

# Inter-Ships: Metaphors as Encounters

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The word-concept 'metaphor' imposes itself in that in-between space where 'image' is the meeting-place between language and vision. I am very committed to movement; to do it and to recognize it. To begin with, to the moving image – not only or simply as in cinema or video, but to the conviction that all images 'are moving'. Whether the image itself moves or the viewer who cannot, ever, see an entire image in one look, as 'still', images move in all kinds of ways, including emotionally and politically, by impressing us or soliciting us as witnesses. This indispensable presence of movement in art and literature, as in all cultural practices, has a solid background in the concept of metaphor, which sets meanings in movement through a fundamental ambiguity. In Latin, the equivalent would be 'translation', to carry beyond; in Greek, 'metaphor' is the word written on moving vans. Hence, 'moving' as in changing locations would be an important aspect. This is why, instead of opposing linguistic to visual, abstract to figurative or concrete to abstract 'representations', I want to propose a different, aberrant terminology, with invented words that in my view come closer to all the ambiguities the concept of metaphor harbours. This moves away from habitual, classical usages of the word. Instead, I will allege some neologisms: invented, non-existing words, that can be considered metaphors, because they do what our conference and this resulting publication sets out to do: 'conceptualizing horizons of meaning', so that 'diverse disciplines can dialogue with each other'. The special contribution of metaphors is ambiguity, which entices readers, listeners, or viewers, to develop the possible associations more widely and in more depth. Hence, no word or image stays still.



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This widening serves goals of the order of the political, ethical, aesthetic and, of course, theoretical, within my continuous search to improve and expand the conceptual tool-kit of cultural analysis.

Let me start with an example from an intensely interdisciplinary writer, Walter Benjamin, one of the prominent philosophers of modern thinking. Reflecting on translation, which is the Latinate term for metaphoring, he wrote:

While content and language form a certain unity in the original, like a fruit and its skin, the language of the translation envelops its content like a royal robe with ample folds. (Benjamin 1968, 75)<sup>1</sup>

Benjamin is not speaking here about art but about language (Benjamin 1968; Buci-Glucksmann 1994). Clearly, he is not speaking in ordinary, straightforward language – if such a thing exists – but in that special use of words meant to bridge gaps between practices we tend to oppose, such as literal and figurative, or the visual and the verbal imagination. Comparing the task of the translator with that of the poet – since he is writing about the poet Charles Baudelaire – he creates a powerful image of the translator's product as both rich (royal) and encompassing (ample); expansive yet enveloping. His image is a theoretical metaphor. The metaphors he is proposing, the fruit and its skin, which he contrasts with the robe with its folds, merge the two domains of cultural activity. One sees forms and texture, even if seeing, here, in turn, solicits other senses, like smell and touch. The metaphorical quality deployed here enables mixing and merging, what we could call 'con-fusion', if we bring in the hyphen between the preposition 'con-', meaning 'with', and the verb become noun of 'fusion', merging (Lee 2013).

In cultural analysis today, few predecessors are more frequently quoted, alleged, discussed, or 'applied' than this figure. Inspired by Benjamin's con-fusing metaphors I want to propose a few theoretical, conceptual metaphors that are non-existing words with powerful contents for understanding in the widening horizons of the current intellectual climate and social world. The primary neologisms, or non-existing words I propose here as theoretical metaphors, are 'Refugeedom', 'Visibilisation', and 'Inter-ship'. Since none of these words exist, I propose them as metaphors in the best, most inspiring sense: as dialogic, expanding the horizon of understanding. Given the current political tensions around the welcoming of refugees, especially in Europe, I selected the refugee as my topic. Refugees

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<sup>1</sup> This essay – "The Task of the Translator"–, central to my argument as my primary 'philosophical object,' will henceforth be referred to by page numbers only. See also the discussion in Derrida 1984, 93-161.

are on the move, in search for a safe place to live; a social problem for the world of today. What is their state, existence, life – their ‘refugee-dom’? With its anchoring in poetics, fictionality, imagination and above all, ‘imaging’, art can contribute more usefully than ever to the social world by (re-)connecting disconnected people (living in ‘refugeedom’) with a culture where they must be noticed (‘visibilisation’), and this is only possible through reciprocity and contact (‘inter-ship’). It seems ‘preposterous’ (to invoke another of my made-up words as theoretical metaphors: pre-posterous as con-fusing pre- and post-, hence, to replace chronology with a mutuality of time) to just come up with non-existing, new words. Preposterous! In other words: how dare you! Ridiculous! For, the new / old word also, as is the enriching effect of metaphors, resonates with the ordinary sense of ‘preposterous’.<sup>2</sup>

In more acceptable terms: the problem of the conjunction ‘and’ at the heart of metaphor, is vital in the examination of art, representation, and social reality; in particular, as my primary focus here, of the life of refugees as members of our social world. My vision concerns an issue that is both strongly socio-political, and raises artistic, educational and intellectual questions; an issue that invokes some serious concerns about social life, and art; and the helping hand they can give each other in the attempt to make both ‘better’: more relevant, meaningful, mutual, and compassionate. This will assist me in making the case for learning through/from/with art, literature, and other dialogically oriented fields, such as urban sociology. I wish to consider such learning as, necessarily, an educational ‘internship’ in looking. The *n* in that better-known term that indicates ‘learning through practice’, connects this learning with the interconnectivity, reciprocity, and mutuality I call ‘inter-ship’.

I seek to understand the skill of looking we take too easily for granted. Looking-seeing is not obvious. How did this idea of a theoretical metaphor that is social, ethical, and visual, come to me? Once, when in the street, I heard a man, of obviously foreign background, murmur to himself: ‘they don’t even look at me’. That was the moment when the seed of the short film I was commissioned to make was sown, and the theoretical metaphor of ‘visibilisation’ came up. The consequence of this not looking and not talking in some sort of engagement with him, is that he radically does not belong, is not part of, the group within which he exists physically – the crowd. Loneliness is not a choice. He is doomed to it. He just *is* in solitude, without connections. But he is not alone, on the contrary. The crowds that surround him seem the more oppressive because of the lack of engagement. The cause of his solitude is his underlying

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2 For an extensive theorization of “preposterous”, see Bal 1999.

state of refugee – his refugee-dom, of a person without state, without nation – which in our film is not articulated in language but ‘figured’, ‘imaged’, with more and more insistence by the indirect takes at varying rhythms. The verb *imaging* is another theoretical metaphor, away from normal words. Our point was that the man, unseen, lonely, in the busy street, has the right to be seen. The film is, therefore, an exercise (intern-ship) in ‘visibilisation’ – making visible, and teach looking. It solicits viewers to become engaged witnesses, making an effort to visibilise the hitherto unseen refugee.<sup>3</sup>

Before you watch the film, just read the few words here about how the film begins its ‘lesson in looking’ through metaphorizing our traditional binaries and turning them, through the conjunction ‘and’, into metaphorical ambiguities; con-fusions. with the invented metaphor-word of Korean-American philosopher, curator and art historian Kyoo Lee, con-fusing them. Lee proposed that word (in a personal communication) as ‘con-’, togetherness or what I call, with my own invented word, inter-ship, and ‘fusing’ as merging, cancelling the boundaries between disciplines. This con-fusing invokes interdisciplinarity as encounter. This seemed to me a useful mode of ‘essaying’ as figuring. Author of a brilliant critical book on Descartes that strongly undermines the hyper-rationalistic reputation of that philosopher, currently considered negatively, Lee (2013) never stops her critical inquiries (to allude to the best journal in the Humanities, *Critical Inquiry*) until she can come up with a new idea that fits. She is editor of the very relevant feminist journal *PhiloSOPHIA: A Journal of Transcontinental Feminism*, established in 2008.

The film has no dialogue; it *is* dialogic in itself. While a voice-over reads from the story of Joseph in the biblical book of Genesis, who passes for one of the very first refugees, the film begins with a manifold figuration. This is a fragment of the engraving by Rembrandt from 1634, made to move metaphorically. After half a minute or so, the image becomes blurred and merges, ‘con-fuses’ into a ‘real’ scene. That beginning is an exercise in the ‘reading’ of the fine line between the still and the moving image, the image drawn and the image enacted; abstraction and narrative. The camera enters the figured scene from the bottom right and brings the viewer close to the voyeuristic position. This closeness to a position that is ethically problematic, figures a moment of choice for the viewer. That moment is itself a metaphor. It triggers a hesitation: if and how we can look at the ‘bed-scene’ that follows. Its goal is to make the viewer responsible, and looking itself, an ethical act. When the slowly

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**3** The short film *Refugeedom* can be watched on this link: <https://vimeo.com/836809823> and for some information about it, <https://www.miekebal.org/films/refugeedom>.

moving camera meets the face of the woman who is lying in bed, the camera almost seems to stutter, enacting a theoretical metaphor, in con-fusion, when the lines and dots become a face, this one not drawn but 'real', enacted indeed. The camera is metaphoring here, moving between still and moving, etching and acting. It then moves more and the image changes drastically when a servant appears, bringing breakfast to the woman who is still in bed. The bedding, the curtains, preserve in their physical reality the ambiguity of the artwork and the 'real' enactments as metaphors. The woman begins to touch the man, desiring him. He withdraws slowly from the woman's grip, and then his state of refugee becomes substantial – let's say, 'visible'. He flees; he feels no longer safe in the house of the master. So, let's practice the new words as metaphors by showing the refugee in his refugee-dom, and offer him inter-ship: connection, through the theoretical metaphor of visibilisation.

On everyday television, we see images of people walking with luggage, small children and exhausted faces. This tends to fill most of us with compassion; perhaps some with irritation, for the repetitiveness of such imagery. Repetition triggers boredom. But also, that viewing situation is limited to the Western viewer – 'us' – who look at the people in the television images as 'others'. Is it possible to make the focalization – another theoretical metaphor – 'double', two-sided, mutual, so that the refugees can also shed light on the environment they enter and the people therein? This is what the brilliant cultural analyst Esther Peeren, who has been academic director of ASCA (Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis) for several years now, proposed in a book in which refugees are central – as specters, according to her book's topic–: "a re-focalization that looks *with* rather than *at* the specter and recognizes that this specter is always also a self as I am always also an other" (Peeren 2014, 29).<sup>4</sup>

The phrase "lonely but not alone" we used as the subtitle of the film, comes from a very unusual, indeed, opposite context: an autobiography of former Dutch queen Wilhelmina, published in 1959. There, she used the phrase to describe her life as always surrounded by a dense crowd of people at court but still, always feeling lonely. For, the workers at court served her, but did not personally communicate with her. The status difference between the queen and her servants precluded that possibility. The two qualifiers, lonely and alone, which seem to be synonymous, but... are here, through the oppositional conjunction 'but', rather presented as an opposition; an opposition metaphorically qualifying a non-existing noun.

The metaphorical language with its focus on opposition helped, for, 'contradiction' is key to the life of refugees. So, we took that

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<sup>4</sup> See also her earlier book on Bakhtin's impact on popular culture (Peeren 2007).

contradiction as our guideline, for the political tenor but also to invent a mode of filming and editing. 'But' does not produce an opposition but a complementary, even causal-logical continuation. What it says is that the bond between political thinking and audio-visual art-making is tight, and not at all contradictory. In consequence, espousing the contradictory situation of the refugee, the aesthetic verging towards abstraction is also steeped in contradiction. On the one hand, the viewer is compelled to keep looking for the main figure to which the film is devoted, the lonely refugee; on the other hand, the man constantly seems to vanish, blur, or fade into indirection; or, when the topic is more or less concretely figured, it takes some effort to discern him as distinct from the surrounding crowd. This tension, or if you like, contradiction between visibility and invisibility became the central mode of 'imaging', enticing a practice of looking where things stay in tension while coming together; a 'con-fusion' of refugees and older, earlier residents. Hence, we also toyed with a somewhat didactic subtitle that accompanied us during the filming: 'a lesson in looking'.

The idea of contradiction stayed with us when I was asked by Palestinian-Dutch professor Ihab Saloul to make a film on refugees on behalf of an event he was planning to organize, *Encountering Absence*. This two-weeks-long event – with a starkly contradictory and idealistic title – was organized by the international organization SPEME, of scholars and artists and others from Italy, the Netherlands, Argentina and Colombia. The project emanated from the Umberto Eco chair in Bologna, where Saloul is a permanent visiting professor. The contradiction in the everyday life of refugees stuck with us: having left behind their emotional ties, they are lonely; but being surrounded by a dense crowd of unknown people, they are never alone. Just like Queen Wilhelmina and the likes of her: people in power positions that isolate them. The powerful and the powerless share that contradiction. I enlisted the young artist Lena Verhoeff to make the film together. Her creativity and skills did miracles.<sup>5</sup>

The institutions collaborating SPEME were keen on opening up the silence around this situation, this fate of refugees, in order to activate the social consciousness of what, in fact, we are doing when we continue to let this situation endure. To awaken that social consciousness, Lena and I thought, we must make that situation 'visible'. For, visibility is bound both to the present tense and to the public sphere. But how do you do that – showing, making visible, without falling into the trap of the usual voyeuristic look that philosopher Theodor Adorno worried about in relation to the

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5 For more information about SPEME, see <https://www.speme.eu/>.

suffering in concentration camps, the inner, emotional state of people we don't know? (Adorno [1974] 2003).

'Visibilisation' was the metaphorical word, invoking an activity to help better the fate of refugees. I will point out a few elements of the way we did this, to bring up a few of the aesthetic strategies that help visibilisation along. Visibilisation, or making visible, is thus the neologistic metaphor I am proposing. In order to stay within the Adornian modesty, avoiding voyeurism, the set-up was fictional. Apart from the short narrative beginning and end, the images are all video takes we imagined, according to what we knew and imagined of the life of refugees. Let me begin with the end, to stay with the metaphoric contradiction.

Towards the end of the film, as a transition to the credits, a photograph from the collection of historical photos of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, made over a century ago, by American artist Clarence Sinclair Bull in 1916 titled *Refugees*, slowly 'moves' through the screen. A historical still image was set in movement. The historical status of the photograph works as a reminder that refugeedom has a long history that won't end any time soon. Migration, exile, and refugeedom as the saddest of those movements, are of all times. But we are responsible for our now-time, our contemporary world. And in this now-world we aimed to make a statement of recognition of the long-duration of refugeedom.<sup>6</sup>

The early picture as an inter-temporal metaphor gives an adequate impression of the conception of our film. The shadow of a view, the emotional torment, the danger, the visual allusion to the turbulent sea, enhanced by turning the still image into a moving one - the sea that so frequently throws the refugee onto the coast, alive or drowned: all this is 'visibilised'. As a metaphor, it can serve as a summary, derived from this photograph from over a century ago. We placed this most abstract image of the film at the end of it, because the elements I just mentioned are more visible after having seen the metaphorical integration of abstract and figurative images that constitute the body of the film. During the watching of the film, viewers will have acquired some skill in practicing visibilisation.

The loneliness felt emotionally and sensuously by refugees when they are stuck in foreign places, is very painful because, as the Indian artist Nalini Malani says so poignantly, simply, and clearly, in one of her works on paper from 2020-21, quoting a poem by Somali-British poet Warsan Shire: "You only leave home if HOME won't let you

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**6** On the tension between the contemporary and the burden of its historical roots, see the very powerful article by Mitchell (2021). The occasion for his article was the cruel murder of George Floyd. My short book from 2020, *Exhibition-ism: Temporal Togetherness*, further theorizes the concept of the contemporary.

stay". Malani made that work when she was herself in a kind of exile. Due to the corona crisis lockdown she was stuck in Amsterdam on her way back from Barcelona, where she had just celebrated, with a solo exhibition, the Miró prize that was awarded to her. It took a year and a half before she could return to Bombay. So, although her situation was not at all tragic, not comparable to that of refugees at all, it made her feel a strong emotion of what she expressed in that artwork; a solidarity through double focalisation, foregrounded by the ambiguity of 'you'. YOU, as inter-ship: the central theoretical metaphor.

The loneliness of the refugee surrounded by people is so strongly felt, emotionally and sensuously, because the contrast between the lonely person recently arrived in an unknown place, unable to speak the local language, and then, on the other hand, the busy multitude around him, is so intense and imposing. The contrast is what 'makes' their emotions. The refugee feels it, experiences it, without having the opportunity to express or share it. That contrast was, in fact, the central metaphor of the film – the thematic, semantic word 'topic' would have been totally misplaced. That contrast is the main point of our aesthetic 'visibilisation'; making that emotionally 'feelable' through the sense of vision was our goal.

Making the contrast itself visible takes a variety of forms, all metaphorical. Some takes present reflections in shop and restaurant windows; there are blurry takes of people walking fast in the streets; there is a tiny reflection of the man in a reflecting globe in a shop display. We can also see or sense the temporal contrast between the movements of the crowd and the stagnation of the man standing still in the street, alone. All these formal 'takes' convey metaphorically a sense of loneliness. At some point, we see the man's hesitation to steal a piece of fruit in a shop display outside. He must be starving. Then he decides to not fall into that stereotype of the foreigner as a thief. At another moment, we see him intensely looking at a canal boat full of tourists, probably hoping to greet them and be greeted by them. But no; nothing communicative happens. These are just some examples of visibilisation.

The confused lines of the opening image of the etching by Rembrandt are filmed in both slow movement and blown-up details; the one metaphoring the other. Bringing in a famous artwork is a way to allude, not only to the very long history of refugeeedom, but also to the status of 'high', canonical art in relation to the issues that great artists like Rembrandt broach in their work, through figurations of canonical stories. This is what artists often do, and Rembrandt in particular. The slow movement and the blown-up details in the filmic image in *Refugee-dom* that make the etching almost illegible, can be seen to, in the literal sense, *make sense*. Due to that intervention, it



becomes abstract, generate a sense of alienation. And that alienation is the point of the depiction of a famous story of refugeedom.

Estrangement is the metaphor of the consequence of distancing, hostility, suspicion, indifference: all general features of the social attitudes towards refugees. The foreigner/stranger is estranged, as that metaphor has it, from the local inhabitants who refuse to engage with him. They don't speak to him, they don't look at him. If and when they do, it is in the sense of the hostility, such as of the young men who bully him, just after he escapes from the grip of the woman who wants him in her bed. The bullies punch him, and blame him for not speaking English; they mock him, and when the refugee takes to the street outside, they follow him for their own amusement. This is the moment that the body of this non-narrative film begins, in all its abstraction that is a metaphor in itself. It focuses exclusively on this man, who is never alone, yet never in contact. After a short hard-cut he finds himself in a busy city street, and a bit later, close to a mirroring globe, which is the outside wall of the new depot of the museum Boymans van Beuningen in Rotterdam. In the utmost metaphor, thanks to Lena Verhoeff's creative interventions in the editing, we see the reflections of the passers-by walking through the refugee's face. This almost violent-seeming imaging enhances the strong, close presence of the crowd that the refugee does not manage to connect with. They are not so many, not a dense crowd; but their walking on his face says enough of what it feels like for him. This is a visual intervention that displays the paradoxical contrast between the man whose face is all we see, and the people walking on it, not looking at him at all. This is a poignantly cruel metaphor.

This is also a moment that the body of this non-narrative film shows its metaphoricity in all its abstraction. Reading the fragment from the *Coran*, and thus, including the narrative and the sacred text from that 'other' culture, seemed the best solution. In making this film, Lena Verhoeff and I have been searching for means, modes, and media capable of encouraging viewers to see the foreigner, refugee and immigrant, from a perspective that is positive, receptive, and empathic, wishing them welcome. For this to be possible, making him visible was the primary requirement. The visibilisation, with all the ambiguities in the forms, was the permanent guideline in making the film. Metaphors, with their ambiguities and multiple meanings, can do this. This is how metaphors keep us in movement, and how their polysemic emanation impresses us with the fundamental multiplicity of meaning.

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