic], not in the modality of ostension, or exhibition, but in the modality of what might be called the *mutative commixture of*

⁹ Malcolm Le Grice, "Kismet, Protagony and the Zap Splat Syndrome" in Millennium Film Journal no. 28, *Interactivities* (<http://mfj-online.org/journalPages/MFJ28/ZapSplat.html>, 1995), p. 4.

substances. Sound is substantial, plastic, voluminous . . . What sight does not permit is commixture. When sounds come together, by contrast, they change and are changed; they enter into each other. Edges dissolve . . . In sound, things merge and interpenetrate. Sound is the mixing and reciprocal mutation of bodies and substances. Sound is the realm of metamorphosis.

Steven Connor (auth. ital.)¹⁰

This commutative conclusion has, however, been anticipated throughout the video by a fast and loose mixing of sound. Most viewers, accustomed as we are to cinematic sound mixes that create an impossibly perfect point of audition by piecing together separately recorded sounds, do not notice breakdowns in the vision-audition sync relationship unless they involve dialogue spoken by a body whose mouth is visible on screen. In this case, I deliberately created a mix to correspond to each shot in which audio believable as sync was commingled with audio that, while low enough in the mix to pass mostly unremarked, occasionally had associations so unbelievable as sync that they would subtly enhance the audience perception of the subject as displaced, multiple and simultaneous. I also mixed sound recorded in still spaces with sound recorded in moving spaces, thereby creating further confusion as to whether the cinematic subject is moving through the landscape or vice versa.

For what is not within the film frame cannot be seen by us, even if it is immediately beside the things that are. Light or shadow can be thrown into the picture from outside and the outline of a shadow can betray to the spectator what is outside the frame but still in the same sector of space, although the picture will show only a shadow. In sound things are different. An acoustic environment inevitably encroaches on the close-up shot and what we hear in this case is not a shadow or a beam of light, but the sounds themselves, which can always be heard throughout the whole

¹⁰ Steven Connor, "Sounding Out Film," presented at [Film, Literature and Modernity Conference](#) (London, Institute of English Studies: January 13-15, 2000), p. 10. **N.B.** Page numbers refer to text reproduced at <http://www.bbk.ac.uk/eh/eng/skc/soundingout/>.

space of the picture, however small a section of that space is included in the close-up. Sound cannot be blocked out.

Bela Balazs¹¹

The doubling of the frame and the one-angle-per-scene ratio in the image track of *Permanent Transit* radically limit the visual description of space. Information about what lies beyond the frame is contained primarily in the audio. But because the cinematic subject's point of view is directed away from the space she inhabits (toward the future visible through the window), this visual rigidity frees the editor to create a "mutative commixture" of sounds. The framing prevents the viewer/listener from locating the visual source of the sounds heard, thus permitting the loosening of sync relationships without immediately breaking the all-important illusion of simultaneity. Thus whatever sounds are heard without being returned to a visual referent are taken up by the viewers as description of an offscreen space continuous with what they see through the frame.

In order to hear a sound, one must have already heard it start to decay, or come to an end; one must have already started finishing hearing it. One hears very largely analeptically, in memory, even with the most shockingly immediate of sound effects, which appear to bore a hole in auditory attention which is then only slowly filled up with definition . . . A question is always broached by a sound, a question that cannot be laid to rest until the sound is embodied, prescribed an origin, returned to the source from which it can then be seen to have come.

Steven Connor¹²

The heart of the acousmatic perception concerns the daily life identification process: when one is prevented from visually verifying a sound-source, one automatically proceeds to associate the sound by comparing with past

¹¹ Bela Balazs, "Theory of the Film: Sound," in Elisabeth Weis and John Belton, eds., *Film Sound: Theory and Practice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), p. 121.

¹² Connor, *op.cit.*, p. 6.

experiences, using the memory as a 'reference-bank of correlation between sound and experience.'

Bjorn Hellstrom, citing British composer Denis Smalley¹³

What kind of description of offscreen space do viewers generate when the sounds that provide their information are multiple, occasionally conflicting, and never returned to a visible origin? My hypothesis is that each individual viewer/listener reaches back into his personal memory-bank for a visual image of the associative referent most familiar to him, thereby creating a picture of the whole space that melds together my snapshot of a place specific to my journey with his own remembered environment. For a moment, as the past of the viewer meets the just-past of the sound heard and the present of the image before the eyes, the screen is the membrane of paramnesia¹⁴ and the screening room a mnemonic device that transports each viewer to an individually constructed space, a place that is the sum of their memories and mine. And when the moment has passed, the confusion of memories remains, and the video transmission is stored almost as a personal experience, something overheard rather than a piece of hearsay.

For Meunier, the structure of identification in the home-movie attitude is essentially one of *evocation*. That is, the function of the *film-souvenir* for its viewer is incantatory and procurative, and its images are taken up as an intermediary, mnemonic, and channeling device *through* which the viewer evokes and identifies not with the mimetic image, but with an absent person or past event . . . Thus, even as they retain the specificity from which their motivational power emerges, the images of the *film-souvenir* are not apprehended *for* themselves, but rather *as* the catalyst to a primarily constitutive and generalizing activity that transcends their specificity in an attempt to call up and reactivate the 'real' and 'whole' person or event that is (or was) elsewhere and at some other time.

¹³ Bjorn Hellstrom, "Modelling of Sounds in Public Spaces," PDF (Stockholm: Arkitekturskolan Kungliga Tekniska Hogskolan, 2001) p. 6. Acousmatic is a concept developed by Pierre Schaeffer and refers to "the condition when a sound is apprehended, but the association to the source is detached" (French Larousse Dictionary).

¹⁴ Defined by Henri Bergson as *deja-vu*, or the illusion of already having been there.

Vivian Sobchack (auth. ital.)¹⁵

In 1969, Jean-Pierre Meunier formulated a phenomenology of cinematic identification that identified three different types of film consciousness attached respectively to the fiction film, the documentary film, and the *film-souvenir*. This suggestive French term for the home movie may be particularly apt to describe the mnemonic nature of *Permanent Transit*: its connotations bring together the carefully framed flatness of the picture postcard and the active verb for remembering. Indeed, although the video's elements are mostly documentary, the experience of watching and especially of hearing it is unlike the passive reception of information sometimes characteristic of documentaries because so much of the video's information is delivered offscreen, thereby engaging the viewer/listener in an active and individualized synthesis of those elements.

When the voice is heard in sound closeup without reverb, it is likely to be at once the voice the spectator internalizes as his or her own and the voice that takes total possession of the diegetic space. It is both completely internal and invading the entire universe.

Michel Chion¹⁶

At this point I should address the particular role of the unseen narrating voice in *Permanent Transit*. Several theorists of film sound, including most prominently Kaja Silverman and Michel Chion, have written about the psychoanalytic implications of audience identification with voice-over narration. From a phenomenological viewpoint, the traditional voiceover takes possession of the diegetic space for several specific reasons: first, its dominant placement in the sound mix, which prevents the listener from

¹⁵ Sobchack, "Towards a Phenomenology of Nonfiction Film Experience," pp. 246-247.

¹⁶ Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, ed. and trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), pp. 79-80.

apprehending it on the same plane of reality as the other sound tracks; second, its function as a description of the space seen on the screen, which dictates to the viewer what should be seen; third, its use of the past tense in description of present scenes, which makes the scenes seem like a proprietary recollection and also endows the voice with the authority of foreknowledge; and fourth, its direct address to the audience without a diegetic intermediary listener.

What is thought of here is a sort of word carpet which, woven from scraps of dialogue or other kinds of communications, impresses the audience mainly as a coherent sound pattern . . . On the surface, this use of speech seems to go against the grain of the medium by disregarding the visual contributions. And yet it is cinematic by extension. The voice patterns brought into focus belong to the physical world about us no less than its visible components; and they are so elusive that they would hardly be noticed were it not for the sound camera which records them faithfully. Only in photographing them like any visible phenomenon – not to mention mechanical reproduction processes outside the cinema – are we able to lay hold on these transitory verbal conglomerates. The fact that they palpably form part of the accidental flow of life still increases their affiliation with the medium.

Siegfried Kracauer¹⁷

The narrative thread unevenly stitched throughout *Permanent Transit* departs from the traditional voiceover model in all respects. The narrator's voice is mixed low, the story is told in the present tense, and a listener interrupts the narrative flow at several points. Most importantly, it is an act of storytelling that we overhear, not a description of events just occurred or about to unfold. The story has no obvious relationship to the image track; it is up to the audience to correlate the verbalized events of the narrative to the spaces before their eyes and to the myriad of other voices, languages, snatches of song and scraps of sound that interject themselves between segments of narration. The

loaded status of the unseen narrative voice as the supposed authority on the offscreen world surrounding the screen is offset by the fact that all the voices and indeed most of the sound sources in the video are offscreen. In this way, all the information delivered can be (although it often is not) apprehended on the same plane of reality.

The nation at war is a parallel memory, a paramnesia, a mislocation in time and space . . . the state's only existence is a visual hallucination akin to dreaming.

Paul Virilio¹⁸

Moreover, the storytelling is very specifically addressed; it is told by my mother, an exile of the Lebanese and Afghan civil wars, to me, a member of the hybrid generation raised by exiles in the West. And the story told, although it has the universal resonance of the best fables, belongs to a specific historical moment. The source of the story is a narrative comedy sketch, produced by Doreid Laham for Lebanese television at the height of the civil war, about a man who loses his passport and gets trapped in the nomansland between two borders set up by warring factions who refuse to let him back in. At the conclusion of the story, he resigns himself and makes a life in the border zone with a Bedouin woman smuggler who helps him open a coffeehouse patronized by both sides. The story told in the video, however, is a remembering of the original at a distance of twenty years. The inaccuracy of the retelling, combined with the evocation of a dislocating and hallucinatory period in the national dream, directs even those listeners who remember a visual referent for the sketch to relate the storytelling back not to the spaces of the original but rather to the video's overall pattern of spatial construction through acousmatic paramnesia.

¹⁷ Siegfried Kracauer, "Dialogue and Sound," in Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 110.

4.1 Manifestation

In the sound film, the fixed, immutable, permanent distance between spectator and actor is eliminated not only visually, but acoustically as well. Not only as spectators, but as listeners, too, we are transferred from our seats to the space in which the events depicted on the screen are taking place.

Bela Balazs¹⁹

My objective throughout the process of making *Permanent Transit* has been to create a cinematic environment that can be seen through, that acts as an index to the audience's own future memories rather than an object in itself. I imagine it as a window that lures you to look through its frame, only to discover that the window opens out onto another window that opens onto another window onto another until you've leaned so far through that you either fall into the unknown or meet your own reflection in the glass. The culmination of this thought process was the decision to present the installation of *Permanent Transit* in the following manner. The video is projected onto a transparent scrim suspended in the center of a dark room. The video can be watched from either side of the room; but if you are standing on the side of the room where you enter, you can faintly hear that from the other side of the screen other sounds are emanating. As you continue to watch those other sounds start to feel oddly familiar, almost anticipatory. If your curiosity leads you to walk to the other side, you will discover that you have passed right through the window; now you are hearing the sounds of the next window before you see it. The future becomes the present, and if you pass back through the room you will be hearing the past. The sync relationships that helped you

¹⁸ Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception* (London: Verso, 1989), p. 49.

construct a space to surround the screen are put into question; your position in that space and even your position in time are suddenly uncertain.

One moment you are looking at a window that could be your own kitchen window, and hearing familiar, half-identifiable sounds that could be the sounds of your own life in that kitchen. As you look at it you feel that room around you; if you reach your hand just so far to the left you'll find that spoon left on the counter after breakfast. But the world beyond the glass looks a little different. You're trying to remember where you've seen this view before, and as you shuffle through a mental file of postcards you hear something strange. You look through the window, trying to see where the sound is coming from, and suddenly you're in another place, looking at another window, immersed in the flood of a foreign conversation or the rush of air in a moving car. Look again and the captain is addressing the passengers, doors slam, forks are dropped, water runs and runs and finally stops. A train passes by the window and you're back in the kitchen but something different is happening, the call of the muezzin faint through the glass. A phone rings, a child cries out. You move to answer and the window changes again. Your plane is taking off. But somehow you could still be in your own home, absent-mindedly washing the dishes and watching your neighbors' windows light up and subside back into darkness. Everything is still and yet you seem to see the molecules rushing like pixels to compose that stillness. Scenes form and reform around you, yet at your center, you feel an intense calm. You are living different lives simultaneously; other environments are entering into your

¹⁹ Balazs p. 8.

own and their familiar continuity would have surprised you five minutes ago but now it is immensely unsurprising, for you are living the inbetween. The entire world is revealed to you as an almost-foreign land; even the topography of your own hand is at once mysterious and familiar. You belong equally to the rush and the calm, the new and the deja-vu. You have entered the borderlands; you are in permanent transit.