

Mieke Bal

Learning Listening

abstract Reflecting back on the articulation of the methodological framework for the practice of cultural analysis and the founding of ASCA over twenty years ago, Mieke Bal explores a practice of listening through her own installation *Nothing is Missing*. The videos presented in the installation featured mothers of migrants being interviewed by a person close to them. This resulted in confronting dialogues that have the potential to offer the attentive viewer — and listener — new perspectives on familial relationships, migration and

interculturalism. Ultimately, through her analysis, Bal demonstrates the enduring pertinence of the notion that ‘the object speaks back’.

Listening is a practice. But, as with all practices, before we can practice it, we must learn to listen. In the noisy world of today this demands serious commitment. In this acoustic whirlwind, we have to learn to make (acoustic) distinctions between voices, languages, tones and moods. Only then can listening be a socially useful practice: a critical one. The objects of study of the humanities have the unique potential to *teach* us that practice. Through their complexity and subtlety, artworks — but also other cultural practices and even, simply, languages and their uses — can help us move beyond simplistic slogans and cursory readings of their alleged meanings.

Early on, when we started ASCA⁽¹⁾ and were developing methodological guidelines in 1997, which were updated and republished in 2017, I explained the need for listening as a method by putting forward the idea that ‘the object speaks back’. Quotations should not be used to confirm what a student says, but to complicate it. If we make a habit of systematically looking back at a quotation and carefully checking to what extent it confirms our

point, we will often notice that this is rarely entirely the case. However, instead of panicking, thinking we are wrong, or worse, repressing the differences, this complication can help us move beyond what we (think we) already know. Listening carefully to the object, treating it as a “second person,” an interlocutor, rather than a mute “third person” *about* which we speak, is the “apprenticeship” of listening as a critical practice. There is no more concise way to explain how I envision the difference between cultural analysis and other approaches.⁽²⁾

Listening to the object speaking back is most concretely shaped in the experiment of what is now termed artistic research. Over the years 2006-2010, I built up a body of video works in which mothers of migrants spoke about what the departure of their child meant to them. I filmed the migrants’ mothers in their own houses, talking about their motivation for supporting or their attempts to withhold their children who wished to leave and about their own grief in seeing them go. The mothers converse about this crucial experience with a person close to them, often someone whose absence in her life was caused by the child’s

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(1) The Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis.

(2) This idea was further developed and demonstrated in my book *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide*.

departure — a grandchild, a daughter-in-law, or the children themselves. I staged the women, asked their interlocutors to take their place behind the camera, set the shot, turned the camera on, and left the scene. This method is hyperbolically documentary. To underline this aspect, I refrained from editing these shots.

The slow, unsmooth and personal monologue that results is a confrontation with the need and difficulty to listen. The uninterrupted presence of their faces in the frame compels viewers to look the women in the face and to listen to what they have to say; in a language that is foreign, using expressions that seem strange, but in a discourse to which we can affectively relate. The translations were made together with the close relative who did the interview, and were placed above the faces so that it was easier to read them without looking away from the speaking face.

Becoming increasingly annoyed by the constant complaining about migrants, I wanted to show a side of migration nobody seems to talk about: the heart-wrenching separations from family and friends, and the grief these cause to those who stay behind. Only when we learn to pay attention to this aspect will it be possible to see migration not only as a harsh necessity, but also as the creation of a more heterogeneous social texture, which is both in need of critical understanding and a potential

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The visitor is compelled to look at the women's faces and listen to what they have to say. The form of the installation helps to grasp the idea of critical listening. It enables the mothers to speak *together* from within a cultural-political position that makes them absolutely distinct and connected at once. In the installation, this fictional interaction is the meaning of the silences that suggest they are listening to one another, even if they have never met. Also, at moments of restraint, when they seem most reluctant to express themselves, the *performativity* of their self-presentation is most acutely able to pierce through the conventional surface. These are the moments of the performative inter-face. Modestly, visitors listen and learn to distinguish between languages and accents, experiences, and forms of grief. This is how I practice cultural analysis.

Read an extended version of this essay on soapboxjournal.com.

biography Mieke Bal is a cultural theorist, critic, video artist and occasional curator. She works in cultural analysis, focusing on gender, migratory culture, psychoanalysis and the critique of capitalism. Her books include a trilogy on political art. Her video *Madame B*,

with Michelle Williams Gamaker,
is widely exhibited. Her most recent
film is *Reasonable Doubt*, on René
Descartes and Queen Kristina (2016).

Works Cited

Bal, Mieke. "Facing: Intimacy across Divisions." *The Global and the Intimate: Feminism in Our Time*. Edited by Geraldine Pratt and Victoria Rosner, Columbia University Press, 2012, pp. 119-144.

Bal, Mieke. *Nothing is Missing*, 2006 <http://www.miekebal.org/artworks/installations/nothing-is-missing/>

fig. 1



Installation in Zuiderzeemuseum, Enkhuizen, 2008; photo: Astrid van Weijenberg