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## LONGING FOR ARRIVAL

*Visual Representations of Cultural Mis/Encounters*

**ABSTRACT:** Either planned or unexpected, the interruption of travel is an arrival of sorts that plays out as a cultural encounter constrained by the difference between the traveler's experience and her expectations. This article refers to three visual representations of the (im)possibility of such cultural encounters, where the viewer gets access to the pervasive liminal space that prevents the actualization of the encounter and becomes the vehicle or performer of the gap. Sergei Loznitsa's documentary film *Austerlitz* (2016) is an account of the phenomenon of heritage tourism observed at a Holocaust memorial site. Through framings of insistent exposure of the visible and audible, the film reveals the embodied dimension of a pervasive longing for an elusive cultural meaning. *Austerlitz* situates this mis-encounter within a liminal space continually adjusted by the distance between viewer and filmic subject. Karim Aïnouz's documentary film *Central Airport THF* (2018) looks at the experience of Syrian asylum seekers sheltered in the hangars of Berlin's defunct Tempelhof Airport. The film contrasts the migrants' daily lives inside the former airport's regimented space with scenes of locals enjoying activities in the park built around the runways. The tension between the two social geographies prompts the viewer to acknowledge the in-between as an inescapable zone of cultural and political distance. Maja Nydal Eriksen's traveling photography exhibition *100% FOREIGN?* (Copenhagen City Hall 2017) assembles photographic portraits co-authored by its former refugees subjects, along empowering first person narratives of their stories of living as 'foreigners' in Denmark. However, through its setting, the exhibition fails to situate the viewer within a position that could destabilize her outsider gaze and trigger a sense of responsibility. While these texts employ, manipulate, and rely on a performative understanding of the idea of gaze, they are effective in so far as they destabilize the viewer from her position of detached observer, and bring her to acknowledge the responsibility of a belonging.

**KEYWORDS:** Tourism, Migration, Documentary Film, Photography, Viewer Position.

Throughout their movement, people make stops in order to establish new grounds, make contact with new environments, or mark their destination. While traveling for vastly different scopes, the tourist and the migrant share similar challenges once they arrest their movement and come to a stop. Either planned or unexpected, the interruption of travel is an arrival of sorts that plays out as a cultural encounter constrained by the difference between the traveler's experience and her expectations. This article refers to three visual texts that propose representations of the (im)possibility of such cultural encounters, where the viewer gets access to the pervasive liminal space that

prevents the actualization of the encounter, and becomes the vehicle or performer of the gap. The texts – two documentary films preoccupied respectively by the phenomenon of migration and that of heritage tourism, and a photography exhibition which translates the migration experience into a first-person introduction to be experienced from the position of the visitor/tourist – bring to the fore, either explicitly or implicitly, an attempt at reconciling a personal history with a collective one, and a necessary reassessment of the present as informed by the past.

While these texts employ, manipulate, and rely on a performative understanding of the idea of gaze, they are effective in so far as they destabilize the viewer from her position of detached observer, and bring her to acknowledge the responsibility of a belonging. In this sense, while the construction of the films occasions uncomfortable glimpses of viewers' own reflections, the setting of the photographic exhibition perpetuates a problematic dynamic by reinforcing the segregation between viewer and subject of representation.

### The Screen as Broken Mirror

Sergei Loznitsa's documentary film *Austerlitz* (2016) is an observational account of the behaviour of visitors to the Holocaust memorial site preserved at the former concentration camp Sachsenhausen in Oranienberg, Germany. *Dark tourism*, a term coined by Foley and Lennon, refers to the increased touristic interest in visiting places of death, disaster and atrocity. (Foley, Lennon 1996, 198-211) Academic scholarship that focuses on visitors' sought experiences at dark heritage sites suggests that the participants perceive the visit as a heritage experience, akin to the phenomenon of *heritage tourism*. (Biran, Poria, Oren 2010, 836) *Austerlitz* engages with the sensorial modes of production, representation and communication associated with the experience of this type of heritage tourism. The film disrupts the ethnographic format, and eschews the sociological information survey, as it explores the potential of image and sound to confound and frustrate viewers' expectations of direct access to knowledge. In this sense, *Austerlitz* is a cultural text that allows for what Martini and Buda see as a necessary "in-depth analysis of the nexus between dark tourism and affect" (*Ibid.*).

The film's construction assembles framings of insistent exposure of the visible and audible, in order to give access to that which is not visible or audible, or not representable as such. The viewer's experience follows a disconcerting learning curve. Gradually, she comes to recognize the images' refusal of transparency, and is forced to negotiate increasingly discomfiting implications. The black and white quality of the image directs the eye's attention to specific elements in the frame, while the tones of gray stimulate

the viewers' perception of the choreography of movement. There is a sense of uniformity, which is accentuated by the framing of people moving in hordes, gazing, listening, or eating in groups. Through the permanent mingling and circulating, the animated bodies display an order of their own. The film reframes this performance-in-the-making in order to suggest the tensions inherent in the phenomenon of heritage tourism at dark sites. According to Urry and Larsen (2011, 19-146), the corporeal performance centered on the tourist gaze is authorized by the specific discourse of *heritage and memory*, a discourse that promotes travel to national shrines and buildings as central to the affirmation of cultures, regions and nations. This discourse would imply a specific type of sociality, that, given the nature of the site, is akin to the *romantic gaze*: "With what we call the *romantic gaze*, solitude, privacy and a personal, semi-spiritual relationship with the object of the gaze are emphasized. In such cases, tourists expect to look at the object privately or at least only with 'significant others'" (*Ibid.*, 19). *Austerlitz* focuses on the *collective* tourist gaze, which involves "large numbers of people [indicating] that this is *the place to be*" (*Ibid.*). In an analysis of an interview-based survey on the motivations and behavior of young tourists visiting the memorial site at Auschwitz, T. P. Thurnell-Read writes: "... there was a certain amount of expectation that people should and would visit the site if they were visiting Krakow. ... [A] sense of personal duty or obligation was often highlighted as a motivational factor" (Thurnell-Read 2009, 34). A paradox of the romantic gaze surfaces: the more followers advertise the practice as virtuous, the less solitary and personal it is (Urry, Larsen 2011, 227).

While the film gestures toward the systemic dysfunction that led to the incongruity between the meaning and the scale of this memorializing experience, its construction attests to the filmmaker's insight into a complex dynamic not readily decipherable. As part of heritage tourism, the process of memorial-visiting is accomplished through performances that involve being, doing, touching, and seeing. (*Ibid.*, 191) The film portrays tourists behaving according to explicit rules – they listen to audio-tour players, walk on established paths, wait in lines, follow and listen to tour guides. These expressions of conformity relate also to implicit codes informed by "mindsets, habitual practices and social relations that tourists carry unreflexively along with them."<sup>1</sup> People's regimented walking under the prescribed attention determined by self-guided audio tours illustrates the tourist 'seeing' as an established set of practices, meant to allow one not to 'see' in real time, but to identify buildings, objects and sites as signs and tourist clichés. (*Ibid.*, 17) Similarly, the compulsory capturing of the visual experience onto photographic and recording devices suggests that the tourist gaze is a practice

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<sup>1</sup> J. Larsen 2008, 21-34; quoted in Urry and Larsen 2011, 192.

“not so much experienced in itself but for its future memory.”<sup>2</sup> The film evokes a critical position that Urry had articulated in his work: “Cameras and images have speeded up and mechanized the tourist’s vision. Complex places are consumed as lightweight pre-arranged photo-scenes and experiencing is akin to seeing, seeing reduced to glancing and picture-making to clicking” (*Ibid.*, 187).

These cultural practices that the film both records and perpetuates are topical manifestations of broader systemic dysfunctions. The visitors are performers in a showcase bigger than themselves, whose orchestration the film exposes, deconstructs and partakes in. There are several ways in which Loznitsa registers his necessary complicity with the mediated touristic performance, thus troubling the viewer’s complacency as observer. The most visible one is the inclusion of shots in which the camera becomes the subject of other cameras’ recording activities, or is seemingly addressed by people’s returning gazes. At a photographed signpost on the road, a man uses his mobile phone to take a panoramic recording of the setting – with his feet anchored to the ground, and right hand raised to align the phone with his eyeline, he slowly turns his upper-body in a circular motion that stops when his phone is aligned with the gaze of the filmmaker’s camera. In an interesting scene lasting more than three minutes, the camera, placed in front of an open door against a white wall, films people coming from the dark room out into the light. We hardly discern the visitors’ contours while still inside, but as they approach the exit and their faces are lit, we notice a particular pattern of their gaze: most of them hold their eyes momentarily on a particular point of interest that coincides with the position of the camera. It is less relevant whether these tourists actually see or acknowledge the camera, or if they look at something else, as it is the effect this scene has on the economy of the film. The expressions on the people’s faces vary from surprise to disconcertment to discomfort to passive aggressive defense, as they look once, then avert their eyes, and then look back again as to check if what they see is real. At the same time, all these people walk and move away in different directions, none approaching this undesired object that is the focus of their momentary gaze. Both the man who records the recorder in the previous scene, and the visitors returning the gaze in this one place the filmmaker’s camera and the viewer on the same field of sight. This alignment creates a symmetry that constrains the spectator into sharing the position of filmic subject. Together with Loznitsa, we stare at the people, but are stared back at – so what is it that makes us different from these tourists? The film summons the viewers to recognize their own reflections on the screen.

A more oblique way in which the filmmaker acknowledges his belonging to the subjects he films is through the construction of the frames. In almost all

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<sup>2</sup> Crang 1997, 137-54; quoted in Urry and Larsen 2011, 180.

the scenes that involve interior spaces, the fixed camera is placed in front of, next to, or across a window, a door, or a combination of these. Through its insistence on otherwise unremarkable circulation zones, the camera allows compounded visions of the relays of gazing implied within the choreography of movement, and gestures from a position of both participant and observer situated on the threshold between inside and outside. Halfway through the film, an almost two-minute take shows the images visible from the outside of a three-panel closed window – the main activity of visitors moving in and out of a room with walls covered by white tiles is blurred by the window reflections of objects and people moving outside, on the same side of the camera. Outside strolling and inside staring overlap as if they are superimposed images, and compound a dreamy effect revealing people that fade in and out of indistinct spaces, stop and gaze, come close to the window and eerily stare towards, through, but not *at* the camera. Through its prolonged stasis, the camera amplifies this visual effect of orchestrated chaos, and brings the viewer to a troubling recognition: within this multilayered agitation, structured on and around the intersection of gazes, the film reveals the embodied dimension of a pervasive longing for a cultural encounter that can never happen.

This cultural mis-encounter occupies a liminal space that the film fine-tunes by adjusting the distance between viewer and filmic subject. Overall, the film assumes a critical distance aimed at the viewer's pondering of the implications of this heritage tourism. This distance is undermined, however, by the camera work's suggestion that, as subjects of the film, the heritage tourists are not necessarily different from the filmmaker or the spectator. The film's sensible attention to this pervasive and inescapable partaking in a debatable cultural phenomenon points to a reading that attends to affect. This is readily apparent in the scenes where groups of tourists listen to their docent's speeches on historical details of extermination areas. While each guide delivers the atrocious facts within a personal narrative style, they all perform their roles of facilitators of the historic-memorial discourse for an audience at a loss to find an appropriate reaction.

The viewer of the film hears fragments of discourses in different languages (subtitled in English), and sees the faces and bodies of the listening tourists as frozen in gestures of aborted reactions. The effect is one of overwhelming emotional confusion and psychological unease: while the words of the spoken narratives mandate the acknowledgement of the gravity of the moment, the idiosyncrasies of each speaker reinforce the performative character of the setting. This push and pull brings the viewer into a partaking of the experience *along* with the tourists on the screen, as she recognizes their awkward reactions as expressions of her own disorientation.

People's inability to produce an emotion commensurate with their experience gives way to an expression of *affect*, or that which is "unconscious,

below, behind and beyond cognition,” and suggests a double cultural *impasse* (Martini, Buda 2018, 5). On the one hand, this expression of affect speaks for the tourists’ impossibility of arrival at a meaning of their memorial enterprise, as the concentration camp visitation refuses human comprehension or apprehension. On the other hand, the film’s foregrounding of this expression of affect troubles the viewer into recognizing her own partaking in a disquieting affective compulsion, by staging the encounter with her own unwanted but familiar reflection.

### Filmic Liminal Space

Karim Ainouz’s documentary *Central Airport THF* (2018) proposes a first person account of the experience of Syrian asylum seekers stationed in Germany’s largest emergency shelter improvised in the hangars of Berlin’s defunct Tempelhof Airport. The 18-year-old Syrian refugee Ibrahim al Hussein tells his story in voice-over while the camera registers moments of his daily routines and interactions during his last year at THF. *Central Airport THF* frames the complex process of receiving and sheltering the refugees against an evocative topography of the space, and amplifies the unsolvable tensions of this social intermediation by projecting them on the architectural organization of the Central Airport’s building and runways. The filmic construction relies on the foreground-background alternation of its dual theme: in the foreground, the temporary, but indefinite and uncertain, respite of the migrants, as gathered within a forced community; in the background, the mechanical separation and utilitarian repurposing of the components of an iconic space historically associated with people in transit. In his study on documentary filmic representations of the dramatic increase of migration to Europe, Jan Kühnemund notes:

Films carry the potential to expose the relationship between images of the ‘Self’ and the ‘Other’ that facilitate the construction of a national (or supranational) entity on the one hand and the role such images play with regard to immigration policies and the production of knowledge for governmental practices on the other (Kühnemund 2018, 13).

*Central Airport THF* subtly brings to the surface the perpetuation, against the participants’ gesturing to the contrary, of specific relationships between images of the ‘Self’ and the ‘Other,’ while enacting a filmic resistance to this practice through a lyrical visual abstraction of the location.

The two themes of the film are introduced from the very beginning. Before any images, the following words in Arabic announce the first-person approach of the theme of immigration: “My first day in Berlin left such an impression on me. I still remember the Christmas lights and the street

decorations. Those first few hours after I arrived were full of joy. I never want to forget that day.” The first images show a group of tourists that listen to their guide’s historical account while staring at different halls and walls inside Tempelhof Airport. The complex of buildings, that, as we learn, served as an important transit hub that passed from Hitler’s ambitions of grandeur, to Soviet, and then American occupation, is now the object of contemplation for architecturally inclined visitors and lends its high platform for tourists’ vantage point over the surrounding runways. THF is represented as facilitating and attracting a certain type of gaze associated with leisure and tourism, an image complemented by the scene of children riding Segways on the former runways that are now part of Tempelhof Park. The film already establishes its two areas of interest as distinct zones that exist and function beyond each other’s radar, and suggests its preoccupation with making perceptible for the viewer the presence of an understated realm of cultural non-closure.

The camera develops the portrait of the community of migrants inside the hangar-shelter by focusing on Ibrahim’s daily activities and the interactions between social actors with whom we become familiar. These images are punctuated by shots that capture the choreography of people’s movement along and between the divider walls of the hangar space. Medical personnel interview families, young children receive vaccinations, a man gets a haircut, social workers speak with refugees, refugees take German lessons, people eat together at tables, or go outside in the back of the building for a cigarette break. The mundane appearance of these activities levels the cultural discrepancies of the participants and allows an image of normality for, and of, the refugees. At the same time, as framed against the incongruous space of the hangar, these otherwise normal interactions preserve an awkward alterity. A high-angle shot registers the regimented sleep-time ensured by the centralized turning off of the lights over the boxes without ceilings that serve as bedrooms. The construction of the frames underscores the scale contrast between the dimensions of the domestic setting and the ample, intimidating size of the hangar’s windows and doors.

The representation recalls, at times, the following sociological description: “Reception centres as spaces of exception are total institutions where the private sphere cannot be protected, life is assistance-based and everyday life is void and repetitive” (Calcagno, Bologna 2019, 74). In *Central Airport*, the focus on people’s interactions reveals the image of the shelter space as a complex microcosm marked by contrasts and contradictions: the space acts as an impersonal, institutional ‘home’ – over dinner table with friends, a man expresses both fatigue over his lengthy stay and determination to resist being moved; a transitional safe-heaven – an old man voices his gratitude for arriving to this place to the caring Iraqi medical worker whose own status is uncertain; an oasis allowing the performance of cultural community – when

Ibrahim's friend comes to his room for a smoke, they listen to Arabic music; a place of constrained and perpetual present – people have no certainty of what the future brings, and no ability to take action before being sorted through the system. The film focuses on the warm, supportive character of human interaction, as it shows both local social workers and migrants engaged in concerted efforts toward a meaningful communication. At the same time, there are scenes that suggest a performance that operates within ready-made perceptions of 'self' and 'other.' During one German language lesson, when the instructor explains to the students how to make sentences about men cutting wood in order for women to make fires, Ibrahim comments that they do not live like this nowadays in Syria, as they have electricity and gas. The film depicts the hangar space as inhabited by the migrant community in a way in which the German speaking social workers, the locals, stand out as the 'other,' as the carriers of difference, like well-intentioned foreigners performing their tasks dutifully but somehow mechanically and from a distance.

This reversal of the media-inherited image of the refugee as 'other' through the redirection of the othering gaze towards the default image of 'self' is amplified by Ibrahim's voice-over narration against images taken outside the airport buildings and around the former runways. In one scene, Ibrahim and his friend light cigarettes in the outside gathering space. It rains, men walk into the frame and stop for a chat, and stand or sit against the wall, facing the camera. In voice-over, Ibrahim reminisces about the friendships he made during his school years. The next image is of an empty runway in the late evening rain – in the background, the airport building traces the horizon, punctuated by high-hanging lamps that drip their light within vertical reflections on the wet runway. Against this stylized, almost abstract image, Ibrahim's voice-over continues: "But now life has changed. It's not like that anymore. Some of us, like me, fled from the region. Some of us stayed there. And some of us died because of the war." The young man speaks with a monotone voice, in simple matter-of-fact sentences that contrast with the dramatic and emotional intensity of the moments described. The sequence is built as a refraction and sublimation of the images conjured by the words – these men that temporarily share the frame carry individual stories of loss and migration. The scene enacts a sense of camaraderie and community these men have left behind and are trying to recreate, while it suggests their presence as subjects brought together by dramatic individual trajectories that resonate or intersect with that of Ibrahim. At the same time, the performative effect of the work of visuals against the narrated words confronts the viewer's tendency to generalize the migrants' experiences and to essentialize Ibrahim's as typical. While it subtly brings the characters into subjecthood, the film troubles the viewer into an untenable, as not identifiable, position.

According to Kühnemund, the media representations of migration and flight as dramas "draw on well-known figures, icons and metaphors ... [that]



tell the old tale of ‘Us’ and ‘Them.’ ... They leave no questions, no doubt; they homogenise and victimise – and, above all, they emotionalise” (Kühnemund 2018, 8-9). In *Central Airport*, the migrants speak, think, behave and feel like ‘us,’ within and against a space that ‘we’ perceive as strange. Through a reversal of familiarity, in which the refugees’ domestic activities expose the awkward context of their surroundings, the representation frustrates the viewer’s disposition for ethnographic knowledge and humanist compassion. The film’s framing of the social dynamic against the surrounding space troubles the expected spectatorial position and recalibrates the distance between subject and viewer. Swiftly dragged into the mind and body of the young narrator, the viewer negotiates the resonances between Ibrahim’s dreamy recollections and the long takes of vast and alien architectural landscapes. The discontinued runways, now part of a public park, filmed at dusk or dawn, summery green or covered in snow, are often deserted except for an occasional jogger or walker. Surveyed through periodic car rides by the security patrol, and separated from THF by a non-enforcing fence, this buffer space is open and accessible to the migrants, but seems to mark a threshold they are hardly interested in crossing over. The construction of the frames accentuates the slightly dysfunctional character of the re-territorialized area and allows the viewer the uncanny perspective of a newcomer.

The liminal state evoked by the images of the runway park is most tangible in the scenes showing crowds of leisurely locals. In the first shot of a sequence half-way through the film, it is summer and people are riding Segways, crossing the frame right in front of the camera – with their slightly oblique, straight bodies affixed to their vehicles, against the background marked by the airport building, and the ambient sound growing into an eerie holding of an equal chord, the riders seem otherworldly. Next, the camera surveys the perspective of the runway, with silhouettes of bikers, joggers and walkers crossing the frame in the distance. The third image is a medium shot of Ibrahim, who stands on the runway and looks around to take in the spectacle. What he sees, the following shots suggest, are groups of people having picnics on the grass with a relaxed, worryless attitude the viewer recognizes as familiar. But our sense of ease is fleeting, as the fluctuations of the music score frame the images as disorienting and strange. Ibrahim walks away slowly while the camera keeps him in the center of the frame, alone on the runway. His words come in at the end of the sequence, as notes in the margin of an aerial view of the busy grass field divided by asphalt paths, and bordered by the airport building at the horizon: “My village was divided by a river, between South and North. I lived in the south.” The image serves as a virtual actualization of a fading memory, and the viewer finds herself afloat between the visual attestations of familiarity, and the aural evocations of alterity. Invited to share in the body and mind of the young refugee, the viewer perceives her virtual belonging among the worryless weekenders as an

extracorporeal experience. Pushed and pulled between the two social geographies, the viewer is prompted to acknowledge the in-between as an inescapable zone of cultural and political distance.

### Still Narratives

In the summer of 2017, the Copenhagen City Hall was the host of the traveling photography exhibition *100% FOREIGN?* presented as such on its website: “100% FOREIGN? is a documentary art project with 100 portraits and 100 texts of 100 citizens, which statistically represent the 161,000 people who have been granted asylum in Denmark since 1956” (*100% FREMMED?*). Produced by Metropolis/ Copenhagen International Theatre, with a concept and photographs designed by artist Maja Nydal Eriksen, the exhibition comprised photographic portraits of former refugees mounted on large panels along first-person narrations of their stories of living as ‘foreigners’ in Denmark. The participants are photographed in elaborate poses staged in Tivoli entertainment park:

In the pictures Tivoli works as an old-fashioned photo studio, where the participants dress well, choosing their own background and posing with the people and objects that matter most to them. With the park’s myriad colors, figures, symbols and materials, the images try to escape the narrative of refugees as ‘victims’ of their destiny (*Ibid.*).

Set against the background of a wave of controversial anti-immigration measures adopted by the Danish government in reaction to the steady increase in the number of migrants seeking asylum in Denmark, the exhibition aims to restore agency to a population not only ignored but also lately vilified.<sup>3</sup>

In an article on photographic representations of migrants, Thy Phu writes:

[R]efugees are coming into focus as subjects of human-interest stories, narratives that attend to the figures of wounded bodies, innocent children, and displaced families .... What are the photographic conventions of those stories, and what are the meanings of these conventions? Importantly, what counter-stories emerge if, rather than dwelling on how spectators view photographs of refugee, we consider refugee ways of seeing, with respect to photographs of refugee subjects and photographs they make of themselves? (Phu 2018, 137)

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<sup>3</sup> The following article details Denmark’s policies with regards to the phenomenon of increased migration: Edward Delman, “How Not to Welcome Refugees” <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/01/denmark-refugees-immigration-law/431520/>.

The exhibition *100% FOREIGN?* appropriates and turns around the idea of human-interest story in two compelling ways. First, it proposes a hybrid documentary platform where the written text and the photographic image are given equal expressive weight. Second, it stands as the outcome of a participatory project, in which the subjects stage, and perform in, their photo shoots, and contribute first-person narratives to accompany their created image.

Presented as short introductions, the texts read as idiosyncratic fragments of refugees' factual and emotional narratives of their experience of changing cultures. Asked to situate themselves in relation to their attributed quality as *foreign*, the subjects reflect on their trajectory leading to their present status within stories that balance newly acquired freedoms against various compromises.<sup>4</sup> As affirmations of the speakers' agency over their own words, the texts escape predictable narrative patterns and provoke the viewer with a form of knowledge that avoids ethnographic tropes. Viewer's engagement with the human-interest story is here troubled by the very subjective and personal character of people's statements of reasoning or feeling: "Foreignness is something existential, and more about your mentality than where you are geographically. ... I don't identify myself with a particular nation" (Selma Mesic).<sup>5</sup> "I feel foreign in Denmark, even more than 100%. ... The Danish Parliament is just like the South African national rugby team before apartheid" (Kalimira Mzee Murhul).<sup>6</sup> "I believe one could increase the sentences for serious crime in Denmark and deport foreigners who have committed rape or murder" (Haseeb Amiri, *100% FREMMED?*). These statements summon the viewer to engage with the subjects' positions as expressed in strong, uncomfortable points of view, and to reflect on the factors that determined and influenced these perspectives.

The photographs complement the written narratives through performative embodiments of subjects' own images of themselves, and act as visual affirmations of people's coming into their own in a country that officially calls them foreign. Seated or standing in choreographed postures enhanced with props, alone or with company, some wearing intriguing accouterments, the migrants co-author and perform a visual representation of their own identity. While the written interview enables a direct

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<sup>4</sup> "DST's statistics bank categorises people considered not of Danish heritage into two groups: 'immigrants' and 'descendants' of immigrants (*efterkommere* in Danish). A person is considered to have Danish heritage if she or he has at least one parent who is a Danish citizen and was born in Denmark. People defined as 'immigrants' and 'descendants' do not fulfil those criteria." Michael Barrett, "Here's where Denmark's foreign residents live and where they come from" <https://www.thelocal.dk/20180411/heres-where-denmarks-foreign-residents-live-and-where-they-come-from>.

<sup>5</sup> From my personal documentation of the exhibit.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

communication of thoughts, opinions and feelings, the image operates within the sensorial and affective realm of visual communication. The participants approach the visual performance as an allowance to adjust the degree of their exposure, and experiment with creative associations. In many of the images, the refugees seem self-absorbed in their performative act, as they direct their gaze toward the camera, but not beyond it – the camera behaves as a mirror that guarantees the return of the desired image. This attitude can be interpreted as a gesture of reluctance in the face of the project's solicitation of multiple forms of communication and exposure. The photographs give the viewer the sense of a hermetic construction, of a riddle that comes with no solution.

Preoccupied with its performative framing, the exhibition does not fully develop the specific relationship between a subject's written narrative and visual portrait. How should the viewer-visitor situate herself in order to perceive these distinctive modes of self-presentation – visual and linguistic – as necessarily belonging to the same creative subject? What type of intra-media translations is one expected to perform in order to perceive these disjunctive expressive elements as determinant for the portrait of one individual subject? The exhibit shows a hesitation in its form of address that is manifest at two levels. First, there is a lack of cohesion in its attempt to bring together two different forms of solicitation of the subjects' sharing of themselves – the form of interview (here, in written form), and the form of portrait photography. More importantly, the project stops short of addressing the viewer's engagement in the immediate experience of the setting, as well as her role in the broader issue of the systemic dysfunctions the stories of these migrants illustrate. Conceived as an attempt at remediating an increasingly urgent socio-political rift through facilitating an artistically enabled cultural encounter, the Copenhagen setting of the itinerant exhibition remains unable to close the distance between its visitors and its participant subjects.

### The Viewer is Present

The works analyzed are built around privileged moments of respite, when people on the move stop and attempt to take in, and engage with, a context marked by its difference, be it historical, cultural or social. The dynamic between two conflicting elements determines the quality of the effect of each of these projects. On the one hand, these representations center on the participants' gesture towards reaching out that comes from an urgency to understand and know, to appropriate an alterity not readily comprehensible. On the other hand, there is the context of leisure, of activity pursued unconstrained and outside one's engagement with work and everyday

experiences. (Urry, Larsen 2011, 4) The projects suggest a specific tension by framing the human need to comprehend a historical moment, a social behavior, or a group of people, against the context of touristic visitations of a heritage site or a photography exhibition, or of leisurely activities in the park. The degree to which these works acknowledge and inhabit this tension stands for their ability to allow the spectator a relevant and responsible position in respect to the social actor.

Addressed to the visitor-explorer of Copenhagen, the photographs and texts of the *100% FOREIGN?* exhibition are arranged and exposed on high panels that divide the ground floor of the monumental Copenhagen City Hall. Intrigued by the performative presentations of the photographic subjects, the viewer-visitor modifies her leisurely stroll through the building in an attempt to understand the stories written in first-person. But these stories remain fragmentary, as they are composed of seemingly arbitrary juxtapositions of photographs and written monologues. While the viewer-visitor wanders through a repurposed space in which representations of migrants are assembled from non-cohesive elements, she struggles to find a viewing position that would allow her the experience of a meaningful encounter. The photography exhibition provides no intermediate space able to reveal the viewer's privileged position, or allow a reflection of her contribution that could destabilize her outsider gaze and trigger a sense of responsibility.

*Austerlitz* deconstructs the phenomenon of tourist visitation of Holocaust sites into behavioral components that, while they seem repulsive within a certain order of expectations, are perplexing as we recognize them as part of our own cultural repertory. Through its structure, the film opens an unbearable space of responsibility that comes from the viewer's understanding that the questionable behavior she witnesses stems from an urgency that she shares, and that she is prone to perpetuate as much as she detests it. *Central Airport* reverses the sense of difference, and the perception of otherness, by telling its story from inside the community of refugees sheltered in the Tempelhof hangars. Led to experience the park surrounding the airport through the young Syrian refugee's eyes, the viewer becomes estranged from the locals spending their free time in the park and perceives them as aliens oblivious to the migrants' presence. Once again, the spectator is brought into a space where she has to recognize her own belonging to a social group whose strange behavior she now observes from the outside, along Ibrahim's momentary tourist gaze. Both films amplify the incongruence between the mundane, frivolous character of the leisurely attitude, and the stringency and intensity of the need for cultural resolution through revelatory contact, by playing it against the viewer's position within the socio-cultural phenomenon portrayed.

The photographic exhibition preserves the distance between viewer-visitor and subjects, as it stops short of exploring the tension between the dense, interiorized performances of the refugees, and the unconstrained, leisurely perusing of the passersby. The construction of the documentary films summons the viewer to acknowledge her ambiguous position of both insider and outsider, by allowing her to experience the void of a gap impossible to close and that she inevitably perpetuates.

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