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Grounding the Global: How Dutch Art and Literature Resound
Exoticism or the Translation of Cultural Difference

Ernst van Alphen

The "critical dimension of literature and art" is still the most common criteria of aesthetic judgment in Western contemporary aesthetic thought. With the rise of modernist aesthetics, in one way or another, a literary text or art work is supposed to embody a critical point of view. This critical dimension should, however, not be articulated explicitly, because it becomes propaganda. It should be demonstrated in an indirect way; shown, acted out, but not said. The implied criticism is not necessarily political, social, or existential. It can also be self-referential by the embodiment of a critique on the literary or artistic tradition. But it is the critical position of a work which serves as a touchstone for critics to differentiate between good and bad works, important and insignificant works.

Although this critical dimension is still highly common as criteria of judgement, at the same time it has become impossible or contested as criteria of judgement in an era that is defined by cultural postcolonialism. According to French art critic Bourriaud, the postcolonial ideology underlying postcolonialism, especially when it manifests itself as multiculturalism, is paving the way for a complete assimilation of references and criteria of aesthetic judgment. For, present critical discourse on art and literature is based on the desire for recognition of cultural difference and of the other as other. This complicates critical judgment radically. In the words of Bourriaud:

Facing: the Local and the Global, or Intimacy Across Divisions

Mieke Bal

Introduction

One of the most tenacious instances of universalism — the belief in the universality of something — is motherhood, undoubtedly the most intimate, hence, local of relationships. The current state of the allegedly globalized world makes this universalism both unapologetically necessary and deeply problematic. This ambivalence is the topic of my contribution to this meeting. My proposal for a new perspective in literary and art studies is inspired by this ambivalence. I focus on the concept of facing in order to develop a vision of the arts that foregrounds both the global and the local, the universal and the intimate.

First of all, it is necessary to shed the problematic binary between universalism and relativism that has so long dominated our thinking about intercultural issues. Thinking of motherhood as a universal usefully counters problematic relativizing. For example, relativizing the horror of losing a child by alleging that, in some severely underprivileged countries, losing a child to illnesses, hunger, or violence occurs so frequently that it is “normal,” would be a painful condescension and a scandalous acceptance of the unacceptable. In the globalized world, the opposite move is necessary. Now that we are bound to those underprivileged situations by knowledge and economic complicity, assuming the universality of motherhood — through a “strategic universalism” — is a political necessity. Only through that assumption does the scandal of the inequities that globalization both promotes and lays bare become apparent.

At the same time and even for the same reasons, the opposite move is just as indispensable. One of the most severe challenges to the idea, or hope, of any universality is the division produced all over the world between people whose everyday life and its intimacy are readily assured and those who lead an existence of “infra-humanity.” Among other consequences, this division also produced an unsettling tension when the two parts of our supposedly unified world collided in Western countries as a result of migration. Migration causes the coexistence of one social environment of people who can afford to live permanently in a place and those who cannot — those who are driven to displacement.

This situation deeply impinges on (conceptions and practices of) motherhood. It interrupts that relationship and brutally destroys the relation of intimacy, since the proximity or distancing between mother and child is no longer a matter of choice. The combination of motherhood and migration, then, is a good place to reflect on the confrontation between globalization and intimacy.

1. With “strategic universalism” I mean a universalist treatment, analysis, and understanding of issues, which does not necessarily entail a belief in the universality of these issues.
2. The term comes from Colombian artist Doris Salcedo. Salcedo’s Unveiled Communion (Shibboleth) in the Tate Modern in London consisted of a long, dark, and elaborate crack in the floor of the Turbine Hall. The catalogue explains the artist’s attempt to put the global division between people down literally. The term “infra-humanity” must be understood in that context. See Shibboleth, Exhibition catalogue (London: Tate, 2007).
against the backdrop of a non-oppositional binary of singularity and universality. The relationship between the singular and the general — to use a more abstract binary that encompasses both universalism—singularity and globalization—intimacy—also holds for my own analyses. It has consequences for the relationship between my video-making (or, taking the word video graphy literally, video-writing) and my academic writing.

An additional introductory caution is called for here. Although one of my video installations is central to my argument, this is not a traditional case study but an exploration, through one particular “case” of the dynamic complementarity between media. One goal is to make the authors staged in this installation, full-participants in what can only be a multi-voiced discussion. Another goal is to develop a methodology suitable for the object of study.  

In terms of the methodological innovation this panel is devoted to, rather than generalizing on the basis of a singular case, I am constantly going back and forth between one special view and another. This is nothing new. In terms of the logic of reasoning, this movement is neither deductive nor inductive but what the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, with an idiosyncratic term, called “abductive”. This method has been defined it as follows: “In general abduction is considered as that type of inference which leads to hypothetical explanations for observed facts. In this sense it is the opposite of deduction. "Abduction goes from consequence to possible cause. As Van der Lubbe and Van Zoest write, this type of logic is “diagnostic”.  

Deduction, in contrast, reasons from cause to consequence and is thus prognostic. Although abduction is itself not new at all, it makes innovation possible. According to Peirce, abduction is the way through which new ideas become possible. It has the singular as its starting point and makes creative leaps. It thrives on uncertainty and speculation, but its origin in observable facts remains primary. I consider abduction the most suitable form of reasoning in the face of globalization and the need to know what intimacy can mean for people at the other end of the economic division.  

This abductive approach to what appear to be case studies has been an increasingly stimulating guideline in my recent work. Over the past six years I have explored this tension through several video works on migration. Most of these are based on the performativity of intimacy with migrants; they are concerned with situations of displacement (Lost in Space) and show migrants struggling to achieve some level of integration (A Thousand and One Days; A Clean Job) or suffering from the economic consequences of globalization (Colony). The tension between intimacy and the consequences of globalization is enacted most explicitly in a video installation made between 2006 and 2008, with a supplement in 2010. Through a discussion of this installation I seek to grasp intimacy on terms that allow for the strategic use of universalism ("motherhood") as well as for the foregrounding of differences ("migration").

Installation Johannesburg, South Africa

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\(^{1}\) Making video is an attempt to respond directly to the constant actuality of the topics of the contemporary. By definition, the contemporary causes the heterarchy of publications. This will always make it impossible to limit our research to literatures. In addition to this temporal argument, video, while of course not fully accounts others, preserves something of the voice of the subjects they stage.


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\(^{3}\) For an overview of the term “abduction” and the sources in Peirce’s source, see Franklin, Peirce’s notion of Abduction.

\(^{4}\) For a complete list of or for stills and synopses of these works, see http://www.wilshdsh.org.
The Project

The installation titled *Nothing is Missing* consists of a variable number of audiovisual units that play DVDs of about thirty minutes in which a mother talks about a child who has left in migration. Imagine a gallery looking like a generic living room, where visiting is like a social call. The image is a portrait, a close-up, of a woman speaking to someone else. Apart from a short introductory sequence that sets up the situation, the videos consist of unedited single shots. Sometimes, we hear the voice of the interlocutor; in other cases, we hear no one other than the woman speaking. Every once in a while, one of them falls silent, as if she were listening to the others. The installation itself enact the tension between global and intimate, since the domestic ambiance is created within a space that is public, although often not a space where such installations are expected. I have installed it in museums and galleries, academic settings, and office spaces — in a corner office at the Department of Justice in The Hague, for example.\(^5\)

\(^5\) *Nothing is Missing*, multiple-channel video installation. DVD, owner, and mixed media, 4 to 15 min, 28 to 35 minutes, looped. Currently the installation is part of a large solo exhibition *Towards the Other in the Peter and Paul Fortress, Saint Petersburg, Russia*, planned for October 2011 and will be part of a group show, *Care Cities*, in Aegae, November 2011.

This installation probes the contradiction between images of universalism as a symptomatic exclusion and as a strategy to enhance differences. My provisional answer to the contradiction between these two elements is to replace any thematic universalism with a performative one, and an essential universalism with a strategic dynamic variant that is constantly challenged by singularities. Between aesthetic and academic work, a certain activism through the promotion of reflection-based experience is also present. The question that the video work raises, and that the present paper attempts to answer, is how it is possible to make intimate contact across the many divisions that separate people in different cultural, that is, linguistic, economic, and familial situations, and why it matters to do so. The goal is not to reach a universal ground for communication but instead to establish the universal as the ground on which differences can performatively be brought into dialogue.

The women are from various countries from which people have migrated since the onset of modern-day globalization. Still living in their home countries, they all saw a child leave to Western Europe or to the United States. My project is not an attempt to understand migration as such, nor to defend its necessity for the people engaging in it, which I take for granted. Rather, if we are to understand the possibility of a universal such as motherhood through insight into the intimate local relationships against the backdrop of a globalized world, we must first of all realize the enormity of the consequences involved and the changes in the souls of individuals taking this drastic step. We must wonder, that is, why people decide they must leave behind their affective ties, relatives, friends, and habits—in short, everything that constitutes their intimate everyday lives. These motivations, which are too complex to allow any generalizations, tend to include economic necessity but are rarely limited to that overarching issue. While my purpose is not to fully understand these complex motivations, I bring them to the fore here, considering that they are relevant in being among the ambivalences toward the migration of their child to which the mothers testify. My primary goal is to explore the possibility of an "aesthetic understanding" that, by means of its own intimacy across the gaps of globalization, can engage the political.
Those terms refer to a simple understanding of the two domains. For aesthetics I return to the 18th-century philosopher Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, who developed the notion of binding through the senses, and, incidentally, also considered aesthetics a useful approach to the political. Since this conception presupposes neither formal beauty nor a separate artistic sphere, it seems a useful starting point to develop the idea of an aesthetic understanding that studies the distinction between academic and artistic exploration. Moreover, the proximity presupposed by the sense-based experience also establishes intimacy between the subject and the object of the aesthetic moment. Hence, this approach further my attempt to develop a methodology that approximates the “subject”.  

For the political I rely on the distinctions between politics and the political currently advanced by, among others, Jacques Rancière® and Chantal Mouffe. In a clear and concise book about this distinction, the latter defines the two terms as follows:

by “the political” I mean the dimension of antagonism which I take to be constitutive of human societies, while by “politics” I mean the set of practices and institutions through which an order is created, organizing human coexistence in the context of conflictuality provided by the political.®

In this distinction, politics is the organization that settles conflict; the political is where conflict “happens.” Thanks to the political, social life is possible. Politics, however, constantly attempts to dampen the political. Rancière uses different terms for the same distinction. In his work, Mouffe’s “politics” corresponds to “the police,” and her “political” is identical to his “politics.” Since I find Mouffe’s terms clearer, I will proceed to use those.

According to Mouffe’s view, everyday life, including the intimacy that inhabits it, pertains to the political. It is there that intimacy must be grasped. In my view, a first step to contemplating these questions is a triple set of facing. Facing sums up the aesthetic and political principle of my video work *Nothing is Missing*, which is an attempt to reflect on severance and its consequences. Through this installation, I attempt to shift two common universal definitions of humanity: the notion of an individual autonomy of a vulgarized Cartesian ego and that of a subjecting passivity derived from the principle of Bishop Berkeley’s “to be is to be perceived”. The former slogan has done damage in ruling out the participation of the body and the emotions in rational thought. The latter, recognizable in the Lacanian as well as in certain Bakhtinian traditions, has sometimes over-extended a sense of passivity and coexistence into a denial of political agency and, hence, responsibility. Reflecting on facing helps me to rethink these notions. I try to shift these views in favor of an intercultural aesthetic based on a performance of contact. In order to elaborate such an alternative I have focused this installation on the bond between speech and face as the site of the performance of a universal. Here, I use speech not just in terms of “giving voice,” but also and more importantly in terms of listening and answering, all in their multiple meanings; furthermore, I would like to turn the face, the classical “window of the soul”, into an “interface.”

 Installation Arhus, Denmark

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Facing Philosophy

Facing constitutes three acts at once. Literally, facing is the act of looking someone else in the face. It is also coming to terms with something that is difficult to live down by looking it in the face rather than denying or repressing it. Thirdly, it is making contact, placing the emphasis on the second person, and acknowledging the necessity of that contact simply in order to sustain life. Instead of "to be is to be perceived" and "I think, therefore I am", facing proposes, "I face (you); hence, we are." For this reason, facing is my proposal for a performance of contact across divisions, one that avoids the traps of universalist exclusion and relativist condescendence.

For this purpose, I first make the move from the two universalist views of humanity — Descartes' and Berkeley's — to a merger that replaces both: from esse est percipi (to be is to be perceived) to cogito ergo sumus (I knew you therefore we are). There is no clearer — almost programmatic — demonstration of Berkeley's view than Samuel Beckett's only film, called Film. As Anthony Uihmann has pointed out, Berkeley's formula, as elaborated to exhaustion by Beckett, is agony-inducing. As it happens, this identity without agency already shows linguistically in the mere fact that the formula defines being in non-personal form. As a result, Uihmann argues, Beckett's film explores the agonizing feelings that result from a consciousness of being through being perceived. Film explores the relationship of disharmony between the three types of images Deleuze distinguishes in Cinema 1. The perception-image is the result of the viewer's selection from the visible world of those images that might be useful for her. The action-image presents possibilities to act upon what is seen. In-between, the affection-image compels the viewer — who is affected by the perception — to consider action. Stuck in (negative) affect when he is the object of someone else's perception, the protagonist of Film, played by the aging and decidedly not comical Buster Keaton, flees from the notion of perceivability in the film's "action images."

The sets of eyes that watch this man and that he eliminates, show us the violence of the "perception image," whereas the ending, the close-up of the "affection image," translates affect into pure horror. This story can offer a useful counterpoint for the installation Nothing is Missing. There, these three types of images culminate in the mitigated close-up of the face that shuttles between perception image and affection image without the leap to action. Here, neither horror as a form of revolt, nor passive perceivability as a handing over of human agency, but a rigorously affirmed second-personhood is the reply to this pessimistic view. The "perceivability" that the predominance of the close-up foregrounds, does not lead to either rejection or agency, but instead to an empowering performativity. This, then, is my reply to Berkeley's pessimistic view of vision as violence.

Now, Descartes. The notion that Descartes in the bad gay of Enlightenment existentialism seems to reduce him in the same way as he was seen to be reducing human existence. According to French thinker Jean-Joseph Guiz, the stake of the cogito is not primarily the link between thinking and being, nor even the exclusive emphasis on reason and the exclusion of the body, but the tautological grammatical use of the first person: I think, I therefore I am. The point is the possibility to describe human existence outside of the need to use the second person.

The popularity of his formula has done more harm than good to Western thought, especially in its exclusions, its exciting of not only emotions, but also the dependency of human life on others from human existence. I call it an autistic version of humanity, and deny it the universalist hath come to claim. Yet, the dependency on others is so obvious and absolute that it may well have

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been its very inevitability that informed the desire to erase it in the first place. From the baby’s mother to social caretakers to linguistic second persons, this dependency has been articulated clearly in psychoanalysis, sociology, and linguistics, respectively: so much so, in fact, that being a second person seems more “natural” a definition of being human than anything else. Second-personhood, I contend, may well be the only and most important universal of human existence, while its repression underlies other universalist definitions. ①

This means that we cannot exist without others — in the eye of the other as in the eye of the storm (Berkeley, Beckett), as much as in sustenance of others (the ethical imperative to which Descartes, according to the vulgarised cogito, refuses to owe his existence). That is where I would start any attempt to confront universality as the ground where globalization meets — allows, enables, or precludes — intimacy. I do this not to pursue the beating of the Cartesian dead horse, but, on the contrary, to keep its mind the productivity of returning with “critical intimacy” to moments of the past, such as the dawn of rationalism in the seventeenth century. ②

In this I am joining a growing group of scholars exploring the history of thought and developing alternative ways of thinking humanity, many influenced by Deleuze, his Spinoza, his Leibniz, and his Bergson — to name the names that underlie my thoughts here. ③

An increasing number of scholars are studying the relevance of Descartes’s


Facing: the Local and the Global, or Intimacy Across Divisions 53 contemporary Baruch Spinoza for an alternative stream of thought between early and late rationalism. The line Spinoza — Bergson — Deleuze has led to extremely important and productive revisions of the image, perception, and feeling. Some of those new ideas lie at the heart of the “migratory aesthetics” of my installation — an aesthetics of geographical mobility beyond the nation-state and its linguistic uniformity. Philosophers Moira Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd wrote a useful book that unpacks those ideas in Spinoza’s writing that can be employed for contemporary social thought. ④

Gatens and Lloyd’s book does three things at once that are relevant for my project, furthering the activity of “migratory aesthetics” and deploying the performative face in that context. Firstly, they develop an intercultural relational ethics. To this end, they invoke the relevance of Spinoza’s work for a reasoned position in relation to aboriginal Australians’ claim to the land that was taken from them by European settlers. These claimants are not migrants since they stayed put while their land was taken away from underneath them, but their claims are based on a culturally specific conception of subjecthood and ownership that makes an excellent case for the collective and historical responsibility the authors put forward with the help of Spinoza. This responsibility is key to any possible universality. It is a relation to the past that we have to face today.

That this intercultural ethics should be based on a 17th-century writer who never met such claimants — although he was definitely a migratory subject — makes, secondly, a case for a historiography that I have termed “prepostorous.” This conception of history is focused on the relevance of present issues for a re-visioning of the past. In alignment with intercultural relationality, we could call it inter-temporal.

Thirdly, the authors make their case on the basis of the integration, an actual

merging of Spinoza's ontological, ethical, and political writings — three philosophical disciplines traditionally considered separately. This, of course, exemplifies interdisciplinarity. In order to transform it from a fashionable buzzword into an intellectually responsible and specific notion, interdisciplinarity could be modeled on inter-facing in the sense I am developing here: as a universalist practice.

Against this background — my search for an alternative to masochistic passivity and activism as a ground for the possibility of a performative universal — the face, with all the potential this concept-image possesses, seemed an excellent place to start. But to deploy the face for this purpose requires one more negative act: the elimination of an oppressive sentimentalism that has appropriated the face for universalist claims in a threefold way — as the window of the soul, as the key to identity translated into individuality, and as the site of policing. With this move I also seek to suspend any tendency to sentimentalizing interpretations of Nothing is Missing.

I: Internal Otherness

I: Internal Otherness

The abuses of the face that individualism underpins are, in turn, articulated by means of a form of thought that confuses origin with articulation, and runs on a historicism as simplistically linear as it is obsessive. Common origin is a primary ideology of universalism. This involves motherhood: all human beings are born from a mother (even if this universal is no longer true). Creation stories from around the world tend to worry about the beginning of humanity in terms of the non-humanity that precedes it. Psychoanalysis primarily projects on the maternal face the beginning of the child's aesthetic relationality.

Both discourses of psychoanalysis and, as I will demonstrate shortly, aesthetics show their hand in those searches for beginnings. Both searches for origins are predicated on individualism, anchored as they are in the mythical structure of evolution as ongoing separation, splitting, and specification.

Here, I take issue with an individualistic conception of beginnings through an alternative view that I will draw from literary theory. A few years after his pathbreaking book Orientalism, the late Palestinian intellectual Edward Said wrote a book on the novels of the Western canon, entitled Beginnings: Intention and Method. In this book he demonstrated that the opening of a literary work programs the entire text that follows, from its content and its style to its poignancy and aesthetic. It is the thesis of Nothing is Missing that this is true for cultural-political reality as well. Origin is a forward-projecting illusion. Therefore, in this installation I wished to explore a different sense of beginning — not in motherhood, but in migration. The primary question is why people decide to leave behind their lives as they know them and project their lives forward into the unknown. With this focus, I aim to invert the literal evolutionism in the search for beginnings, and, in the same sweep, the focus on children and babies inherent to that strange contradiction of individualistic universalist theories of the subject.

Today, with authorities displaying high anxiety over the invisibility of the Islamic veiled face, we cannot overestimate the importance of the ideology of the face for the construction of contemporary socio-political divides. To briefly show the workings of this ideology I look to an art-historical publication that earned its stripes in its own field: a study on the portrait, the artistic genre par excellence where individualism is the condition sine qua non of its very existence.
Confusing, like so many others do, origin with articulation in his study of
the portrait — the genre of the face — art historian Richard Brilliant explains
the genre with reference to babies:

The dynamic nature of portraits and the “occasionality” that anchors
their imagery in life seem ultimately to depend on the primary experience of
the infant in amni. The child, gazes up at its mother, imprints her vitally
important image so firmly on its mind that soon enough she can be
recognized almost instantly and without conscious thought. 3

Like psychoanalysis, art history here grounds one of its primary genres in a
fantastic projection of what babies see, do, and desire. Both disciplines can
and must be challenged for their universalism. 4

The shift operates through the self-evident importance attributed to
documentary realism, a second un questioned value in Western humanist culture
that has been elevated to a universal status and that has also been inscribed in
the face. Identity pictures as a form of policing demonstrate the bond between
these two sides of the ideology of the face. The point of the portrait is the belief
in the real existence of the person depicted, the “vital relationship between
the portrait and its object of representation.” 5 The portraits that compose Nothing is
Missing challenge these joint assumptions of individualism and realism and their
claim to generalized validity.

The women in this work are, of course, “real,” as real as you and me,
and individual — as different from you and me as the world’s divides have
programmed. At first sight, they have also been documented as such. At the
same time, however, the installation enables them to speak “together” from
within a cultural-political position that makes them absolutely distinct and

4. “Occasionality” refers to the reality depicted; in the case of the portrait, it refers to the other.

absolutely connected at once. This is the meaning of the silences that suggests
they are listening to one another, even if they never actually met.

As for the documentary nature of their images, again, this is both
obvious and obvious false, since the situation of speech is framed as both
hyper-personal and utterly staged. I filmed the migrants’ mothers talking about
their motivation to support or try to withhold their children who wished to leave
and about their own grief to see them go. The mothers talk about this crucial
moment in their past to a person close to them, often someone whose absence in
their life was caused by the child’s departure — a grandchild, a daughter-in
law, or the children themselves. This is a first take on the universal performance
of contact I want to propose, against the more exclusionist universalities. In this
performance, I contend, intimacy plays itself out against the odds of
globalization-informed separation.

The act and mode of filming itself is implicated in this theoretical move. It
is, in one sense, perfectly and perhaps excessively documentary. I staged the
women, asked their interlocutors to take place behind the camera, set the shot,
turned the camera on, and left the scene. This method is hyperbolically
documentary. To underline this aspect I refrained from editing the shots. I will
return to the resulting slow, unsmooth, and personal talk that results.

Aesthetically, the women are filmed in consistent close-up, as portraits — the
other side of the face of Brilliant’s babies. The relentlessly permanent image of their
faces is meant to force viewers to look at those women in the face and listen to what
they have to say, in a language that is foreign, using expressions that seem strange,
but in a discourse to which we can relate affectively. This is a second form of the
performance of contact. Another assumption of Brilliant’s argument concerns the
nature of identity. In his view, identity is based on the baby and is enabled by
seeing the mother’s face; in this way, the ontogenetic perspective is constantly
mapped on the phylogenetic one, in which development is the matrix and old equals
primitive. This baby-basis is challenged most explicitly by the simple fact that the
figures speaking here are the mothers, the other side of that face gazing up at them;
they now become the holders of the inter-face. The face as inter-face is an occasion
for an exchange that, affect-based as it may be, is fundamental in opening up the discourse of the face to the world.

Crucially, for Brilliant, identity emerges not only out of appearance and naming but also out of distinction. Moreover, the recognition of appearance triggers interaction and expression. Typically for the cogito tradition, the two are practically the same:

Visual communication between mother and child is affected face-to-face and, when those faces are smiling, everybody is happy, or appears to be. For most of us, the human face is not only the most important key to identification based on appearance, it is also the primary field of expressive action. ©

The assumed link between these two sentences equates communication with identification and expression. This equation is grounded in the double sense of identification — as and with — that underlies the universalist paradox and to which my installation attempts to consider an alternative. I call that alternative “interfacing”.

The socio-cultural version of this political ambiguity is most clearly noticeable in the dilemma of “speaking for” and the patronizing it implies, versus “speaking with” as face-to-face interaction. The self-sufficient rationalism of the cogito tradition is thus in collusion not only with a philosophical denial of several personhood but also with a subsequent denial of what the face, rather than expression, can do. In order to move from an expressionism to a performative-identity of the face that, I contend, writes a program for a new, tenable universality, I deduce three uses of the preposition “inter-” from Ganan and Lloyd’s take on Spinozism that can be mobilized in a holifful way. But in order to prevent an over-hasty, over-optimistic mystification, each “inter-” works across a constitutive gap.

© Brilliant 1996, 10, emphasis added.

Intercultural Ethics: Relationality across Gaps

Inter-cultural relationality, in its inscribed mobility of subjectivity, posits the face as an interlocutor whose discourse is not predictably similar to that of the viewer. These women speak to “us,” across a gap, as they speak to their own relatives, again across a gap. The first gap is that of culture, if we continue to view cultures as entities instead of processes. In such a conception, intercultural contact is possible on the basis of the acknowledgment of the gap that separates and distinguishes them. The sometimes over-extended emphasis on difference in postcolonial thought is a symptom of that gap. The second gap is caused by “the cultural” conceived as moments and processes of tension, conflict, and negotiation. ©

To highlight this dynamic, including the gap, I have chosen to invite the mothers to choose intimate as the interlocutors. The people to whom the women tell their stories are close to them, yet distanced by the gap that was caused by their migration of the loved one. Tunisian Manouza’s daughter-in-law, for
example, who was not chosen by her, is reaching out to the mother across an unbridgeable gap produced by history. In Romanian Elena’s case, even the son himself struggles to overcome the gap that sits between him and his mother, with whom he talks during the short summer period when he visits her.

There are yet other gaps in play. As I have suggested, the two simultaneous situations of speech—between the mothers and their relatives and between themselves and the viewer—doubly mark second-personhood, but across a gap. The strong sense of intimacy emanating from the direct address of the mother to her closely familiar interlocutor at first excludes the viewer. Only once one makes the effort and gives the time to enter the interaction can the viewer earn a sense of participation. When this happens — and, due to the recognizability of the discourse, it does — the experience is exhilarating and, I contend, unique in public events such as art exhibitions.⁴

The third gap opens in the making, due to the theoretical and artistic alternative to artistic authority of a “willful abandon of mastery,” which underlies the filming in my own absence. There is necessarily a gap between intention and artwork. The gaps as interventions into sensations that are “borrowed” in a sense, grounded in someone else’s body, open the door to the inter-face. Gaps, in other words, are the key to a universality that rejects a romantic utopianism in favor of a difficult, hard-won but indispensable inter-facing. Gaps, not links, are also the key to intermediacy. As my installation attempts to suggest, the two go hand in hand.

There is another discourse to be addressed here, in the wake of the humanism of the post-humanity of vulgarized Cartesianism. I am referring to the discourse of intention, predominant in the humanities. I have frequently argued against the relevance and tenability of that discourse, most extensively in 2002. The theoretical and artistic alternative of a “willful abandon of mastery” I have discussed there underlies the filming in my own absence that —


I practiced in the videos for this installation.

Uhlmann points this out through Beckett, and the latter uses that same noun, gap: there is necessarily, not coincidentally, a gap between intention and artwork. Beckett wrote this in a rare joyful passage, where he describes the sense of accomplishment he felt precisely because of his failure to do what he had intended:

I felt it really was something. Not quite in the way intended, but as a sheer beauty, power and strangeness of image ... In other words ... from having been troubled by a certain failure to communicate fully by purely visual means the basic intention, I now begin to feel that this is important and that the images obtained probably gain in force what they lose as ideograms. ⁵

On a profound level of intersubjectivity, this statement engages the question of intention as medium-specific, binding it to images and, hence, bringing the discussion of intention within the domain of art history, where the relevance of intention is usually not discussed but taken for granted. For someone like Beckett, who was a writer before all, this serendipitous experience was crucial. Uhlmann concludes his essay with the following summary of what, in the wake of the affliation he establishes between Berkeley, Bergson, and Beckett, the image does to intention. I quote this formulation because it succinctly sums up why the image is productively incompatible with intentionism — an incompatibility that, I argue, is most useful for a migratory aesthetics of the face. He writes:

What Film in part offers is the exploration of a medium that draws its power — the power to produce sensations — through gaps. Yet, images —

provide sparks that leap from one side to the next, like messages across synapses, thereby allowing the formation of a unity among difference: intuition and sensation, intuition and the idea, intention and reception, philosophy and literature. 3

Significantly and paradoxically, Uhlmann uses the discourse of medium specificity here to make a point about the merging of domains and the discourse of embodiment — sensations — to posit gaps. The gaps as entrance into sensations are grounded in someone else’s body, opening the door to the interface. Gaps, in other words, are the key to a migratory aesthetics that binds globalization to a transformed intimacy.

Video Still, Alhamb, Khartoum, Sudan

Pre-posterous Time

This concept of the gap lays the ground, in turn, for the second partner in the exploration of inter-”, namely inter-temporal thinking, which comes with the preposterous foregrounding of the present as starting point. These women carry the history of the severance from their beloved child. They enact their acceptance of that separation as a fact of the present. Moreover, the concept of video installation positions the co-presence of the mothers with the viewer visiting the installation. Here lies one function of the acoustic gaps, the silences in the films. When they do not speak, it seems as if it is the viewer’s turn to speak back to the mothers, who are now just looking the viewer in the face.

The inter-temporality also plays out in the belatedness of the viewer’s engagement. To understand the need for this engagement in its inevitable belatedness, two distinct steps need to be taken. The first makes the move from individual to social, the second from past to present. At the same time, the social nature of inter-subjectivity holds the performative promise of the improvement of the social fabric that the imaginary enactment of identification will help to build. The images themselves fulfill a function in this inter-temporality. They do this through the exclusive deployment of the close-up as affective image. Here, Spinosa’s writing on affect becomes relevant. As Gatens and Lloyd recall,

... the complex interactions of imagination and affect [yield] this common space of inter-subjectivity, and the processes of imitation and identification between minds which make the fabric of social life. 3

Aesthetic work may be eminently suited to double-bind the women to a social world whose fabric allows their experience to be voiced. Instead of being caught in a double-bind that forces them into silence, they can be relieved of carrying their burden too solitarily. This is where the affective-image, which Deleuze theorised as emblematically situated in the close-up, comes in with its typical temporality. Close-ups subvert linear time. They endure and thus


inscribe the present into the image. Between narrative images and close-ups, then, a particular kind of intermediality emerges: one that stages a struggle between fast narrative and stillness. Here, the type of inter-temporality that is at stake takes the present of viewing as its starting point.

Italian philosopher Paola Mazzati points to the crucial function of the affection-image as the closest to both the materiality of the image and that of subjectivity. She writes: “Between a perception that is in certain ways troubling, and an action still hesitant, affection emerges.”

The affection-image binds a perception that has already taken place but leaves a trace to the future of possible action. This is why the affection-image remains closest to the present while providing it with the temporal density needed to make the inter-face possible.  

Gates and Lloyd recall that Spinoza’s conception of affect is explicit in its inter-temporality. They write:

The awareness of actual bodily modification — the awareness of things as present — is fundamental to the affects; and this is what makes the definition of affect overlap with that of imagination. All this gives special priority to the present.  

The resulting images are far from the documentary realism so dear to Western culture. They possess a temporal density that is inhabited by the past and the future, while affect (and especially the affect produced by the close-up) remains an event in the present—an event of, to use a typical Spinoza-Deleuzian term, becoming. This is not an event in the punctual sense, but a slice of process during which external events slow down or even remain out of sight. Becoming concerns the presence of the past. If we take this presence to the realm of the social, we can no longer deny responsibility for the injustices of the past, even if we cannot be blamed for it. Without that responsibility, the use of the word “we” — “the full deceptiveness of the false cultural ‘we’” — itself becomes disingenuous, even unethical. Gates and Lloyd’s “Spinozian responsibility,” then, is derived from the philosopher’s concept of self as social, and consists of projecting presently felt responsibilities “back into a past which itself becomes determinate only from the perspective of what lies in the future of that past—in our present.” Taking seriously the “temporal dimensions of human consciousness” includes endorsing the “multiple forming and reforming of identities over time and within the deliverances of memory and imagination at any one time.” (81) This pre-postmodern responsibility based on memory and imagination makes well-being not only stable but also instable. (82) This instability is a form of empowerment, of agency within a collectivity-based individual consciousness. In Deleuze’s work, this becomes the key concept of becoming.

Facing Restraint

Becoming also defines our activities as scholars in the humanities. Hence, finally, inter-disciplinary thought is needed. This allows us to make the
connection, in the present and across the cultural divide, between a number of discourses and activities routinely either treated separately or unwarrantedly merged. It may be somewhat surprising that, in the course of this project, I became more cautious with the self-evident value of any form of interdisciplinarity. I have been a fervent proponent of interdisciplinarity for a long time (from 1988 to 2002). From the women in Nothing is Missing I have learned what I had only intuitively earlier: sometimes, invoking a disciplinary framework can do more damage than good to the insights we try to develop through it.

There are many issues here, but I will focus on a single one. The most obvious case seems also the most problematic one: the place of psychoanalysis, the darling approach of some and a changeling for others. I was faced with the need to hold back in this respect. Obviously, I do not dismiss the theory. But, lest I universalize Western conceptions, in some cases it was necessary to give full weight to the mothers’ enacted desire to refrain from self-expression.

First, the situation of filming, in the intimacy-with-gaps and in the absence of the filmmaker, could easily become a trap to solicit more self-expression than the women would want to endorse. The intimacy of the speech situation has a globalized world of viewing as its backdrop, after all. But it is at moments of restraint, when they seem most reluctant to express themselves (in the Western sense of that phrase), that the performativity of their self-presentation is most acutely able to pierce through the conventional surface. These are the moments of the performative inter-face. I will describe one instance where the “performance of reticence,” so to speak, in fact yielded the most beautiful insight into the way intimacy and globalization intersect.

The woman I filmed first, Tunisian Massaouda, offers a striking instance of a culturally specific reluctance that cautions us against psychologizing or psychoanalyzing her. Not coincidentally, this occurs at the most strongly performative moment of the video. This is the situation: as I have been able to see first-hand, Massaouda and her newly acquired daughter-in-law, Ilham Ben-Ali Mahdi, get along famously. But in their relationship remains the stubborn gap that immigration policies have dug. When Ilham married Massaouda’s youngest son, the mother was not allowed to attend the wedding; the authorities had denied her a visa. Not only had Massaouda not been granted the opportunity to witness who Ilham was, but, even more obviously, she had not been able to fulfill her motherly role as her culture prescribes it, which is to help her son choose his bride. At some point, Ilham ends up asking with some insistence what Massaouda had thought of her when she first saw her, after the fact and, hence, in a situation of powerlessness.

First, Massaouda does not answer, which makes Ilham anxious enough to insist, and to ask: did you find me ugly, plain? The older woman looks away at this point. The young woman insists. We will never know what Massaouda “really” felt, but the power that the filming bestows on her, as if in compensation for her earlier disempowerment, is to either withhold or give her approval. She does the latter, but only after some teasing. When I saw the tape and understood the speech, I was convinced Ilham would normally never have been allowed to ask this question and thus vent her anxiety — an intuition she later confirmed. As for the mother, she was given and then exercised the power she had been denied, and she used it to first mark the gap, then to help her somewhat insecure daughter-in-law.

“We” — global, mostly Western viewers of adult age — can easily relate to this moment. Such insecurity, for example, can easily be construed as universal. This interaction between Massaouda and Ilham is thoroughly social, performative, but also bound to the medium of video — to the making of the film. Yet, it does not allow, says, a universalizing psychoanalytic interpretation. Neither did I as maker have any influence on this occurrence — it was not my “intention.” Nor can we construe it as a realistic, documentary moment in the sense of Brion Gysin’s Gadsarian analysis of petrature, where an “occasion” was recorded — it would never have happened outside of the situation of video-making. Thus, it contradicts and suspends the universalizing myths of realism and documentary “truth.” There would never have been an external reality the film could have documented. It is a moment, in other words, that was staged,
yet real, thus challenging that distinction. Nor can we pinpoint a psyche offering symptoms for interpretation. For this to happen there was, instead, a need for a culturally specific relationship between two women related by marriage and separated by the gaps of migration, and for a relationship to the medium that allowed the women to overlay cultural boundaries.

Thus, reflecting on what I have learned from this experimental filmmaking, I felt compelled to extend my willful abandonment of mastery from the filming to the critical discourse I am offering here. An installation of voices, intermingling and alone — of women facing other women none of them had ever seen: I did this, but I could not master how I did it. The art-making, in other words, is not an instance, an example to illustrate an academic point, nor an elevated form of cultural expression. Instead of these two things, equally problematic for a productive confrontation of universalities, I propose the universal validity of the performance in its non-universal singularity, including the moment of slight tension between Massoumala and Ilhem. The performative moment is the product of an act of filmmaking that required the absence of the filmmaker.

Moreover, it also required the surrender of the two women to the apparatus standing in-between them. This surrender entailed a cultural transgression — to insistently ask a question that in the culture of origin would be unspeakable. This, more than her linguistic pronunciation of Arabic as a second language, is Ilhem’s “accent,” in the sense in which Hamid Naficy famously uses that term. This “accent” emblemizes the productive, innovative, and enriching potential of intercultural life. In this case, it could occur thanks to the absence of the filmmaker — but also of the two husbands — and the situation of displacement for both women. This interaction — between the people performing and the critic reflecting on how to understand what they did — would be stifled if an overly familiar psychoanalytic apparatus were let loose on this event.

This is as useful a lesson for a scholar interested in interdisciplinarity as any. It takes us out of the somewhat despairing “anything goes” posture that the flag of interdisciplinarity seems to cover too often (and which the indifferent use of the term “multidisciplinarity” betrays). The insight is the result of the shift from an essentialist concept of a static culture to a performative, confrontational concept of what could be called “the cultural.” In this adoption of Fabian’s concept of culture as a process of contestation and in analogy to Mouffe’s distinction between politics and the political, I see a possibility to articulate an intimate cultural dynamic in the globalized world: the intercultural, indeed.

Facing Speech

Massoumala’s and Ilhem’s performances of intercultural contact were done on the basis of a close collaboration of the face and the word. Indeed, the spoken word is central to a performance of contact across divisions as well as to the installation. The word is deployed in an attempt to turn a condescending act of “giving voice” into an affirmation of our need to be given that voice. More directly than film, video binds the image we see to the sound we hear. That

sound is, in this case, primarily and almost exclusively the human voice and the spoken words it utters. Speech, then, becomes the occasion for a positive deployment of interdisciplinarity, one that operates through intermediarity.

Firstly, the centrality of the spoken word impinges on the visual form, the close-up. Film studies have been keen on including sound in their analysis, but the visual appearance of words in subtitles seems to solicit nothing but indifference, both in the film industry, where the ugliest outsourcing of words pollutes the most beautiful images, and in the work of scholars who tend to ignore that aspect. In Nothing is Missing I have attempted to experiment with the visualization of speech in order to make the most of the convergence of words and images. The subtitles, for example, make it easier to read the words and watch the faces at the same time.

In order to further privilege the voice of the mothers, the films consist of single unedited shots of their faces as they speak and listen. The personal situation presupposes sincerity. At the same time, they are keenly aware of the public nature of the speech they are producing in front of the camera. The nature of this performance is closer to theatricality, in the critical sense, than to traditional filmmaking. As theater, the situation is closer to minimally rehearsed, improvised, and inquiring forms of theater than to perfectly mastered public forms.

Secondly, the translations presented as subtitles also embody the close bond between the linguistic and the visual aspects of the images—the bond between face and speech. As I mentioned earlier, the viewer is confronted with different languages, foreign to most, audible in their foreignness and visible in an emphatically visualized translation. Placed above their faces, the language is both made important and presented as somewhat of a burden. English as the universal entrance port is exploited as well as de-naturalized, both by this visual

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4 On the rhetoric of sincerity, see Errol A. Ashford, Mark Bol and Carol Smith, eds., The Rhetoric of Sincerity (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008).

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foregrounding and by the translations themselves.
Translations are as literal as possible, bringing out the poetry in the original languages without sacrificing to clarity. None of the translators are native speakers of English. Their assignment was to help me stay as close as possible to the phrasings the women used. This method results in this “accepted” English that maintains the bi-cultural status of the communication.

Finally, the most acute intermediarity occurs in the faces, which visibly produce the sound of the voices through their movement, thus yielding the movement of the image by means of sound. For this, with the language we do not understand, and the need to translate, all in one, the face is the actor. It is really difficult to separate sound from vision, since the mouth articulates with the rhythm of the sounds. This is not simply a case of the “moving image” of cinema. Instead, the moving quality becomes a poetic, a self-reflective statement about the medium that re-integrates what the predominance of English as universal language has shattered. This stands in contrast to the particular home-boundness resulting from a lack of education, in turn aggravated by misogyny and colonialism. In this way, the face and its acts become the emblematic instance of video’s power to transgress boundaries of a variety of kinds.

Video Still Hamalah, Gaza, Palestine
Conclusion

In *Nothing is Missing* I do address actual migration, but not as the thematic heart of the work. That heart, rather, is the encounter with the faces as negotiated universality, where globalization meets and inflects intimacy — and vice versa. The focus on the face embodies the act of facing in its three meanings, all three staged here as acts of mutuality facilitating contact. First, the emphasis on activity reflects back on the face itself. No longer the site of representation and expression, the face has become an agent of action: what this installation demonstrates is what faces can do rather than how to do things with faces. How, then, can the face be a universal, without presuming that facial expression is cross-culturally present or stable? The face faces, looking us in the face, which makes the viewer the interlocutor. It faces something that is hard to live down — here, the severance of the primary bond that humanism constructs as defining for humanity: that between mother and child. In these videos of acting faces, that event is qualified as larger than the individual. All women speak in understated tones of the causes of the child’s departure, and they do so in terms for which Western cultures can assume some measure of historical responsibility, if only “we” reason with Spinoza. The severances, all having different causes in the past and being experienced differently in the present, are lived as what for me is the ultimate tragedy: that all of the mothers say they are happy about the sore fact that their child left. These backgrounds are understated because they can neither be eliminated from the present nor be allowed to overrule the existence of the mothers in an everyday that is also rich and sometimes happy. Hence, the discourse intimated in the installation’s title — the one on which Messouda ends her eventual and hard-won openness about what matters most to her as a mother:

that her son finds broad to eat. Facing these present pasts, this kind of recognisable and perhaps, dare I say the word, universal motherhood...

...that results nevertheless fulfills the becoming of who we are in the present: facing these pasts together so that “we” can “be” is part of our own potential of becoming. ⁰

But how can we do that? Making contact, the third and most important act implied in facing, facilitates that becoming—becoming world citizens, building our existence on mobility without having to move. This making of contact is suggested as an effect of the insistent facing in *Nothing is Missing*. What faces can do is stage encounters. This is the point of the mothers’ faces in *Nothing is Missing*—their empowerment. In the installation, the face is constantly present, in close-up but not as close as possible. As a visual form, the close-up itself is the face:

There is no close-up of the face. The close-up is the face, but the face precisely in so far as it has destroyed its triple function [individualisation, socialisation, communication] ... the close-up turns the face into a phantasm... the face is the vampire. ²

If the close-up is the face, the face is also the close-up. Hence the slight distance nevertheless built into the image to avoid locking the viewer up and denying the women any space at all: to avoid facile conclusion and appeals to sentimentality. To give the face a frame within which it can exercise its mobility and agency. To make the images also look a bit like the busts of Roman emperors and other dignitaries. That slight distance, then, provides the space for a certain kind of freedom. This would be a freedom à la Spinoza—a freedom that is “critical.” Critical freedom, wrote James Tully, is the practice of seeing

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the specificity of one’s own world as one among others. Inter-temporally, this freedom sees the present as fully engaged with a past that, insofar as it is part of the present, can be re-written a little more freely. The act of inter-facing can do that. The term, or illusion, of universality may not be the most felicitous one to characterize this act, but accompanied by the verb “confronting” it makes sense beyond a relativism that implies turning one’s back on such faces.

Let the Allegory Fly: Beyond the Activity of Reference

Bian Yangfeng

The idea of applying the concept of allegory to Chinese film is anything but new, because “Chinese philosophers from the Qin Dynasty (221-206 B.C.) onward have often used extended metaphors” (of which fable is the logical result) to effectively express their ideas. This is assumed to reflect the fact that, as “realistic” thinkers, the Chinese usually do not favor abstract argumentation. Thus simple allegory helped to stimulate the interest of audiences and helped to “increase the force of an argument.”1 “If an allegory says one thing in words and another in meaning […] it is an open question whether the verbal analyst can avoid giving a one-sided view of it. But the one-sided view may, in and through its incompleteness, lead us to “reimagine how much has been left out and […] in comparison we can hardly ask for much more than that.”2 In the 1980s, allegorical readings as perceived in western literary theory came to be the underlying mode of representation in most Chinese films, at the same time those films, heavily influenced by the West, became more technically sophisticated and complex. In this context it seems that the western notion of allegory could be an appropriate tool for dealing with the vague sense of some

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LIU Yuejin, Ph. D. in Literature, is Fellow of Institute of Literary of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Deputy Director of Institute of Literary of CASS and Editor in Chief of Literary Heritage. He is also Deputy President of China Society for Research on Historical Materials of Literature History. He is a contributor to 12 writings, which include A Literature Chronology of Qin and Han Dynasty (2006), A Research on "new verses of jade terrace" (2000), Philology of Chinese Mid-ancientLiterature (1997 ), Chinese Ancien Scholar-

LIESEBETH MIESSLER

LIESEBETH MIESSLER is Assistant Professor in Comparative Literature at Leiden University. Before obtaining this position she studied and worked at Utrecht University, University College Dublin, the University of Trier, and Cornell University. Her main fields of expertise are interculturality in literature and cultural effects of globalisation. She has published widely on literature of migration, as well as on exoticism in literature, representations of the national, and issues of gender and sexuality. Her publications include the monograph New Germans, New Dutch. Literary Interventions (Amsterdam University Press, 2008) and the edited volume Ethnizität und Geschlecht. (Post-)Koloniale Verhandlungen in Geschichte, Kunst und Medien (Cologne; Weimar; Vienna: Bühlau, 2005). Currently she is co-writing a book on multiculturalism in Dutch literature, preliminary titled Beyond the multicultural drama and co-editing a volume on Literature and Multiculturalism in Scandinavia and the Low Countries (forthcoming at Rodopi in 2011). Liesebeth
YE Shuxian
YE Shuxian (Ph.D.), Chair Professor, Director of comparative literature, Institute of Literature, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS); Vice Chairman of the Chinese Academy of Folklore Study; Editor in Chief of "The Series of Anthology Explanation of Chinese Classics"; Editor in Chief of "The Series of Myth-History". He also was Visiting Professor of British Academy, Oxford University, Cambridge University, and Yale University. His major publications in Chinese include 30 books such as *Philosophy of Chinese Mythology*, *Chuang Tao: A Cultural Hermeneutics*, *Lao Tao: A Cultural Hermeneutics, Bear Totem: China’s Ancestor Myth, etc.* Some of them are translated into English, French, Japanese. He edited an English book, *China’s Creation and Origin Myths: Cross-cultural Explorations in Oral and Written Traditions* with his partner. Owing to his leading of Literary Anthropology and Chinese Mythology, he was awarded Outstanding Leading Researcher Award of China and other foreign awards.

ZHIAO Xifang
ZHIAO Xifang is Fellow of Institute of Literature of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), Professor of Philosophy at The Graduate School of CASS, and Deputy Director of Department of Chinese Modern Literature of CASS. He has been invited to give lectures at Cambridge University, London University, Harvard University, Yale University, Tufts University, Toronto University, Nish University of Paris, etc. His eight writings and translations include *Stories of Hong Kong (2003)* and *Post-colonialism (2009)*. His more than 90 academic papers have been published in America, Britain, Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Mainland China.

ZHIOU Min
ZHIOU Min, Literature Ph.D., Associate Professor, Vice Dean of Institute of Literary Studies, Shanghai International Studies University, Research Fellow of the Institute of Foreign Literature, Henan University, Kaifeng. More than 20
academic papers have been published in key academic journals (*Literary Review, Foreign Literature and Contemporary Foreign Literature*) in the field of postcolonial literature, cultural studies and contemporary American and British literature. Her eight writings and translations include *Post-colonial Identities: A Study of V. S. Naipaul's Fictions* (written in English). She has assumed simultaneous and consecutive interpretations at more than thirty international conferences and forums for some state leaders, the Nobel laureate in literature, and world famous scholars.

**Appendix – 2:**

**Contributors' Information**

*Listed in alphabet order of surnames*

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BIAN Yafeng                 Leiden University
Maasje Bloemker          Utrecht University
Marja Boeltei              Leiden University
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