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⇒ The Regard of the Gypsy: Ramón Zabalza's gitano images and the visual challenge to the stereotype

In sharp reversal of the orientalist image that adorns its front cover of impoverished gypsy caravans caught in a thunder storm, a jagged bolt of lightning cracking the darkened sky above and casting its desolate, silver light onto the scant earth below – an image which in the barrenness of its landscape and the darkness of its skies immediately seems to confirm the dramatically obscure and marginal position assigned to the gypsy in the modern, western imaginary – Ramón Zabalza's book *Imágenes gitanas* (1995) has the stated aim of recounting a particular, individual perspective of gitano identity. At first sight at least, the clichéd liminality of the images is at variance with this stated claim of contingency. In the course of a unique voyage of discovery that began as an anthropological inquiry into gypsiness and lasted for some two decades, turning with the years into an epistemic renunciation of academic authority so as to allow gypsies to speak for themselves through his visual work, Zabalza swapped notebook for camera and abandoned the academic stance for that of friendship. Nevertheless, as perhaps his cover image highlights, the notion of the stereotype frames both his visualising project, precisely because the latter takes this as its launching pad, and its end result, an attempt to underline the spatial and temporal axes that frame any portrayal of identity. In this dual dynamic, there surfaces the ambivalence of his representation of gypsies “as they are”, an ambivalence foregrounded no doubt by his chosen medium of representation, the photograph. Equally, there comes to mind the question of whether Zabalza himself, arguably the central figure in this endeavour in his multiple roles as photographer, author, editor and narrator, can actually step outside of himself and not intervene whilst paradoxically also attempting to forge a supposedly direct link between the viewer and the subjects of the images.

The sixty black and white photographs which make up the corpus of the volume were taken between 1973 and 1993. All of them focus on the lives of poor gitanos living predominantly in Extremadura, Madrid, Ávila, Toledo, people with whom Zabalza had developed a personal friendship and whose lives he came to partake of at least to some

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considerable extent. Contextualizing the images are the testimonies that Zabalza provides at the start of the book of his experiences with these friends. The short narratives appear as if in a diary, the day to day events and exchanges telling us, as readers, as much about the author as about the gypsies with whom he spent his time. The focus of the photographs is on the day to day, moving from relationships within the gitano family to work, travel and, in general, the struggle to keep going against considerable economic odds. While Zabalza reiterates the particular viewpoint that determines the images as well as the individuality of the subjects, thus distancing himself from any generalisations of gypsy identity, an introduction by Teresa San Román (Zabalza 1995: 9-10), undoubtedly the best known anthropologist of Spanish gypsies working today, nevertheless implicitly legitimises the ethnographic authority of the images within. Yet she stresses the interiority of Zabalza's position as photographer to the gitano group when she states that "Ramón Zabalza es uno de los poquísimos payos a los que un amigo gitano le ha pedido que le fotografíe con su familia junto al cadáver del padre recién fallecido" (Zabalza 1995: 9). Zabalza is at once a payo and hence in opposition to the gitano, and he is simultaneously a friend of some considerable intimacy, an insider to gitanos as well as an outsider. A tension thus ensues from the aim of the book and its possible effects as the demarcations of inside and outside are revealed to be blurred and indeterminate.

Photographs and reflections

Zabalza's book intends primarily, as he states in his introduction, to bring to the viewer a fragment of his own time with numerous gypsies, whereby the photograph serves as the field in which viewers, despite their dispersed and distant positions, are seduced to imagine something of his experiences and hence to engage in an imagined relation with gypsy difference. In her prologue, San Román states that:

Se trata de la plasmación, a través de imágenes visuales y verbales, del impacto que en el autor ha producido, durante muchos años, su encuentro personal y único con muchos gitanos, con esos gitanos y no con otros gitanos, él y no otras personas (Zabalza 1995: 9).

Despite this subjective emphasis in his representation, which stresses the particularity of his own vision as also of his chosen subjects, it cannot be denied that the layout of the volume, its bilingual Spanish-English presentation of his narratives of memory and its deliberate provocation of the viewer's curiosity through the juxtaposition of disparate verbal and visual re-tracings aims to open a political space for gypsies as "others" who merit a certain regard. The contradictions thrown up by this volume are many in that it transgresses numerous conventional frames: in its focus on the economically less privileged amongst gypsies, it provides the viewer at once with visual proof of dominant notions and connotations of gypsies as an ethnic minority living on the margins of western society in conditions of economic deprivation. Certainly, Zabalza himself never questions the extent to which gitanos are in any way "different" to himself; nor does he challenge the notion that gitano identity is a given that can be viewed and "known" through the process of viewing. On the one hand, in his introduction, he openly criticises what he sees as ethnocentrism and paternalism from anthropologists to gypsies (Zabalza

1995: 15). Yet the photographs also underline the humanity of gypsy existence lived in terms of poverty and struggle, inviting from the viewer an imaginative act of empathy, and they equally highlight the sense of communal belonging that defines the gypsy way of life. Furthermore, Zabalza states that by getting to know gitano culture, he was able to better understand his own cultural identity. Gitanos are at all times in his narratives referred to as “them”, the “other”, but of equal importance here is the notion of “direct contact”. The camera, for Zabalza, is the margin between himself and the gitano as other, whereby his position as observer results in a reflexivity that leads on to an observation of his own identity. Thus the attempt to reflect the other via the still image translates into a reflection upon the self. The result is an implicit questioning of the disempowered margins where gypsy identity is located in the *payo* (i.e. non-gitano) imaginary, an invitation for us as viewers to align ourselves with the photographer and to wander out of a supposed, hegemonic centre where we control the lens of our perception, only to discover that certainties and centres, as well as margins and edges, are mutually reliant and mutually unreliable imaginings.

Photographic ambivalence

The bilingual Spanish–English volume, very much an attractive “coffee table” book intended no doubt for a western, middle class readership (the inclusion of English translations suggests a targeted international readership), is consciously presented in an ambiguous fashion, whereby image and text are both separated into different parts and mutually implicated in a deliberately paradoxical move, leaving the viewer/reader to speculate on the possible meanings and interpretations of the photographs. No caption, therefore, accompanies any of the photographs. Instead, a list is added at the end giving the date and location of each image. This is a style espoused by many “serious” photographers and photodocumentarians, such as the Brazilian Sebastião Salgado in his many photographic volumes. The aim, of course, is to allow both a direct, visceral relation to emerge between viewer and image as also a more rational one, based upon text, context and information offered by captions. Thus the images themselves hover ambivalently between their twin roles as aesthetic and realist representations. Firstly, though, Zabalza’s autobiographical accounts of his time with the gypsies that starts off the volume act implicitly as a framing narrative to the ensuing photographs. Not so obvious, though undoubtedly of considerable importance to the viewer’s interpretation of the images, is Zabalza’s own editing of the photographs and the coherent, linear sequences that he thereby builds up to support the literary/anthropological narrative of the volume. The verbal and the visual are thus at once mutually implicated and disparate.

A further ambivalence presents itself in Zabalza’s reasons for producing this volume. As he goes to some pains to state, unmistakable in his work is its point of departure which is located in the numerous stereotypes of and prejudices against gypsies that circulate in mainstream Spanish society. The aim, then, is to undo these stereotypes, to somehow deconstruct the “otherizing” of gitanos in dominant Spanish discourses, to render gitanos human in Spanish eyes and thereby to construct for them a space of dignity and regard. Thus Zabalza’s work must be seen to be impelled by a fundamental ethical imperative that seeks to locate ethnic, cultural and economic difference in terms of rela-

tion, a relation that is based on the visual acknowledgement of the other as at once different from the self and also as the very means of affirmation of the self. Furthermore, this is an ethics that operates within the boundaries of the photographic image and, indeed, one that relies for its effects on the superimposition of numerous, contradictory frames on this image. Needless to say, it is also an imperative that functions within the larger framing concept of the cultural stereotype of marginality and disempowerment as applicable to gypsies, and of dominance as applicable to the presumed hegemonic, payo or non-gypsy viewer. Thus, direct relation with the other is attempted via the intervention of intermediary “texts” or images, within an overall context of the fetishization of otherness that results from the stereotype. The photographs therefore aim to release or do away with stereotypes by imaginatively interweaving framed, cultural representation and contingent, lived practice in order to realign the performance of relation and hence identity. The thrust of the volume is a self-conscious promotion of identity as process. Furthermore, this process must take place across considerable economic and political differences as well as ethnic and cultural borders.

Lévinas and the ethics of vision

The aim of this paper, then, is to problematize the role of photography in this endeavour. To what extent can the photograph, a medium which objectifies what it represents to the same extent as subjectifying it, a medium that is poised, as Elizabeth Edwards has persuasively argued, on the borderline of documentation and expressiveness, a medium which discloses and excludes, which draws arbitrary boundaries around lost moments in time, which both freezes and scatters, to what extent, then, can the photograph provide a space for direct relation or recognition across the frame? Surely, though, the potential of the photograph to exclude or to suggest relies upon the viewer’s vision in order to be exploited? In his book *Sights of Vision* (1997), David Levin states that “our vision is not just a biological endowment; it is also a capacity, a potential that can be developed and realized in a number of different ways” (1997: 9). As a consequence, vision, or the ability to see, is historically produced and appropriated from birth onwards by culture in the course of the socializing process entered into by the newborn child. Vision thus becomes socially determined and carries with it the weight of past narratives. Equally, however, if vision is determined by existing discursive constructions, then it is also a field of possibility, a way into the future, where alterity is brought into focus and offered regard. To see differently is then to think and act differently. Perspectives of alterity, as Zabalza has found when looking through his lens, impact upon the self and force rethinkings of identity in terms of relation.

Herein lies the ethical force of vision. So also the political force behind arguments for re-aligning lines of vision. Lévinas, whose development of the notion of the face-to-face encounter foregrounds vision as the means of establishing an interlocutor addressed in terms of difference, writes of the violence of not regarding. For Lévinas, the refusal to see is to give in to the destructive urge. In his *Entre Nous* (1998), he states that:

I have seen him on the horizon. I have not looked straight at him. I have not looked him in the face... To be in relation with the other face to face – is to be unable to kill... The face signifies otherwise (1998: 9-10).

Otherwise or other ways: for Lévinas, it is the very alterity of the other, his strangeness, "his irreducibility to the I" (1969: 9) that forces a reckoning with the ethical. Robert Bernasconi stresses the ethical force in Lévinas's work when he says:

If the I in its separation is the absolute starting point, then the Other is also absolute in the sense of transcending, exceeding or overflowing this starting point in such a way as to call the I into question. The Other puts me in question in such a way that I find myself responsible for the Other, for whom I can never do enough (Bernasconi 2000: 62).

Alterity thus forces the interrogative onto the contours of the self, but, for Lévinas, the other always remains distinct and separate from the self. The stranger, as other, is distant from the self and it is in this very distance or in-between space that the ethical arises. From this viewpoint, the gitano, as an absolute other to the payo, forces onto the viewer a question of ethics through his or her difference and distinction. Alterity thus presents itself to me, as the viewer, in the guise of the photograph, as absolute, irreducible, strange. It holds my vision, arrests my gaze and forces me to rethink my responsibility to the gypsy as other.

Yet, for the modern individual, it is doubtless problematic to think of self and other as absolutes that are not mutually implicated in any ontological sense. True, the gitanos of Zabalza's images are surrounded by the frames he imposes upon them and in which they are presented to me. In the elasticity of an imaginative viewing, however, the space both confines and releases. Those very frames beckon another reading, one that can only come to life through the frames of my own vision, the historical lens of my shifting cultural perspectives. Nor is this a linear progression of my own historical discourse, for the other readings that lurk at the margins of my vision, at the borders of the image as I see it, force upon me a dialectic between past, present and future whereby my historicity is re-revised, re-shuffled and re-experienced. Those readings beckon me to see the gitanos as an alterity that can include me, draw me in through my very transgression of my self in and through the imaginative act of viewing: thus a coffee table book transforms me in the same way as my regard can transform it and the image of the gitano as other allows me to translate myself, i.e., to transl(oca)te myself, forcing my own displacement, not face to face with them, not even next to them, but in entangled implication with their very fluid, mobile midst. As Eduardo Cadava shows in his seminal text, *Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History* (1997), on the historical import of Walter Benjamin's explorations of the photograph, Benjamin was, beyond doubt, the theorist par excellence who drew out the temporal fluidity and spatial mobility of the photograph. He also underlined the contingency and temporal fragility of the photographic image, the fleeting flashes of history that it presents to the viewer only to disappear into darkness again. Photographs are testaments of death, of fleeting time, that flash into our present and disturb our temporal coherence. Thus, for Benjamin, photographs are articulations of the past, traces of history, seized temporarily through the shifting, unreliable dynamic of memory and amnesia, death and loss, absence and presence, mimesis and imagination. In this space of fluid constellations, all historical knowledge is borderline, poised and tremulous for flight, balanced on the reckoning of a mere moment in time. Identity, seen through the photograph, is only ever imagined then, never directly represented. Knowledge of the other, as indeed of the self, is thus borderline, precarious, on the move.

This mobile, shifting borderzone of self and other clearly complicates Lévinas's notion of the face-to-face. In the torn, fragmented imbrications of self and other, a complexity arises which highlights the uncertain borderzone as the space of relation. In his critique of Lévinas, Jacques Derrida challenges the notion that the self and other can ever be absolutes. For Derrida, alterity is experienced in terms of the relative, whereby the other is always other than. Thus the other is not distanced from me, but appears as an alter ego, an interrogation on my presumed horizon that suggests the *peut-être*, the can-be that is in the here and now. In this decentering proposition, Derrida detects a double movement of self/other that complicates Lévinas's concept of alterity. The margins that I see, the borders of the image that my sight rests upon – the very means through which my sight affirms itself – thus become zones of seduction, namely transgression. I am drawn into imagining my historicity in terms of an/other. The border that separates also connects. Mostly, it invites the overflow of imagination into what endlessly lies beyond and herein is its porosity, the fragility and the fracture that are also the frame. The photograph constrains and encloses only because it simultaneously and paradoxically affirms the fact that other realities lie on its demarcations. The apparently natural frame is thus a contingent and fluid boundary, a constructed parameter that presents a centre only to implicitly implore its own decentering.

Photographic contingencies

The dramatic force of photographs no doubt lies in this very tacit ambivalence arising from an invented border and an invented focus. For the purposes of this article, the complications of these supposedly separate categories can best be viewed in a specific photograph by Zabalza. According to the list appended to the photographs, this particular shot was taken in Vicálvaro, Madrid in 1985. Nothing more is known about it, as it, like the rest of the images, does not have a caption. The scene suggests the end of perhaps a market day, with several women engaged in what appears to be clearing up a stall. On display are numerous household items, china crockery, cooking pans, one with a label on it saying “acero inoxidable” (stainless steel), small pots, tablecloths. A van or a truck is glimpsed behind them with some young children sitting on top. The scene is relaxed, casual, apparently totally natural. Visible gypsy difference, both ethnic and economic, is suggested by the darkness of skin of those present, the frills on the women's skirts, the scruffiness of the children perched atop the vehicle. The two women in the foreground are laughing together, caught in mid-conversation perhaps, as the others listen in and watch. At first sight, they are at the centre of this image, their jocular body language caught in mid-gesture holding my gaze for a transfixed moment. As my eyes wander, however, I am arrested by the small, framed mirror that lies at the bottom right hand of the picture, yet another household item presumably for sale. I realize now that located at the core of this photograph is, not the two women laughing so naturally or indeed the group as a whole, but rather Zabalza himself reflected with his camera as he takes the shot. He is both inside and outside the picture, framed and contained even as he attempts to frame and contain. Indeed, it is precisely because he is, to my ‘knowledge’, on the outside of this photograph – no, more to the point, he is indeed the very constructor of this image, the builder of its boundaries – that he is also at its centre. What is more, the cen-

tre is no longer at the centre but has now shifted to the bottom right. In this double take of visual appropriation, the hegemonic position of the viewer is stripped bare as he too becomes an object of vision. Levelled now with the subjects of his ethnographic study, his image in the mirror throws up the contingency of reflection, the question of perspective in regard. Thus, for Zabalza, to see the gitanos in terms of difference is also to see himself in this same-other light, to turn the self into an other. Concurrently, the disenfranchisement of the gitanos, their liminality, becomes Zabalza's as well, just as his empowered location as a visual appropriator becomes theirs. For us, as viewers of the photograph, to imaginatively extrapolate Zabalza from the image, simply because we somehow "know" that he was on the outside, is also to release the gitanos from the frame, to read the image in terms of what is not shown, to render forth the fragility of space and time. Mostly, as Benjamin has pointed out in spectral terms, it is to peer hesitantly and precariously via the photograph into what might have been and might yet be.

The "direct encounter" attempted by Zabalza through his work, one that can be aligned to Lévinas's notion of the face-to-face, can thus be problematised through the photograph. The absolutes of photographer and subject as separate entities are rendered invalid, as the transgressive space in-between invites multiple connections and configurations. Nevertheless, and in keeping with the excess that accompanies the photograph, Zabalza's image poses the interrogative on the constructed – and, needless to say, now deconstructed – borderline between payo and gitano, viewer and viewed. Instead the photograph becomes a space of embroiled relation, of reckless border crossings from the safety of the centre to the danger of the frame's edge, where, as Derrida has stated, "the other would not be what he is (my fellow man as stranger) if he were not alter ego" (1978: 127). Conventional power relations are thus disturbed by this coffee table book with implications that extend beyond the once again blurred boundary between individual and group. In her chapter entitled "Travels of the Imaginary Spanish Gypsy", Lou Charnon-Deutsch (2002: 22-40) connects the conventional portrayal of the Spanish gypsy as exoticized other with the development of discourses of national identity both in Spain as well as in the rest of Europe. The gypsy as the dark-skinned, somehow wild and untamed other is located at the borderzone precisely in order to construct the hegemonic racial and cultural confines of the nation. The proliferation of ethnic myths thus coincides with the construction of nationalism. Difference is emphasized so that the disenfranchised, be these gypsies, immigrants, the colonized or other "others", serve ironically as the building blocks of power. In this imperialist strategy of hierarchies, gypsies have been problematic for centuries precisely because as travellers, they are mobile and cross boundaries. In their disrespect for territories and terrains, in the transgressive impulse of a people on the move, often, it should be stressed, forced to be on the move by those who seek to marginalise them, gypsies serve to signal stability, rootedness, righteousness in their other, the payo or non-gypsy.

Zabalza's abandonment of the ethnographer's notebook in favour of the camera should be commended here. In many ways, recent efforts from the academy to engage with gitanos – itself in many ways a novel and somewhat "postcolonial" venture not untypical of late modernity – have had the effect of rendering them confined within the inflexible and unimaginative discourses of power and authority. The sociologist Tomás Calvo Buezas relies largely on quantitative surveys for his analyses. With titles such as *La diferencia inquietante* (1997), the anthropologist Teresa San Román locates gypsies

firmly at the margins of society, in positions of disempowerment. Paloma Gay y Blasco, in her *Gypsies in Madrid* (1999), likewise fails to question difference and states that in the course of her fieldwork (an inherently problematic term that presupposes the field), she as a non-gypsy was always on the outside. Despite the obvious championing of gypsy causes, their own positions of authority, their political assurances are never under threat. By freezing gypsies into otherness, these academics simultaneously freeze themselves in the absence of academic reflexivity.

The carefully carved scriptures of academic discourse contrast, then, with the seductive fluidity of the image that floats into my view. In her book entitled *Raw Histories: Photographs, Anthropology and Museums* (2001), Elizabeth Edwards argues that photographs not only reveal hegemonic agendas but also suggest the alternative, the subversive, the double dynamic of inside/outside, centre/periphery. She states that:

there is a multidimensional fluidity of the discursive practices of photographs as linking objects between past and present, between visible and invisible and active in cross-cultural negotiation. Meanings come in and out of focus, double back on themselves, adhere silently (2001: 4).

In this sense, and in the historical and political complications of the photographs, Zabalza's work is suggestive of potential, the opening of gitano identity from the colonizing discourses that have conventionally demarcated it. What ensues is no anthem of gypsiness, no great song of solidarity for those on the margins, not even an absolute regard of the face to face. Instead, I find myself merely caught in a caesura of time and space, a dramatic, performative arrest of my gaze on the brink that invites my ethical imagination to take temporal flight beyond its own frontiers. Viewed through the photograph, the epiphany of the face to face, then, is uncontained, opening onto the alterity of my own meaning, forcing me to rewrite myself, reposition myself, make new sense of myself – photography as autography, but one written in the murky, half-light of the margin. Perhaps, though, it is only here in this unruly space, in this chasm of slippage, that the ethical weight of these photographs can be discerned, as the frame melts before my very eyes and meaning is contested, recoded and transformed.

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