

Hotel Mother Tongue or the Non-place of Identity

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(...)

Agency and non-place

The ideal of a movement and of free bilingualism or multilingualism, of a language that is nowhere and a place that is just one of many stations along a road seemed to me to find its foremost interpreter and place in the multimodal medium of the moving image. Thus, I stopped studying literature and switched to film. Film in Finland is also essentially multilingual; the films are never dubbed and are mostly shown with subtitles both in Finnish and in Swedish.

But besides that there was a more profound poetics of the moving image that was sensitive to the materiality and heterogeneity of the surrounding world. The spoken word in film has a resonance, timbre and volume that places and concretizes every character. The world of film can never simply represent an abstract norm as the written language can. Film as a medium is also always a mixture of documentary and fiction. The screen and its borders (the frame) are the facts of film, but this reality never becomes fixed content-wise because the poetics of film consists mainly of a denial of the dependence on a material, flat space; and the means for that rejection is the editing and the sound. Thus, the place of film – the story we experience and interpret – is by necessity illusory. And it is through the matching of flat and limited images with each other that we create in our minds a physical and concrete place. A reality.

The Non-place of identity

Hence, place is constructed and illusory in film but we construct it so it becomes 'reality'-like. And the experience is real. Feelings are real. It is the same with identity, or almost. As the British anthropologist Edmund Leach has argued in his structuralist classic *Culture and Communication*, identity is based on a fundamental contradiction. Not only in the sense that we are dealing with something that is both same and different simultaneously, but moreover, that a purely stable I, and therefore an identity would be completely impotent (and therefore impossible); that because individuals do not live in the society as individuals with clear-cut boundaries; they exist as individuals interconnected in a network of relations of power and domination. Thus Leach claims that: "power resides in the inter faces between individuals, in ambiguous boundaries". Thus it is in these ambiguous boundaries that the complicated game of identity takes place. I choose to call it a non-place because it can't be fixed – it is one of those contested and intricate intersections between the private and the social where it becomes impossible to point out the boundaries for either one. The real of identity is illusory but not our experience.

Ryokan Mother Tongue

It is this thematic in relation to the poetics of the moving image that – according to me -- the artist Pekka Niskanen displays so well in his work "Ryokan Mother Tongue".

Niskanen's piece shows two men and a woman moving around in private and public spaces remembering and reflecting on past personal events. They speak either Finnish or English with an accent (German or Finnish). Two important places and public spaces in the narrative of the film are a hotel and a hospital, which are however never shown visually in the film. What is significant for hotels and hospitals are their character of borderlands between the private and the social or public. A hotel is a public place where we may retain our privacy. The hospital on the other hand is a place where our most private selves are brought out into the open. What Niskanen displays visually is the intersection between social, or performed identity, and private, or experienced identity. We see characters moving in public places like concert halls and lecture halls, but acting as if they were – so to speak – at home. The camera moves

endlessly in and out of the various locations as if displaying the non-place of a position; denying a stable place for the viewer, the subject.

By establishing such a strong parallelism between the private and the social Niskanen is not, however, taking a stance, i.e. stressing the social or private character of what is the true home or true foundation for identity. Instead the questions are left open. This openness characterizes the poetics of the film as well: the illusory space of the film, constructed by the editing and sound, do not strive for a coherent space as if suggesting the idea that we are all children of the hotel mother tongue: constantly checking in and checking out, temporary private inhabitants in a public domain.

Identity or an ethics of otherness?

If then the question of identity is as complex as for example both Leach and Niskanen suggests; and if language, the social frame that we are born into, is something that we have to leave or transgress or turn into a hotel for our experiences how is it possible then to retain a sense of social community and self without exercising power over ourselves and others in the manner I described in the beginning? How to avoid the prison-house?

One suggestion might be, and I think Pekka Niskanen shows that aptly in his film and video installation, that we may never solve these problems – they are fundamentally social and therefore fundamentally human. We can on the other hand very well be aware of the problems and contradictions and be receptive to them and therefore also responsive to the problems and contradictions. That is in turn a starting point for, what I would like to call an aesthetic of otherness or mimesis.

For me, the greatness of film, or the moving image, is the way it brings the things and sounds which already surround us into the fore. We are given the opportunity to experience the world in all its material freshness. Niskanen does this by using careful, but restless and sweeping camera movements, and by depicting sounds and spaces that are never stitched together so that he would impose his subjectivity or individual will upon us or upon what is depicted. There is thus a respect for the other, for the material, for the enigmatic in *Ryokan Mother Tongue*. A respect for what Theodor Adorno calls the mimetic.

My interpretation of Adorno is that the mimetic is primarily an attitude. An approach that I think Niskanen has as well. Thus, my point would be that such an attitude may constitute an ethics, an ideal of how to approach the question of identity in contemporary Europe. The mimetic attitude is a way of relating to other people and the social world in such a manner that the otherness is preserved. It is this possibility which I think is one of the basic qualities in the moving image (in opposition to one of the great transformative art forms: the written language). Thus I would want to suggest that it is more difficult for film to adhere to a 'false projection': the projection of an image that turns everything into its own image -- because a truthful projection preserves the otherness of the other.

Hence, if I go back to where I started, with my own personal story: My basic feeling when being tossed between the prison-house and the hotel of language was that I wanted to keep the feeling of otherness that I experienced but that I was not allowed to have it. Thus, and this is my main thesis in this talk: identity politics must therefore strive for a preservation of the otherness of the individual, for the particular.

What I am presenting here is not original thinking. Many have pointed this out before, and please do not ask me how to implement a cultural politics according to an ethics of otherness, or, of non-identity. I don't know. But what is original, in this performance is the artwork that I am referring to. It allows us the experience of the contradictions in the concept of identity and narrates stories that are more or less familiar to most of the people who have been – and still are – struggling with their identity. "*Ryokan Mother Tongue*" does that, however, without delivering answers, but by displaying otherness and therefore preserving it.