

Video Memories of Diaspora: Searching for Identity in Between Homelands

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Abstract

Transcultural studies often theorize third world diaspora from within the dominant Western context, and its relation to the culture of their postcolonial home. This essay takes on a reversed perspective, aiming to examine filmic representations of two young Western subjects in third world countries. The filmmakers Thomas Brück and Bentley Brown spent their formative years as members of Western diaspora families in Mexico and Chad. Using the medium of film, their work navigates cultures — as the works of certain subaltern immigrant artists and filmmakers in the West do. By analysing their personal documentaries *Third Culture Kid* and *Oustaz*, the essay investigates their cinematic means of negotiating transcultural identity across geopolitical borders. Special emphasis is given to the employment of home video material to reconstruct and represent memory.

Introduction

Transcultural studies often theorize the third-world diaspora within the dominant Western context and its relation to the culture of their postcolonial home.¹ This essay investigates a reversed filmic perspective on diaspora identity: the filmmakers Thomas Brück and Bentley Brown spent their formative years as members of Western diaspora families in Mexico and Chad. Using the medium of film their works navigate between cultures — as the works of certain second and third world immigrant artists and filmmakers in the West do. What strategies do the filmmakers pursue to discuss the subject of transcultural identity in documentary film? What stylistic means do they employ to generate and represent memory?

¹ This perspective has been represented in various personal documentary films such as Sandhya Suri's *I for India* (2005) about her family ties between Great Britain and India, or Arash T. Riahi's *Exile Family Movie* (2006) portraying the director's Austria-based family that re-unites with their Iranian relatives in Mekka after decades.

To apprehend their works in the context of transcultural film practice, the essay first discusses the key concerns of diaspora and identity, and then gives a brief summary of Thomas Brück's short documentary *Third Culture Kid* (2015) and Bentley Brown's short documentary *Oustaz* (2016). Referring to the memory theory of Aleida Assmann, the second part examines notions of memory and their representations in the films of Brück and Brown. This essay will also address the narrative use and authentic impact of home video material as the visual base of both documentaries. Finally, the essay looks at the stylistic device of personal voice-over narration on the filmic quests for belonging and the strategies of self-reflection inherent in the personal filmmaking style.

Diaspora and Identity

Migration movements are not a new phenomenon. Wars, famines, political or religious persecution, as well as invitations by foreign governments have been impulses for translocation over centuries. Today, global economies, international education systems and career opportunities, too, contribute to an increasing amount of people leaving their ancestral countries and relocating into new communities and spaces either for a particular time span or for good. Diaspora experience is a much-debated factor in the context of subaltern communities claiming agency as well as legal and social equalities. The diaspora experience challenges a sense of identity and belonging of any person who for some reason or another decides to leave their homeland.

Contemporary definitions of diaspora focus on their community members' experiences of transition and fragmentation in between the cultures of the old and the new home. Stuart Hall describes these global citizens as 'new ethnicities' who share a deep experience of discontinuity.² Their self-perception is decisively shaped by the need to actively position themselves between the various and sometimes-contradictory influences of both cultures. Vijay Agnew characterizes them as 'individuals who live in a variety of societies and cultures and who emphasize their sense of belonging or exclusion, their states of mind and their sense of identity.'³ Consequently, diaspora experience blends elements of the ancestral and the new culture, into creolization and cultural hybridization.

One may ask to what extent the self-concept and the notions of 'home' would be governed by the same mechanisms in Western diaspora communities. Beyond the economic and social pressure many migrants from second and third world countries experience in the West, Western transnationals are equally affected by

² Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, ed. by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) pp. 392–403 (p. 395).

³ Vijay Agnew, *Diaspora, Memory and Identity: A Search for Home* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), p. 5.

Video Memories of Diaspora: Searching for Identity in Between Homelands

notions of difference which make them question their understanding of self and belonging. They appropriate elements from both cultures and integrate them into their lifestyle and understanding of the world around them. This inevitable process is seen as an important motor for the conception of art and culture. By the means of art or media participation the Diasporic subjects ‘[...] generate new and different images of themselves and their group that correspond more closely to their evolving self-image and self-definition.’⁴ New York based Indian anthropologist Arjun Appadurai extends this notion by arguing that the imagination is a driving force for these artists.⁵

This paper traces the subjective cross-cultural experience mirrored in the works of the Western filmmakers Bentley Brown and Thomas Brück. Both documentary directors participated in the new global mobility as ‘third culture kids’, a term employed by Ruth van Reken and David Pollock for ‘children who spend a significant period of their developmental years in a culture outside their parents “passport culture(s)”’.⁶ Brück, of German descent, was born in the Mexican town Zapopan, where his parents had settled for professional reasons. He did not know much about his parents’ ancestral country and culture until the family resettled to Germany when Brück was six years old.⁷ The resulting struggle to identify his home and develop a sense of belonging is reflected in his eponymic film *Third Culture Kid*.

US born filmmaker Bentley Brown moved to Chad as an eleven-year-old accompanying his parents on a healthcare mission, and stayed until he was an adult. He learned Chadian Arab as well as French, the colonial *officialesse*. This allowed for an intense participation in the local culture. After completing his studies in his native country, he returned to African and Arabian regions to work in foreign aid as well as on film projects. Brown believes in cross-cultural filmmaking and collaborating with local crew-members. All his films deal with the subject of migration, moving between countries and ‘the identity transformation that is happening as a result’.⁸

It should be stressed that both filmmakers have been part of a numerically rather small diaspora in a third world country. Their films focus not on the concerns of a diaspora community but on their own personal experiences. They imagine their childhood from the found video fragments and conclude their individual

⁴ Agnew, p. 5.

⁵ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), p. 31.

⁶ Ruth van Reken and David C. Pollock, *Third Culture Kids: Growing Up among Worlds* (Boston: Nicholas Brealey, 2009), p. xi.

⁷ Interview with Thomas Brück, 17 August 2016.

⁸ Bentley Brown, ‘Linguistic Integrity in Cross-Cultural Filmmaking’, lecture at the Berlin Language of Art & Music Conference, hosted by the Institute for Cultural Diplomacy, 2014, min. 12:00, online video recording, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_HfSomJzwxM> [accessed 21 August 2016]. Examples of his film work are *Faisal Goes West* (2012) and *Le Pèlerin De Camp Nou/Captain Majid* (2009). His autobiographic documentary *Khawadjat* (2016/in production) uses home video footage we already know from his earlier film *Oustaz*.

explorations. Thus, their quest for home and cultural belonging can be seen as exemplary for translocation experience of the globalized world. As children growing up in foreign countries, the directors were highly perceptive to the influences of the new ethnic context and open to intercultural relationships: 'I was very concerned about fitting into the new community where my brother and I were basically the only foreigners or new arrivers in a small town in which we grew up',⁹ Brown reflects about his position as a cultural outsider in Chad, confirming Agnew's theory of identity as a prevalent subject for hybrid communities.

Mansions and Mentors: The Cinematic Childhood Memories of Thomas Brück and Bentley Brown

Opening with a shot of his Mexican passport, Thomas Brück narrates the story of his blurred notion of home after locating back to Germany with his family in *Third Culture Kid*. The long-lost validity of this very passport troubles his sense of identity. Twenty years after parting, Brück sets out on a quest to his lost childhood home, to find out where he actually belongs. On his eight-week journey through Mexico, Brück finds himself surrounded by symbols of forsaken national identity. Shots of bare flagpoles become metaphors of the young filmmaker's scattered identity. In the course of the film Brück encounters protagonists that struggle with their existence in Mexico, but encourage him on his search for belonging. Finally, he is ready to confront his physical diaspora home in Guadalajara.

Bentley Brown's *Oustaz* is framed by the visit to Montreal he made together with his Chadian childhood friend and fellow filmmaker Abakar Chene Massar. The trip becomes the inciting incident for Brown to review his old home video recordings. Subsequently, he looks back at his childhood memories in the Chadian small town Ati, to his friendships and his beginnings of filmmaking. By doing so he pays tribute to Oustaz Boukhary, a painter, inventor and musician from his neighborhood. Oustaz had taught him to speak Arabic and is therefore a key figure to bridge Brown's ancestral and the Chadian culture. While reflecting upon himself and filmmaking Brown comes to terms with his Central African past. This makes him reach a state of equality with the admired teacher.

Representing Memories

Memories are an important element for autobiographical and cinematic works. They are investigated and restructured in retrospect and enable the artist to define an identity and reflect upon it with peers and thereby draft an

⁹ Brown, 'Linguistic Integrity', min. 8:00.

Video Memories of Diaspora: Searching for Identity in Between Homelands

image of the self: 'Without memory, we cannot develop a concept of self nor communicate with others. Biographic memories are indispensable, because experiences, relationships and the image of the own identity are made of it.'¹⁰ Along these lines both directors survey their memories in hindsight. Their documentary perspective is strongly shaped by the question of who they are and which cultural factors influenced their image of self. Bentley Brown summarizes the relevance of memory for his works in his voice-over: 'Is who I am just a series of memories? Conversations? Imaginations?'¹¹ These uncertain concepts form the basis of his film essay.

Memories are fragmentary by nature, and Aleida Assmann is right to remark that they are 'mere excerpts', 'unconnected moments with no before or after'.¹² Their ephemeral qualities might dwindle away during one's life. This makes it a challenge for the filmmakers to reconstruct their past in Mexico and Chad. In *Third Culture Kid*, Thomas Brück takes up this line of thinking in his voice-over text: 'My time in Mexico often seems like a dream to me, hardly tangible. They are disrupted and blurred fragments of memory. Sometimes I wonder if they might originate from pictures or home videos.'¹³ The home video fragments that find entry into his film support this fragile and blurred assessment of his memory process.

Although Assmann claims that memories are governed by subjectivity, she argues that they never exist in an isolate way. They rather overlap with the narratives of others and thereby confirm each other.¹⁴ Brown and Brück use this mechanism by resorting to the video footage of family and friends as an instrument of remembrance. They draw from these external memory carriers by transforming them artistically. Both directors rearrange and condense various fragments in the editing process, and frame them with their own voice-over. Thomas Brück even created a questionnaire concerning his time in Mexico that he handed over to his family members to correlate and contextualize his own memory fragments, as to finally construct his film narrative. These perspectives are incorporated in the film. For example, Brück quotes his mother in the voice-over text: 'Do you remember entering the small fence gate? I immediately knew: here I can feel relieved and live happily with my small family for a few years' (my translation).

Similarly, Bentley Brown gives voice to his childhood companion Abakar whilst incorporating their dialog about the common friend Oustaz into the

¹⁰ Aleida Assmann, 'Individuelles und kollektives Gedächtnis: Formen, Funktionen und Medien', in *Das Gedächtnis der Kunst: Geschichte und Erinnerung in der Kunst der Gegenwart*, ed. by Kurt Wettengl and others (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2000), pp. 21–27 (p. 21, my translation).

¹¹ Trailer of *Khawadajat*, min. 02:49. Source: Bentley Brown.

¹² Assmann, p. 21.

¹³ *Third Culture Kid*, min. 01:40 (my translation).

¹⁴ Assmann, p. 21. This links to Maurice Halbwachs' observation of society and its collective memories playing an important part in subjective reconstruction one's past, Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 51.

film. Brown sparks off a conversation picturing the evening gatherings at Oustaz's place around a fire. Abakar would then add Oustaz's way of provoking the conversation by posing bizarre questions and thereby supplement the filmmaker's memory.¹⁵

Home Movie Material

From the early beginnings of film, cameras have been used to depict private family life, initially only by a privileged few. With the rise of Super 8 cameras it became increasingly common for Western families to document their family occasions in moving images. The development of video technology democratized this practice further, as it did no longer depend on a chemical processing and was thus easier to access and carry. The Latin root *amare* is commonly referred to stating that 'amateur' films were shot for pleasure. Accordingly, they often depict pleasant family events, such as new-born babies and their first steps, first days in school, weddings, picnics, family members participating in various games, vacations and other events considered worth documenting. According to Roger Odin, these stereotypes appear in most home movies.¹⁶ As a record of banal everyday situations that have never been documented by official sources, these family productions offer *endotic* anthropological insights.¹⁷

Sports games, trips and private music sessions from Brown's video archive become the source to reconstruct his teenage years. The material covers a long time span of more than five years, which explains the difference in quality and format of the private footage. As Brown's parents record less, over the years, Bentley and his friends take over the camera and thereby shape the future memories. Roger Odin points out that home movies typically exist in snippets: 'no narrative structure has been superimposed onto it'.¹⁸ In the montage, Brown assembles these snippets into a personal narrative. He juxtaposes documentations of the everyday activities with performative sequences by the circle of friends: music and drama scenes, which also star his teacher and role model Oustaz. The more the young filmmakers grow up, the more complex their videos become: they start planning, editing, and structuring them. Glimpses into their filmmaking process and excerpts from the collective's first fiction film are used to narrate Brown's growth of his cinematic language.

The amateur material Thomas Brück uses to reconstruct his memories of his family home in Guadalajara originates from his elder brother. Although his

¹⁵ *Oustaz*, min. 01:21.

¹⁶ Roger Odin, 'The Family Home Movie as Document', in *Mining the Home Movie: Excavations in Histories and Memories*, ed. by Karen L. Ishizuka and Patricia Zimmermann (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), pp. 255–71 (p. 261).

¹⁷ Odin, 'The Home Movie and Space of Communication', in *Amateur Filmmaking: The Home Movie, the Archive, the Web*, ed. by Laura Rascaroli, Gwenda Young and Barry Monahan (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), pp. 15–26 (p. 22).

¹⁸ Odin, 'The Home Movie and Space of Communication', p. 18.

Video Memories of Diaspora: Searching for Identity in Between Homelands

family archive comprises a great amount of video material from Mexico, Brück restricts himself to Hi8 video footage of the family mansion his brother recorded after the family's decision to leave Mexico and return to Germany was made.¹⁹ Produced as a document to remember the house, the video material is marked by the sad expectation of leaving: the camera scans the home, room by room, showing us bedrooms, chairs, pets and toys and garden flowers.

Patricia Zimmermann describes the archival relevance and narrative potential of the private video recordings, as she states: 'Amateur films and home movies negotiate the space between private memories and social histories in a variety of forms and iterations.'²⁰ Brück's home movie footage is a meticulous ethnographic record of a German diaspora family at a given time in history that is revealed through its architecture and interiors, which frame a certain time period. It is hence an exemplary archival document, and a subjective reminiscence of a childhood. By showing these interiors rather than members of the family, Brück keeps the focus on himself and his subjective experiences. Shots from a recent journey to his childhood country frame the family archive material and are used to reflect upon the childhood memories. The material was recorded with a Super 8 camera, the iconic equipment of home movie makers of that time. The resulting imperfect, fragmentary aesthetic highlights the personal, nostalgic character of the images in his film. The filming is strikingly similar, as in order to reconnect to his old home, Brück's handheld camera pans slowly over old familiar landscapes the way his brother did all those years ago. Juxtaposing these two layers of amateur material, Brück addresses the question what it means to grow up in-between two cultures.

Amateur film seems to promise a high degree of authenticity. The footage of Bentley Brown and his friends benefitted from this effect. Using the video camera the group obtains a cultural agency that is practiced in a playful manner, shooting several films narrating local stories and destinies. 'Everybody acted',²¹ Brown remembers in the voice-over of *Oustaz*, highlighting the great interconnection of film crew, actors, musicians and audience. Their films were produced on a very low budget and without professional editing systems. The great success the films had in the community can be explained by their immediate and authentic character, which local viewers could identify with. Brown expounds: 'When we showed it to the town where we lived [...] people enjoyed watching it. They loved it. Not because it was an excellent film, it was very amateur. But because it was the first time that people saw themselves and their neighbors and their friends in a film.'²²

Both Brück and Brown use footage that mirrors the fragility of personal memory: errors and transients allude to the historic dimension of the repurposed

¹⁹ Interview with Thomas Brück, 17 August 2016.

²⁰ Zimmermann, 'The Home Movie Movement: Excavations, Artifacts, Mining', in *Mining The Home Movie: Excavations in Histories and Memories*, pp. 1–28 (p. 4).

²¹ *Oustaz*, min. 11:30.

²² Brown, 'Linguistic Integrity', min. 09:14.

videotapes. Particularly the footage Brück's brother recorded of the family house has decayed. Signal loss and video pixel drops keep disturbing and sometimes even erasing the original video images. These artifacts highlight the dated footage. Dominik Schrey points out that those sections from the home video archive that the family members love most are most often played or rewound and subsequently most worn down. Their visual information is increasingly replaced by 'traces of appreciation or pleasure'.²³ The visible deterioration of the video footage becomes a metaphor for the blurred and fragmented character of Brück's childhood memory.

It would be possible to argue that the amateur video material contributes deeply to the question of hybrid cultural identity both filmmakers address. Brück juxtaposes before-and-after shots of his diaspora home. Brown illustrates himself not only belonging to the Chadian community — cycling through the savannah, exercising Arab calligraphy and dancing to Chadian tunes dressed in a white turban — but also rooted in the Western culture playing football and classical piano — reminiscent of a colonial, Western identity in a postcolonial African country. The piano melody melts into transcultural fusion when Oustaz takes over the keys playing a dashing tune in the archival video footage. By connecting their voice-over with the home movie material, the filmmakers knot ties to both cultures and evoke a hybrid cultural *mélange*.

The Authors Presence in the Film

Not only the use of home-movie material, but also the employment of voice-over narration is considered another prevalent attribute of autobiographical films and documentary self-portraits. According to Manthia Diawara, transcultural filmmakers favor this form of first person narrative. It becomes 'the filmmakers revisionist construction of history in which the narrator is as central to the film as the film's object'.²⁴ Both filmmakers make use of this revisionist method, however, their stylistic approaches differ: Brown's voice-over narration alternates with dialog fragments and tale-telling chords of Western and Chadian music. Thomas Brück on the contrary follows a more reduced concept. He deliberately eschews his brothers descriptive narrative recorded on his archival tapes as he considers it not personal enough and rather decides to focus on his own personal search. Along his voice-over, derived from his Mexican travel diary, Brück navigates through his life history. His tale puts the worn home movie material

²³ Dominik Schrey, 'Analog Nostalgia and the Aesthetics of Digital Remediation', in *Media and Nostalgia: Yearning for the Past, Present and Future*, ed. by Katharina Niemeyer (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan Memory Studies, 2014), pp. 27–28 (p. 35).

²⁴ Manthia Diawara, 'The I Narrator in Black Diaspora', in *Multiculturalism, Postcoloniality, and Transnational Media*, ed. by Ella Shohat and Robert Stam (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003), pp. 193–202 (p. 193).

into a subjective perspective. Brück's narrative is structured into episodes by a second layer of text: inserted quotes by Angeles Mastretta, Albert Schweitzer and the Dalai Lama serve to present an external view on the question of identity and belonging. He opens the film with an aphorism of Schweitzer claiming one will perish of homelessness — or reach purification and knowledge. This preface becomes the central dramatic question for Brück's film. Further quotes underline his struggle or progress in his search. Most of the quotes stem from the filmmaker's Mexican journey, such as a Dalai Lama aphorism sprayed onto a hostel wall, finding their way into the film as personal memories.

Language is another aspect to express familiarity or strangeness and the experience of discontinuity. Brück presents himself as a protagonist who learned Spanish but contemplates in German. Thereby he stresses his perspective of looking back from his ancestral country that dominates his current thinking and verbal expression to the place of his early childhood. Bentley Brown speaks in Arabic, which he learned as an eleven-year-old. Although not his mother tongue Arabic is the language that connects him with his childhood companions. This stylistic decision emphasizes the strong bond between the friends. Arabic is also the language in which the friends conceived their theatre plays and film scripts for the Chadian community. By contributing to this, Brown confirms his belonging to the community. Reflecting about his first steps in filmmaking leads him to revealing the circumstances of recording. Repetitively, he shows the family video camera in frame or speaks about the improvised equipment the friends could use for their first film experiments. Along these lines, he explains in his voice-over: 'This was before mobile phone cameras. We just had the family camera'²⁵ while we see him looking through the viewfinder of an amateur camcorder. Observational shots indicate that Brown was not the only camera operator, but that he learned to handle the camera together with his friends. In his montage we can overhear their excited conversations like: 'Swear to god, am I a good cameraman? [...] This is a good shot, right?', 'It's nice', 'Sure, fucker?', 'Here, fucker, take the camera back!'²⁶ We see the collective directing scenes of their debut film *Le Pèlerin De Camp Nou* and make aesthetic decisions about framing. Their shared love for film becomes the framework for the documentary's plot. It thereby creates a dramatic curve that culminates in Bentley and his friend Abakar premiering the film at a festival in Montreal.

Brück's and Brown's continuous presence in their films — visually or by the means of voice-over — constantly reminds the audience of the very subjective nature of their revisions of diaspora experience. The resulting sincere impact of their essayist self-portraits enables the viewer to connect and identify.

²⁵ *Oustaz*, min. 06:16.

²⁶ *Oustaz*, min. 09:15.

Conclusion

The experience of hybrid cultural identity plays a formative role and can be seen as an important motor for self-articulation — expressed here by the means of film. The process of remembering forms the basic narrative structure for both documentaries. Fragments of home videos, a personal voice-over narrative and the juxtaposition of contrasting music from both cultural contexts are effective tools to portray the filmmaker's identities torn between two cultural poles. In the voice-over they finally reconcile with the past: while Bentley Brown reaches the state of equality with his teacher Oustaz before leaving the country, Thomas Brück's search leads towards introspection and finding an inner global home. Both filmmakers de-colonialize the filmic gaze beyond the postcolonial contexts and find images and filmic symbols to describe their own transcultural identity — across geopolitical borders. In an exemplary and conciliatory way their films represent a scattered identity in an increasingly globalizing world.