

Zadoc's Foreignness

David Bate

The view from an automobile gives us a fleeting glance of the world as we zoom by it. The tradition of street photography in the Twentieth century developed this type of vision into an art, one that sees in the fleeting instant a sign for more important or 'bigger' things. Rendering things in the world that ordinarily move as *fixed* images does not seek to 'capture' time, life or anything else, like butterflies in a net, but rather initiates a process that *invents* meaning through the stilled image. Meaning is generated in these images precisely through their static condition. Out of this photographic practice rooted in a process of uncertainty (the random, transitory or even unplanned encounter) comes, not its opposite, certainty or conviction, but something else, more akin to a social commentary. Commentary is based in the art of observation. A good commentary is one that refines and refreshes sight from its habit of *knowing* and it does this by negotiating the values that it encounters. This is what I see at work in the photographs by Zadoc Nava. His work negotiates 'the foreign' within everyday life, an idea that will need some explanation.

Zadoc's work appears to be interested in what might be called 'traditional communities', groups whose social sensibilities and identity is not ended or weakened by modern technological forms. I say 'appears' because there may be no way of knowing exactly what significance is generated here by these photographs, between the viewer and the pictures. What any viewer does with a photograph is open-ended. As spectators we need to *negotiate* the meaning of any image, both social and personal, regardless of the specific subject matter of the pictures. Furthermore, even traditional communities involve a dialectics, between individuals and community, between modern and old, between future and past, the future and the present, and between representation and image. Indeed, what is striking about many of the photographs in this book is their attention to the relationship between people and images; a bond and tie that recurs across the different cultures featured and figured in the photographs. In Havana, the images of the Cuban revolution and leaders, revolutionary figures vie with the living space they occupy.



In a contrast between treasured icon and identity, citizens find themselves caught living in the bodily presences available to them. Likeness and dissimilarity engage the viewer inside these communities.

So too, with the photographs taken in Tehran, Iran, visual representations of a community and the idols of leaders are also figured in parallel contrasts. Citizens live between the image of the father and the space of existence they leave unoccupied, left open for negotiation. The photographs here create a doubled-space, where the images seen within them, as public murals, political posters and

so on, function as 'authority', while the social spaces around them are the places where people act and play out the melancholy joy of reality.



It is around such parameters that a diversity of 'foreignness' can be situated, and given meaning as the space where difference is negotiated. Just to be clear, to speak about or to be 'foreign' in this context is to recognize and accept forms of difference and strangeness that are not reducible to 'race', sex, ethnicity or other social categories so often contested. To be foreign or as Zadoc here is, an agent of the foreign, is to delve into the unfamiliar of familiarity. The clichéd codes of knowing 'things' in a culture and country gives way to strangeness, the multitude of unfamiliarity that lies beyond the obvious idea of the 'foreign'.

If the voyage is a still idealized means of discovery, it is nevertheless not by travelling that you necessarily find out something new. (To travel from one airport to another is not really going anywhere at all, you have to go beyond to find something new.) To discover something means looking beyond the 'code', beyond exoticism, or rather, without exoticism. Exoticism takes many forms: the picturesque, the ethnographic adventure, the othered person, the idealized cliché, or even something as simply 'bizarre'. In the intended sense here, the foreignness within these photographs relates to their deviation from the mediated image of the cultures and cultural practices they show. At once familiar in terms of iconography, the scenes are nevertheless foreign, unfamiliar, but not exotic. They do not assimilate what is seen to the existing mission of knowledge. There is something in the mode of picturing that resists this, making these scenes all quite paradoxical, retaining the strangeness of their reality.

Look at the cover image of this book. A taxi (you can see its number scrawled on the side, and just make out its sign attached to the roof rack) has a male driver and female passenger on board. A woman and a man sit in an automobile. The woman stares straight ahead while the driver smiles. They seem to be going somewhere. Her scarfed head and shoulders, an image so reminiscent of a 1950s cinema starlet, is seen in profile clearly through the open car window, whereas the window frame dissects the man's body in two. The window frames her while he is cut in two by it. They occupy different spaces. The seatbelt across his chest echoes this division, cutting his body in two yet again, as though it was another shadow cast by the window frame. Yet his bared arm takes up a disproportionate and imposing amount of space in the triangular quarter light window.



Beneath her scarf, wisps of hair fall across her face. The man's face is hidden in shadow, but his smile and moustache counterpoint each another. Masculinity and femininity, one seen clearly in the window frame, the other cut into two, hidden and shady. What we are shown here in this photograph taken in Tehran, in an ordinary taxi scene on the street, is the outside and inside of two public spaces: the taxi and the street. We are shown the inside of that sometimes-awkward metropolitan experience, the artificial closeness, the physical proximity and false intimacy of the 'taxi ride'. We are shown the uncomfortable closeness and distance of that relation, in this case between a man and a woman. Paradoxically this inside space, no matter how uncomfortable it is as a common psychological awkwardness, nevertheless functions in dialogue to the outside, that is, the public street. In fact, she seems closer to the outside street than the interior of the car, partly due to the open window that frames her. Thus, the scene of this woman being taken somewhere offers the viewer a dialectics concerning 'safe space'. Where is a safe space here? One might conclude there is none. The image recalls a certain type of paparazzi photographic drama, inherited from European painting (the modernists of Paris): the figure of the passing woman, but here driven by a man in an automobile, a figure almost hidden in shadow and cut in two, yet whose power emanates in subtle ways beyond that smile.

Zadoc's picture here functions allegorically, 'the foreign' appears as a plurality and not as a singular thing. This image is not a picture of 'Iran' as a country, 'Tehran' as a city or even as it appears here in *Shadowlands*, as a fleeting encounter within a flow of scenes taken under the fundamentalist logic of a patriarchy. Rather, this image functions as a critical metaphor that condenses *all* these fields. The image is not subservient or subsumed to any one of them and, as such, generates within the ordinariness of the *scene* (not the image) a kind of 'foreignness', whose value is precisely enmeshed within this complexity of positions. The thickness of the image is not reducible to a singular certainty - something that is further complicated by the sequence of photographs in which it appears.

In another juxtaposition the lonely image of a cooked chicken on a spit is set against a different photographic scene, a human figure dressed as a bunny rabbit. The chicken is 'cooked' and spitted, while the human rabbit seems about to remove its own head, or perhaps, is holding it to prevent it from falling off. Tragic and comic at the same time, both creatures seem 'trussed up' and ready to go. One is already cooked and ready for consumption, the other is associated with the marketing techniques of USA mass fast food outlets. But a deranged rabbit offers no solution to social crisis; indeed this one seems to be a symptom of it.



There is something strangely familiar that transverses the suite of photographs set in Tehran. I think it is the way the image of 'America' (the USA, not the entire continent) resonates inside them in ambivalent ways. America is one of the shadowy presences across these pictures, and of course in the actual history of

Iran. On the one hand, the anti-American images emblazoned on the architecture of the streets speak for themselves. On the other, the activities seen on the streets appear to contradict the propaganda. Modern Persian shoppers do 'ordinary shopping', the take-away coffee cup, shopping bags, strolling mothers and daughters, the solitary man or woman. All these scenes are redolent within American street photography too, a link that is perhaps further emphasised by the use of light, particularly the way that characters are bathed in light in various pictures. There is yet again another dialectics at work here between familiarity and unfamiliarity, whose luminous product is a 'foreignness' that opens up this world of culture, without judging it, without pronouncement or condemnation. It associates it with things we know, therein making it also strange. For the viewer, what is important in this is the access to visibility, and the process of visibility in this culture whose relation to 'the West' has had such a contemporary political tension.

Yet if what cannot be avoided now is the dynamics of social visibility, that is, the way that social power is exercised and located within the regime of looking, it is nevertheless not the only register of power at work. In a fundamental discourse on visibility, visibility and its flip side of invisibility, may well be two poles of a register of power. However, 'visibility' does not simply give up its secrets just like that. Herein lies the foreignness of the scenes. What we cannot really see, like the taxi driver, retains its power. The scenes, at once familiar as any city street, yet retain a strangeness, an invisibility that yields up to us only the shadow of power.

In this oblique and indirect way these images point to what Janet Wolff has called the 'aesthetics of uncertainty'.¹ She locates this aesthetics of uncertainty as the interest and in fact a need for any (political) commitment to acknowledge complexity. This proposal for the use of uncertainty has little to do with postmodern cynicism or the rejection of any values whatsoever. The aesthetics of uncertainty is rather the opening up of a debate, a condition, fuelled by negotiation. This political argument, Wolff argues, should be translated to the field of aesthetics where things must be located within the frame of uncertainty. This form of aesthetics relates to the visual argument that is made by pictures, their impact in general and their effect on viewers in particular.

Returning to the streets of Havana and the portrait photographs taken there, it is clear that the inhabitants seen in the pictures acknowledge and make clear their recognition of the camera. They are willing in their participation of the photograph (although maybe not the dog and participate in the making of the picture as an image-event. In a sense, here we see an instance of the negotiation of the other as an aesthetic and also as an ethical practice. (The viewed looks at the camera/viewer, just as the viewer looks at the viewed.) The negotiation of the other is not simply to do with a direct gaze at the camera, which is itself a central technique in the history of ethnographic and police photographs, but rather to do with the negotiated relations adopted between photographer and people pictured. In the back and forth of these looks (camera and subject) the experience of foreignness flourishes or, at least, makes it easier for it to flourish.

The function of looking at this juncture is secondary to the significance of the encounter. Like the glance at a (self) mirror image, looking is a means to the question of identity and identification, to check if there is one, to ask, confront or confirm what it is, or what it means. 'Me' and 'the other' (the mirror-image) in this instance are the same. One and the same. In a virtual reconstruction of the encounter, familiarity (recognition) is met with unfamiliarity (foreignness). An interior recognition and exterior foreignness meet each other, each making the other closer and yet paradoxically, further away.

In this way, the photographs in this book are all linked, precisely because they move from country to country and across different cultural communities, to the theme of identity and social processes of identification that act upon people. How do communities define themselves, or confine themselves to certain areas of interest, practice, enjoyment, concern, excitement, or why gather themselves into certain often-crowded spaces?

Where a classic sociologist would demand an answer to these questions in social and literary form, the photographs seen here exactly address these issues through the frame of uncertainty and foreignness. The pictures quite literally frame these issues and questions as an aesthetic space: photographs take the form for questions of the personal and social occupation of space.

This is why Zadoc's photographs, in the various suites of different images, can be said to offer a commentary, a social commentary concerned with the busy interior and exterior processes of human living. As a device of spatial representation the camera creates a dynamic relation to the environment, participating in addressing these questions through the way the camera is located within it. So the position that a photographer puts a camera then is an ethical question too and brings us back to the issue of what is put in the frame. In Zadoc's work, thoroughly ethical, the points-of-view we are offered take us to and through different communities, whose actions may not seem legible or surprising. From this can be taken that the pictures retain an element of uncertainty in their logic, which has to be negotiated by the viewer in their participation with them. 'Foreignness' is not about the difference of the cultures in the pictures, but in the thinking that informs the vision of them. The viewer has to form their own conditions of participation with the pictures.

I think of John Cassavetes film work (whose first film was incidentally called *Shadows*) whose influence on French new wave cinema is famous, especially Jean-Luc Godard. Such a reference is not purely random, since Zadoc Nava also works in the cinema as an independent filmmaker. Improvisation and *cinéma vérité* realism is key in the film work of Cassavetes and I see some elements of this here at work in these photographs too. Negotiation is crucial to the work called *House of Strength* the historical martial arts practice of warriors that shows the masculine province of combat training, one that fuses dance, religion and philosophy.



The work directly contrasts with the final work in this book on female boxers, *Olympia*, with its obvious reference to the forthcoming London Olympics of 2012, and less-obvious tongue-in-cheek historical reference to the famous French painting, 'Olympia' (1863) by Édouard Manet. Modernity and tradition, the logic of certain fixed communities are weighed against each other. There is no supra-narrative here condemning or condoning the practices, it looks at female and male practices as they are performed and as they are framed by their environments. An air of curiosity saturates these images, showing their real

intimacy and the utter distance of them from each other. Present and past, invention and community, failure and tradition, melancholy and distance, anger and intimacy all find a place in the pictures without closure. This is what I mean by 'Zadoc's foreignness'. It is the 'something' that aches to speak within these images.



One might think of the book title here *Shadowlands* as referring to all of these places, the cultures and countries that have had (or still do have) the shadow of violence or hidden histories of oppression over them. Colonial, anti-colonial or even revolutionary cultures have all taken their toll on populations. If groups cling to certain social and cultural practices over others, it is against the long cast of a shadow over them. The origin of the object or historical condition of these cast shadows, however, is not told in these pictures. It is not their aim to do this, to speak about historical origins. Bathed in light, the subject that the viewer is shown still seems to be in the capture of these shadows. Technically, changes in light affect the way we see an object. This is nowhere more true than with the registration of light from a camera on film or the light receptors of a digital camera (both were used to make different works in this book). Shadow and light, as complex historical and cultural metaphors also shape our cultural views, as to how we see a culture, a practice or tradition. Lost in the mediatised world of the televisual screen, the cultures and scenes represented in this book begin to stand out as shaped through the camera in a different way. Instead of a vision of certainty the images here provoke the question of uncertainty, as a form of knowing.

So while the view from an automobile might seem superficial, passing or fleeting, it should be recalled that even travelling within one's own culture it can reveal a foreignness in ourselves. As shown in this book, often with paradox and humour, foreignness is exactly, an essential part of our own identity.

ⁱ Janet Wolff, *The Aesthetics of Uncertainty*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2008.