Nora Fawzia Taher

CROSSING AIR

Film still Reassemblage
by Trinh T. Minh H
(1982)

If you are a person who can listen to music while reading, I would like you to put on Khalas Mesafr - Shaida. If you are not a person who can listen to music while reading, I would like to ask you to listen to it afterwards, while you ponder on your new thoughts. The title roughly translates to: It's okay traveler. The poetic song talks about the feeling of strangeness that comes with traveling to a new country, how you have to find comfort in your loneliness since no one will accept you as one of them. This song was introduced to me, by my Egyptian father, who said this feeling never completely goes away, but you do gain a similar feeling after going back to that what used to be your home.

By critically exploring the potential of crossed cultural art, design, what it means to feel "in between places" and the meaning of Afro-surrealism, and simulacra this thesis will offer my hopes and insights into the ways in which art and design can be used to create an alternative narrative of the non-western immigrant experience. The stories told by us, near us, but not about us. This thesis aims to explore the complexities of navigating a sub real but true space through the lens of a graphic designer and human being.

I will use my MENA (Middle Eastern and North African) and semi-Western perspective to explore how to navigate the physical and metaphorical borders of MENA and European countries.

Nearby

Like Vietnamese artist Trinh T. Minh Ha so beautifully said in her work Reassemlage: "I do not intend to speak about; just speak nearby" her film reflectively dismantles the exoticization and objectification of otherness, it critiques the traditional anthropological films. In this film she deliberately suspends meaning, she acknowledges the possible gap between herself and the people in her film. She leaves the space for re-presentation so that she doesn't speak on top or on behalf of the people populating her film. I think the strongest part of the work is that she's not assuming a position of authority in relation with the other, which is why I think Minh-ha's work is so fluid and free of assumptions.

She states: *I wrote 'there is no such thing as documentary' because it's illusory to take the real and reality for granted and to think that a neutral language exists, even though we often strive for such neutrality in our scholarly work. To use an image is to enter fiction"*

Afro-Surrealism

Imagine walking into a supermarket where everything is exactly something you don't need. You might need cheese but all they sell is butter, you might need milk but all you can find is greek yoghurt, you are looking for bread but there are only cookies. Imagine that this happens not just once but every day in different scenario. And when you tell someone they don't understand why you don't just replace the cheese, milk and bread. So eventually you do..

In 2009 D. Scot Miller writes the manifesto: Call it Afro-Surreal. It states: "Afro-Surreal presupposes that beyond this visible world, there is an invisible world striving to manifest" The root of the word "Afro" can be found in " Afro-Asiatic": Shared languages between African, Middle-Eastern and Asian people of (what in Western society is seen as) " the other world". And because of colonization, war and immigration, now, the two worlds have collapsed.

Film stills Reassemblage
by Trinh T. Minh H
(1982)

(Balsom), Erika. "'There Is No Such Thing as Documentary': An Interview with Trinh T. Minh-Ha." Frieze, Frieze, 1 Nov. 2018, https://www.frieze.com/article/there-no-such-thing-documentary-interview-trinh-t-minh-ha

Film still Atlanta
by Donald Glover
(2016)

The manifesto also mentions: *"Afro-Surrealism sees that all "others" who create from their actual, lived experience are surrealist, per Frida Kahlo"* But there is a significant difference between Surrealism and Afro-Surrealism. Surrealists would do drugs, dream or do seances in order to get above reality, but Afro-Surrealist are already inherently living with an absurd fiction everyday of their life, something that you know is not suppose to be real, yet the consequences are true. A show that depicts this in a genius way is Atlanta by American creator and actor Donald Glover. A show constructed in weirdness and poetry that portrays moments of a seemingly absurd world that is organically connected to the one we live in. The characters show a constant feeling of being out of place and a subtle discomfort of how they're defined by others based on ethnicity and class.

Atlanta is a symptom of the way things are, I see Atlanta as resistance. The resistance of creating an identity in order to adhere to the Western-white identity that says: this is who you are, while you know it is not, or at least not the entirety of who you are.

Attack on reality

I am the daughter of an immigrant, I am used to assumptions of others of who my father is, how he must act, I am even used to these assumptions about me. I have personally only ever seen my father creating this surreal perfect fiction of himself for the outside world. Now that I'm an adult myself, I think it was to fight these assumptions and show the "native Dutch" how 'similar' he really is to them. To make things 'easier'. But the mere fact is that if he has to be so aware, of how to act outside his house, it makes him not similar at all, it doesn't allow him to be real all the time. And as a child, when you copy this behavior for long enough, all the while your identity is already suggested by your teachers and classmates who are insensitive to any other culture than the Dutch, it can result in not actually knowing who you are.

(Miller), D. Scott. "Call It Afro-Surreal."
48Hills, 19 May 2009.
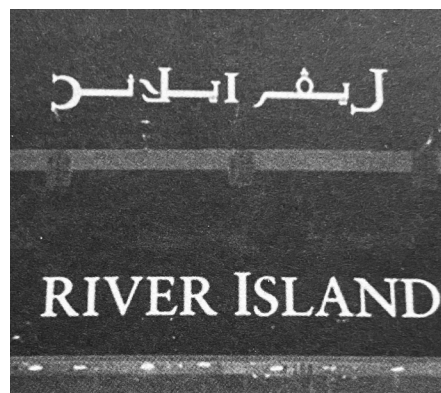(Baudrillard), Jean. Simulacra and Simulation. University of Michigan Press, 1994, pp. 166–84.

When French philosopher J. Baudrillard wrote:

"it is the reflection of a profound reality;
it masks and denatures a profound reality;
it masks the absence of a profound reality;
it has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum"

He was specifically talking about photographic film and images here, opposed to the previous traditional form of visual media: paintings for example. Photographs added a new layer of believability to their message. The word simulacrum refers to a simulation of a simulation. We see it arise in graphic design all the time. Let's take the clothing brand River Island's logo as an example: The first logo from 1988 contained an illustration of the world map (thus simulating the world map), then referring to that same logo, River Island put a more simplified logo out in 1991 reducing the size of the world map, simulating their first logo. In 1996 the logo changed to only serif typography simulating their second logo and then again in 2012 that logo changed into a sans serif font.

We could say graphic design is inherently based in simulation because when designing we are always referring to something. But there is a right and wrong way to design, you always want to respect what you are referring too, unless you are making an intentional statement not to, and this is where I start seeing problems: River Island's logo from 1996 was translated to Arabic for a store in the UAE where there is a bilingual policy requiring International brands to appear in both Latin and Arabic. But when we look at the translation of the logo it is absolutely horrible. Arabic is a language that unlike Latin is based in calligraphy, so you can't just disregard strokes, proportions of the letter and cut out parts from a Latin typeface and make it 'look' like Arabic letters. Often it is not even redable and results in Frankenstein Arabic. While I think that a design needs too communicate it should also respect the cultural heritage that it refers to. The Arabic language has a beautiful cultural and religious history, we have different calligraphy styles like: Kufic, Dīwānī, Nastaliq, Naskh and many more. A style like Kufic already has 4 different adaptations. There are even six supplemental letters for non-Arabic languages that

First River Island logo
1988

'Frankenstein' Arabic logo found in UAE.
Photo by Pascal Zoghbi - From the Politics of Design

(Baudrillard), Jean. Simulacra and Simulation. University of Michigan Press, 1994, pp. 166–84.
(Pater), Ruben. The Politics of Design. BIS Publishers, 2016, pp. 32–33.
(Khan), Gabriel Mandel. Arabic Script. National Geographic Books, 2006.

Filmstill from Tukuleur
by Brahim Tall
(2022)

use the Arabic alphabet. So while the Arabic language in itself is inherently inclusive it often is completely butchered by non-Arabic speaking designers. This already shows the power dynamic between Western and Arabic design. An easy solution would be to outsource to actual Arab typographers and graphic designers, supporting Arab designers and resulting in a communicative and respectful design.

When we are not aware of simulacra in graphic design this can result in the absurd reality that I mentioned earlier. Imagine walking in your native country, and not being able to read your own native language, because it has somehow changed. It's a violation of simulation and an attack on reality.

Cross-cultural dialogue

I believe photographs are not true, they might be a part of our reality but how we interpret images is not the truth. Belgian/ Senegalese photographer Brahim Tall argues: *"These traditions in representation, and the manner in which we tend to read them, affect the way in which we interpret the world around us. By shifting them around in this film, their interpretation becomes ambiguous. And that's exactly what being mixed is: ambiguous!"*
Tall's film Tukeleur shows how much a collective gaze can change interpretations on our bodies, because of this, it's main character is forced into ever changing and does many attempts to find a place between acceptance and otherness. But the consequences of this collective gaze stunts his personal growth. I think this is an accurate representation of what can happen to a mixed person in a European country and shows in how much need we are of a cross-cultural design.
As priorly described, the worlds have collapsed, due to colonization and immigration. So how do we work together? How do we embrace being children of the diaspora to better our reality? How do we start a cross-cultural dialogue?
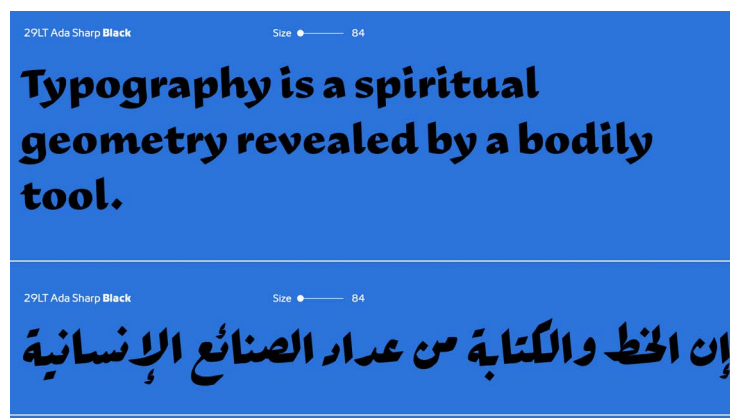
One of my favorite examples of cross-cultural dialogue is Ada a typeface designed by Lebanese designer Pascal Zoghbi. Ada means fulfilling a duty. He created an Arabic and Latin version of the font. Respecting both cultures and elements of the characters. Yet they perfectly work together, instead of using one to base the other on, they're based in the same inspiration, staying true to their heritage and complementing each other. They work separately but are even more powerful together. Zoghbi's *Ada* is what I wish for this world. I would argue that us artist and designer children from the diaspora have a duty to be critical

29LT Ada Sharp **Black** Size ●——— 84

Typography is a spiritual geometry revealed by a bodily tool.

29LT Ada Sharp **Black** Size ●——— 84

إن الخط والكتابة من عداد الصنائع الإنسانية

towards design contributing to an absurd reality, we have to be aware and think of new ways to combine the worlds peacefully and work together. To create a cross-cultural dialogue and be heard.

Font family Ada
by Pascal Zoghbi

Ownership

Our current culture is almost completely existing of images, they add to our reality although they aren't real, they inevitably shape our ideas of what is real although they aren't true. Design is a huge part of our reality and I could even argue the most important part. Design in infrastructure, bureaucracy, consumerism and social media (sometimes literally) shapes our daily lives. And we might not always understand how, but they all work together too.

Borders aren't real, I would say. I think they're made up by greedy politicians who think land and sea actually belongs to them. The whole concept of borders is constructed in ownership and separation. Unless a natural border of land and water it is basically air, and what crazy person tries to take ownership of air? Yet this behavior has immense ramifications on the freedom and living quality of certain people.

In 2022 Afghan Hazara painter Zahra Vaezi flees with her family from the Taliban, they tried to enter Europe but had been forced back from land border four times and twice at sea. During one of the pushbacks a Greek coast guard threw their engine and gasoline off into the sea and they almost drowned and died. In the video ZAHRA by NowYouSeeMeMoria and Konstatina Levi, Vaezi records part of her journey trying to flee and crossing borders with her phone. In a voice over she speaks about her experiences and feelings of all that happened. The videos shared on WhatsApp give an insight in the nerve-racking process of preparing for a crossing that might result in death.

"That is precisely the power of this image, as many times people have expectations and preconceptions about how a refugee should look like. We expect or even don't accept they can smile, have phones, use make-up. We only accept as 'real' photographs those in which refugees are suffering or portrait as victims" writes Fiepke van Niel on ZAHRA. We already explored that there is no such thing as a 'real' photograph, it's always a simulation of 'reality' and an interpretation of the photographer. But, as Susan Sontag said: *"To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself in a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge*

— and therefore like power."
And see, I find, when something is about you, you should have ownership over that. So I would suggest news outlets start using images and footage made by the people they want to tell a story about (with their consent). In the times of social media, photojournalism almost becomes irrelevant and keeps the power dynamic of "the other" intact.

NowYouSeeMeMoria is a collective that shows images and footage taken by refugees to oppose the standardized images of refugees and immigrants we see on the (Western) news, that are clearly pushing a narrative. To clarify: the narrative of the weak, sad, poor and so incredibly different refugee. And while Western news outlets forget to mention most refugees spend thousands to hundred thousands of euro's to even get on a boat, they're adhering an identity to the refugee, of the poor, and the other. And are you not suppose to have ownership over your own identity?

Film stills ZAHRA
by Now You See Me Moria
(2022)

(van Niel), Fiepke. "On Photographs." Foam M/Otherlands, Foam, Nov. 2022.
(Sontag), Susan. On Photography. Penguin Classics, 2008.

THE SILENCE ABOUT MORIA IS BECOMING TOO LOUD
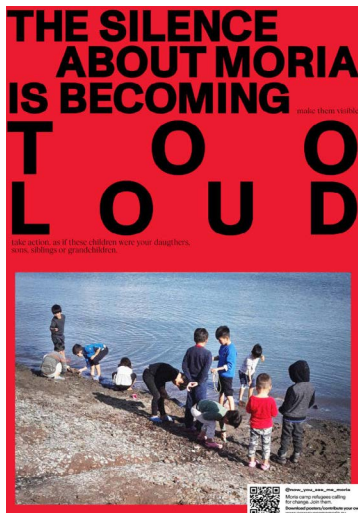
Poster - open call
of NowYouSeeMeMoria

In 2021 the collective called on graphic designers, to create posters based on the images taken by the refugees on the Greek island Moria, to which 446 designers responded. The posters were free for everyone to print and were hang in numerous places on the windows and walls on valentines day. Even het Stedelijk Museum in the Netherlands devoted an exhibition to it, called: POST/NO/BILLS in which people could print the posters and take them to hang up somewhere. *"In this case I wanted to give the residents of Moria agency to show their living conditions. It is impressive what the open call has brought about: all kinds of people felt the need to respond, from the professional designer to the 14-year-old layman behind his PC. The posters show the power of the graphic form, to convey a message with language and image."* Thus Thomas Castro, curator of graphic design.

When consciously using media and design as a tool to communicate something, it's important to understand who you are working for, in this case it is the refugees on Moria. As designers we have a tendency to do everything ourselves because we are trained in designing. However, the current world calls for collaboration and screams for cross-cultural dialogue. By using images made by the refugees of Moria it shows their truth which can possibly change or lighten the absurd reality. Maybe not only for them or even not at all, because they only see a simulation of posters containing their images on social media but, I do think having a sense of agency over what of you is shown and what isn't, is a powerful start. But perhaps for the refugee who has made it into the city, the refugee who has integrated but still carries all the pain. Perhaps even for me, I was never a refugee, yet it gives me hope. The belief that there are many ways to give and get agency over your own identity and a little more over your own and the collective (absurd) reality.

Kous kous

Another way is to embrace the fact that we are living an absurd fiction of reality. Like Belgian/Moroccan photographer Mous Lamrabat does. About his work Kouskousklan he writes: "Fear is a tricky thing, what if we take symbols that fear us and bring it in a way that it becomes something we can smile at?" In the photograph you see a dark skinned Moroccan man in the dessert wearing a white pointy head over his jellabiya and face, and a black Nike logo where the eyes would be. Referring to the mask, people of the infamous ku klux clan wear. To me it was immediately clear that the title of the work was a parody on them by the word Kous Kous, one of Moroccans most famous and beloved dishes. I giggled when I read it. By photographing it in an extremely different context and renaming it he's reappropriating the meaning of it.

(Now You See Me Moria), POST/NO/BILLS #2, Graphic Design, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, Amsterdam, Netherlands | Art Limited.)Art Limited, https://www.artlimited.net/agenda/post-no-bills-2-now-you-see-memoria-exhibition-stedelijk-museum-amsterdam/en/7584436. Accessed 19 June 2023

He's mocking the absurd reality in which the ku klux klan exists and actually kills people. Because that reality is just unacceptable, and sometimes you have to laugh, to keep from crying. He also pointed out that the ku klux klan appropriated and copied the outfit in the fist place from the South-Spanish community Nazarenos who used the high cone to bring their penitence closer to god. Because of their colonial past the south of Spain and Morocco share much history. When I was in Spain I witnessed Semana Santa, by accident, may I add. Semana Santa is the 'Holy Week' and the time when the Nazarenos take part in their processions. I only ever saw images of the kkk so imagine my complete shock and unbelief of what I saw before someone explained it to me. My reality, feelings and fear at that moment were completely based on images I had seen once and associated with it. They masked and denatured a profound reality. So once again I say. Images are not real.

Vogue Italia posted it as a fashion statement without any context and after that the image was erased from the internet because it faced too much criticism, mostly from the African American community. With Italy's unfortunate reputation in racism in combination with African Americans who obviously have a different reality to it, I can imagine that, an image like this comes as an extreme shock and with a sense of betrayal. When fear is very much alive, because there are real life and death consequences to it, when they would run in to someone dressed like that, because unfortunately the klan is very much still alive today. Which tells us again, within simulacra context is extremely important.

Kouskousklan
by Mous Lamrabat

Political heartbreak
I believe that it is almost impossible to speak on Identity or religion without it becoming political. In my experiences people find political a scary word to give to themselves but when your body is in a place not designed for it, so in a different context as 'expected' doesn't it immediately become an act of resistance? Therefore is the immigrant body not by default political?

Lovesong Revolution by Iraqi /Dutch artist Urok Shirhan is a work that perfectly illustrates how some voices or bodies can accidentally become political. The sound essay is a beautiful combination of revolutionary songs, moments and Shirhans narration.

(Lamrabat), Mous. "Koukousklan."
Instagram, 2022.
(Sirhan), Urok. Lovesong Revolution. 2020.

Urok Shirhan

Lovesong Revolution

the city talks back   assembly 01

Lovesong Revolution

Can a sound start a revolution? The Portuguese Carnation Revolution of 1974 is known to have been triggered by a love song aired on the radio.

Tracklist

Paulo de Carvalho – "E Depois do Adeus" (1974)

Zeca Afonso – "Grândola Vila Morena" (1971)

Aziz Ali – "Hi Elsana Sana" (1958)
هاي السنة سنة – عزيز علي

Maeda Nazhat – "Ya Umm El Fustan El Ahmar" (1960's)
يا أم الفستان الأحمر – مائدة نزهت

Sheikh Imam – "Guevara is Dead" (1984)
جيفارا مات – الشيخ إمام

Ahmad Fouad Negm – "Guevara is Dead" (1967)
جيفارا مات – أحمد فؤاد نجم

Jaafar Hassan – "Santiago" (1973)

Visual of sound essay Lovesong revolution
by Urok Shirhan
(2020)

By combining all of these different significant moments in time and space, in a sonic essay she questions wether there is place in the public sphere for the unamplified voices inside our heads. She explains that some of the songs were meant as love songs but started a revolution, accidentally becoming political, others were politicized through their adaptation in contexts such as protests. I believe the same happens to our bodies, when we cross a certain border, may it be geographical or mental and are perceived as off-beat, certain questions may arise and our whole existence in that space immediately becomes political. Because, when a space is not designed for your body, hair or behavior and yet there we are, how can we interpret it as anything else than a political statement? But can our rebellion by existing in a certain space, include our heartbreak and exhaustion as well as our courage and defiance?

Arabish

I remember my father not teach me Arabic, because he was afraid I wouldn't be perceived as Dutch if I did. If I spoke Arabic at a young age my Dutch might have not been so flawless. But I miss it, I miss speaking a language that I never knew how to speak. I rather have flaws in both my tongues than completely dismiss the existence of one. Who am I if not that what I speak and act?

In Mothertongue a videowork by fimmaker Zinab Sedira, who was born in Paris to Algerian parents, reflects on storytelling as a way to preserve cultural identity across generations. When Sedira moved to London she had a daughter who's native language now is English. The video shows how difficult it is to maintain a shared heritage across national and linguistic divides (in this case, Arabic, French and English) and acknowledges the complexity of identity. The grandmother speaks in Arabic to Sedira and Sedira speaks both French to her, and her daughter. The daughter speaks English to both Sedira and her grandmother, and that's where the friction lays. Because she and her grandmother don't

(Sirhan), Urok. Lovesong Revolution. 2020.

understand each other, there are attempts of sharing stories but Sedira is needed as a translator.

When you copy story on story but change languages in between, so many times, at one point the story loses it's meaning. I feel that there often is a gap between the immigrant parent and their child, a gap that exist because the parents have grown up in a completely different culture than their children, often they have been through a lot to get to their new country and don't want to burden their children with all they have been through or don't want to bring up old pain and trauma. But when children don't know their parents story it's hard for them to find their own because they don't know where they come from. They will look for a sense of belonging but will most often feel between places. This can result in a feeling of weirdness and loneliness and suggests a subreality that is never filled in. I think a way to change and heal from this is for their parents to share these stories with their children and in return their children will tell their parents more about their life. A work that beautifully visualizes this is the installation Here/There or هنا/هناك by Fikra design studio based in the UAE. With this they argue a new Identity: Arabish, a hybrid culture between Arabic and English it wants to shed a light on being constantly pulled back and forth between two cultural realities, expectations and traditions.

Mothertongue
by Zenib Sedira
(2002)

Home is fluid
Simulacra is naturally intertwined with graphic design, if we are not careful of who we give ownership to and in what context we position ourselves and our work we will inevitably end up feeding the afro-surreal experience. We need to leave room for voices integrating our designs to be able to contribute to the cross-cultural dialogue.

Here/There or هناك/هنا
by Fikra design studio
(2023)

Home is not a static concept, home is fluid, fractured and multiplied. A feeling that might change over the course of time. We have to reconsider our diasporac existence and celebrate it. Celebrate that even though our revolution contains our heartbreak it also contains our courage. That every space that's not designed for us, we redesign until it is. We are a from everywhere and we are from nowhere at the same time, we are the only ones to build bridges in the collapsed worlds and I think that that's an inherent diasporac beauty we all carry with us.

It is not always easy to be a designer of the diaspora however, it has made me very aware of trying not to assume or speak for someone else in my designs. I appreciate art and design that doesn't simply push a narrative but opens up the possibilities and the space to new or unheard stories.

I want to ask all designers to speak nearby and all designers of the Diaspora to stay critical of designs that add to our absurd reality. To create designs to ease our absurd reality, for ourselves, for each other.

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