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Territorial Amnesia

Giovanna Zapperi July 19, 2010

*Florence Lazar, Les Bosquets, 2010 (video still)*The breakdown of the *banlieue*

'Les Bosquets' is the name of a *cit * in Clichy-Montfermeil, a satellite town in the Parisian suburbs (*banlieue*), located 17 km north of Paris. The french term "cit " indicates the typical housing units built around the borders of the city after the second world war. Le Corbusier's model of the "Cit  Radieuse" (radiant city) as a modernist residential housing principle has become the symbol of the reconfiguration of the European city's landscape in the second part of the XXth century. Le Corbusier's cit s-buildings are now mostly regarded as monuments of modernity, and sometimes, like in Marseille, they have turned into desirable middle-class housings. However, in most cases the "cit " is no longer considered a functional habitat for the working-class, but rather a disfunctional environment for a widely unemployed population. Needless to say, in the French vocabulary, the cit  has become the sign of a degraded urban environment haunted by the specter a growing migrant population.

In what follows, I will talk about Florence Lazar's documentary work in the specific context of the Cit  des Bosquets. This site has been subjected to an ongoing process of demolitions for the past twenty years, as part of France's most ambitious project of urban planning and reorganisation. I will look at the ways in which Lazar tries to understand a local situation that involves issues of gentrification, mobility, labour, struggle, and sexual difference, thus hoping to draw some possible parallels with the discussions on labour and mobilities in the Asian context.

Florence Lazar is an artist that works with photography and documentary film and video. During the past ten years, her work has been primarily concerned with events that took place in former Yugoslavia: the end of the war, the fall of Milosevic, and the creation of a special court to judge war crimes in Belgrade. Lazar, herself a French of Serbian origins, produced a series of videos focused on issues of translation, transmission, and identity formations in the post-war context, mainly through the representation of discourses and gestures of filmed persons. Her most recent

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projects are located in a geographically closer situation: the Barbès district in Paris, and in the cités of Clichy-Montfermeil. *Les Bosquets* on which I will focus today, is her most recent work.

In the past five years, the territory of Clichy-Montfermeuil, where the cité des Bosquets is located, has become the symbol of the banlieue's disintegration. In 2005, a vast movement of riots spread all over the country, and this is where it began. The media representation of the site at the time of the events has still powerful effects in how the banlieues' population is perceived in public debates and policies. However, the site's image during the riots is not the only factor that contributes to the reification of the cité's inhabitants. In recent years, a growing number of movies, videoclips, and television series depicting urban violence were filmed in this area. French producer and filmmaker Luc Besson in particular has established his company here: the result is that the 'cités' are now used like a vast film set and its residents are thus becoming extras of their own living space (Besson's latest production, *From Paris with Love*, starring John Travolta, was filmed in this area).[1]



Florence Lazar, *Les Bosquets*, 2010 (video still)

Visual representation has become a crucial issue for this area, oscillating between the spectacular and the documentary, between the movie and the TV report, as two distinctive but complementary visual strategies. These representations are increasingly entwined with the materiality of the transformations in the territory's social texture.

#### Seeing and Listening

Considering this complex situation, finding alternative paths to try to visually understand the site's history and present is no easy task. How to find meaning in this intermingling between the gentrification process and the struggles that define the banlieue's visual identity? How to approach singularities and communities that resist against their eviction from a given urban territory? Florence Lazar arrived at the *Cité des Bosquets* not to just denounce a situation of social injustice, nor to actively engage in the forms of resistance. Her inquiry into the territory of the cité takes as its starting point a question about what does it mean to know a situation, to inhabit a place that has become the site of conflictual forces. Her operation deploys what I would call, borrowing Irit Rogoff's definition[2], a micropolitics of knowledge. With this notion I intend to define a process that is not a mode of doing politics, but rather a way to give oneself the possibility to understand a situation and to find a position that is not determined in advance.

In the films that Florence Lazar did in the former Yugoslavia, she always approached a singular fact, a narrative or an unexpected encounter that allowed her to open a breach into traumatic and complex events. Nothing was represented or narrated as if it could be possible to understand it objectively. Despite the realism adopted as a filmic style, reality itself remains difficult to grasp. Not because of the ambivalence between what happened and what is only imagined or reported, but because the different voices, discourses, and points of view that merge in the narrative, slowly compose the picture of something multiple and often contradictory. Much the same as what we experience observing some ancient Dutch paintings, Lazar's films need time: the sequences are slow and often insist on single scenes that are framed in a way that is realistic in style while activating a meditation on the events that are narrated.

In her previous projects, she adopted diverse narrative modes focusing on the personal account, the discussion and the act of listening. In this framework, the documentary image paradoxically suggests the impossibility of having a comprehensive view of the events. In order to understand what is going on, we have to put together the

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single fragments, to read between the lines of the discourses and gestures of those who saw and heard things, and are still searching for meaning. The oral dimension plays a crucial role in these works whose aim is not to demonstrate a thesis, nor to convince the spectator, but rather to create a discursive space: as has been written, Florence Lazar films the spoken word[3]. Subjectivity thus becomes crucial in how a geographical site and its memory can be verbally and visually articulated. The documentary operation consists in creating the visual and spatial conditions for this kind of discursivity.

#### Fieldwork.

After a period of two years and a half of research, encounters and negotiations in the cité, Florence Lazar was enabled to go to Les Bosquets with a camera and a team. Two people that we see at different times in the film were crucial both for her circulation in the space of the cité and in the processes of approaching different voices within it. The first person is a young black man, the mediator that facilitates the camera's presence: without him it would be impossible for a white woman to film the cité's everyday life. He especially introduces her into Les Bosquet's street life, where male interactions and sociability take place. From this perspective, he acts like a native informant that permits to access a reality that would be otherwise impossible to observe. The second person is Aisha, an Algerian woman wearing a scarf – a highly controversial sign in the French political and cultural debates. The privileged relation that Lazar develops with these two people suggests something like an ethnographic procedure. However, the film is not constructed upon the fiction of a reality that presents itself as such. The situations are clearly constructed in a way that is obviously artificial, trying to arrange the conditions for accessibility and knowledge.

Lazar tries to understand how layers of time are currently superimposed in the territory of Clichy-Montfermeil. She never asks questions. It's not about asking people to explain what is going on, nor to set up a dialogue. There is nothing like an interview, we rather need time and concentration to understand what the different people are talking about. In a similar way, when she went to former Yugoslavia after the war, she sometimes filmed long sequences of people speaking, without understanding a word of their language. Consequently, the point is not witnessing and testimony, but looking and listening, sometimes stubbornly, insistently, until some meaning emerges.

So while looking at the building site from a distance, we hear conversations: about that building – B1, B2, or B3 – that was destroyed, about the fact that people will have to be relocated elsewhere, about who is gone, who stays, and who might arrive. And, about those that refuse to leave. A group of young men is sitting around a table in the street, playing cards, discussing and hanging out. The street has turned into a male living room, which maybe says something about what it means when your living space is being demolished.



Florence Lazar, *Les Bosquets*, 2010 (video still)

These young men playing cards and discussing are unemployed while other men are working in the cité to destroy the buildings where they live. Here various generations of migrant workers coexist without really encountering each other: the cité's population is composed by so-called second generation of Algerian, Caribbean, or African migrants, although we can imagine that the composition of the population is more complex. But we don't know much about those who work and stay in a separate space beyond the barriers of the construction sites.



Florence Lazar, *Les Bosquets*, 2010 (video still)

The cité's radical transformation dramatically contrasts with an impression of suspension of time. The environment's changing shape is observed as something exclusive and excluding – it's still unclear, as we slowly understand, what will happen to most of the population. Some are obliged to move from one building to another before being directed to their new apartments in the same location; others have already left because of the rising prices. Aisha says that she wasn't able to move to an individual house, because it's reserved to those who have a job, indicating that unemployed people can't apply for one of the new houses. She therefore suggests a radical separation between 'us' (the old inhabitants) and 'them' – otherwise defined as the French – the arriving middle-class. A new population of (mostly) white middle-class people is already visiting the site's new buildings and apartments. We see a young white man presenting a 3D animation film showing how the city will be transformed. The 'old' modernist housing units are going to be replaced with new buildings, there will be new schools, a shopping mall instead of the street market, a new police station, and most importantly, a brand new tram to connect the banlieue to the centre of Paris. At present, it takes one hour and a half to go from Paris' Gare du Nord to Clichy-Montfermeuil, while the new Eurostar train connects Paris to London in 2 hours.

#### Transformative spaces

As Florence Lazar herself explains, the reconfiguration of the site coincides with the erasure of its history: 'the site's brutal destruction establishes a territorial amnesia which interrupts the site's chronology. In addition, it represents a literal collapse for the cité's inhabitants, most of which have already experienced a geographical displacement'.

As we have seen, men occupy the space of the street in a very peculiar way that locates them between the interior and the exterior. But where are the women? Women's visibility and sociability in the streets of the cité is very limited: they spend most of their time at home, or when they are outside, they cross the streets without staying, too busy either bringing the kids to school, shopping at the market, or going to work if they have one.

At times during the film, we see two women, an older and a younger one, both wearing scarves, sitting outside on a carpet, discussing and conversing. They are in an open air space, in the middle of a bucolic landscape, or in front of the cité, that we can see behind the barriers that separate the street from the building site. The two locations suggest the shifting boundaries of the urban territory, with this feeling of unfinished that typically characterizes urban expansion. The presence of two supposedly Algerian women in this context is not surprising, but the carpet and the conversation that takes place on it bring a rather unexpected element in the picture. The carpet, a quintessential domestic object, has been dislocated onto the public arena, in a way that only partly recalls the male living room observed before.

During her research in Clichy-Montfermeuil, Lazar encountered a group of Algerian women that had moved to France with their families in the past decades. These women are strongly implicated in the negotiations between the residents and the institutions in charge of the demolitions and of the relocations. Aisha, in particular, was the spokeswoman of the expropriated owners and tenants (most of the cité's inhabitants actually own their apartments, whose prices on the market have increasingly diminished).

Before starting to work on the film, Florence Lazar produced a series of photographs showing these and other women with the carpet, a device she proposed as an endeavour to constitute a female space within this urban

territory. The carpet suggests the idea of a liminal space between the domestic interior – the ‘home’ from which they have been evicted – and a sort of public ‘agora’, where a woman’s voice can exist and be heard in the public space of the cité. This ‘imaginary garden’, reminding the ancient *hortus conclusus* that in Renaissance painting delimited the territory assigned to women, is displaced onto the public domain and thus transformed into a site for discussion, conversation, and resistance. This displacement is not as innocent as one might suppose, especially if one looks at *La prière*, an installation based on Florence Lazar’s footage of a street prayer in the Barbès district of Paris, where the carpet conjures up a very different meaning in terms of sexual difference. This comparison uncovers the radical change she operated in the photographic series. In its reconfiguration as a (public) space for femininity, the carpet suggests a desire for a place that can be simultaneously intimate and visible, an imaginary place for women’s presence against the gendered separation between public and private.



Florence Lazar, *Conversation I*, 2003-2008

As Hito Steyerl has observed, the search for a documentary distance requires both an ethical and a political positioning, especially because every time we look at a specific situation, we are already involved with the power of the image. Accordingly, she argues for a critical documentary mode whose temporality would be the future instead of the past: in this perspective, the documentary image should depict what is not yet there, but might come in the future.<sup>[4]</sup> The carpet’s imaginary garden set in the reality of a devastated territory is a utopian image, a sight that is yet to come. It suggests the possibility to inhabit a situation in a way that can be transformative and liberating. The women’s occupation of the public space is thus a gesture of resistance and remembrance against the brutal erasure of the site’s history. And yet, it’s also a way to express the desire for a different kind of transformation.

[1] As Florence Lazar reported to me, Besson was eventually obliged to find another set for his film because some “extras” revolted against the low wages and burned the production’s trucks.

[2] I borrow this definition from a paper Rogoff gave at the panel *Micropolitics: Worlds Knowledge* in September 2009 at Institut National d’Histoire de l’Art, Paris.

[3] See: Pascal Beausse, “Florence Lazar: l’artiste comme journaliste”, in Christine Poullain, (ed.) *Florence Lazar*, exhib. cat. Grenoble, Musée de Grenoble, 2002.

[4] Hito Steyerl, *Die Farbe der Wahrheit. Dokumentarismus im Kunstfeld*, Vienna, Verlag Turia + Kant, 2008, pp. 15-16.

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