*You're Joking* **and** *Deep England: Strangers at Home*
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The films *You're Joking* and *Deep England* turn on the figure of the stranger in slightly different ways. They are not tidy propositions; like any work of art they address a number of issues, not least of which is other art. Both works refer to other works that address the stranger and my work builds on the legacy of the themes as addressed by these precursors. I do not have space here to discuss either the earlier works or other readings of my work, so I will focus on one of the driving imperatives: what constitutes a stranger and how we negotiate our way through this figure in the day-to-day arena.

**The Stranger**

The first film, *You're Joking*, takes place in the rough and tumble of multicultural life and is partly constituted through my reading of Judith Butler and her thinking on interpellation. It also has a relation with the film *Portrait of Jason*, made in 1967 by Shirley Clarke, which interrogates how the subject constructs himself in front of the camera, for the camera. The second film, *Deep England*, focuses on possibilities for the figure of the stranger, using my own feelings of displacement in a specific context to draw out issues concerning the relation between exile and ownership of place, history, and nostalgia.

Sara Ahmed, in her recent book *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*, looks at how the stranger is produced and over-represented as a figure that is unknowable: 'Such encounters allow the stranger to appear, to take form, by recuperating all that is unknowable in a figure that we imagine we might face here, now, in the street'.[1] The unknowable gains form through certain predetermined fears. She points out that through interpellation differentiation appears at the same time as constitution and through inter-subjective encounters subjects are re-interpellated and assigned different values in public life.

In this scenario, the act of hailing the stranger serves to constitute the lawful subject and the stranger at the same time. Ahmed continues that it is not merely being recognised by the other that constitutes the subject, nor just recognition of the other. The subject comes into being at the moment she is able to recognise others through their appearance, and that recognition of strangers 'brings into play relations of social and political antagonism that marks some as more strangers than others' (Ahmed, p. 16).

Ahmed uses the example of neighborhood watch schemes. Neighborhoods are constituted through the anxiety of homogeneity and safety and its failure (we only have to look at popular narratives of soap operas and 'neighbors from hell' television programmes to see how this works). The fear and anxiety comes precisely from the possibility that one can be found in the other. What is important here, according to Ahmed, is that the production of a safe place (that of the leafy suburbs in the neighborhood watch schemes that Ahmed uses as her case study) relies on the already formed idea of what is not safe. In looking at such schemes Ahmed notes, by way of example, how police leaflets encourage the neighborhood watcher to be suspicious and to know what is unacceptable through the empty trope of common sense, which makes common what is already thought to be the norm or normalising what is common. Thus the stranger and suspicious person are linked, she writes, through an emptying out of content, through purposelessness and loitering but ultimately through the link with the safety of community as other to the Stranger.[2]



*You're Joking* is set in a single flat, in an inner-city environment. The protagonist tells stories of encounters in his everyday life. Each story is told in a different room, each with a differently coloured wall. The work is shown on monitors as four separate images and listened to on headphones. The first shows the narrator telling how he is called a 'nigger' by a child. The second shows him telling the story of a woman who informs him that the Jews are responsible for 'the trouble in Africa'. The third shows him overhearing a woman assumed to be of Caribbean descent telling a presumably Eastern European woman, identified in the narration as a 'gypsy', to go back home. The final vignette shows a farmer telling the narrator, who is black with a London accent, about an African 'Jungle Jim' with whom he works. These stories are both ordinary and extraordinary as they pinpoint moments of hate, distrust, and misrecognition. They also speak to Ahmed's differentiation whereby the stranger is constituted (as Stranger) through an already assumed idea of who is safe and how that plays out as a hierarchy of victimhood in the discourses of multiculturalism.

Each narrative identifies a different manifestation of identity establishment through the telling. However, telling the story is not an easy task here. Wayne, the protagonist, falters and contradicts himself as he tells and re-tells the story. Wayne recounts what he actually experienced but he is acting. There are four stories. Each vignette is edited as a composite from the different accounts of each incident. It is a disrupted narrative that cannot be placed neatly in time or place. The establishing point of view shifts as the different versions of narrative are edited together into a linear piece. Wayne's position changes through the story (and through each story) and the viewer is taken along on his journey to find a position in the narrative Wayne is telling. In these narratives Wayne is asking himself and the viewer to differentiate between friend and stranger, between 'good guy' and bad as he struggles to position himself. In Ahmed's terms, he is asking who is the lawful subject and who is the stranger. Multi-positionality is crucial here as a way of critiquing the narrative of hierarchy, of a subject who is contingent upon outside relations that are forever changing from friend to foe and back again.

Wayne speaks directly to the viewer in a way that seeks empathy with him as narrator even as he is complicit, revealing his own prejudice. This direct address, through the fourth look of Paul Willemen, is also calling us into action to make a decision about what is going on and to position ourselves accordingly.[3]

So the four accounts as narrative explore the formation of subjectivity.[4] As each story is told slippages occur that reveal how a sense of self in relation to the event is formed, reformed, and established through what Ahmed calls a re-interpelletion. Wayne, the protagonist and actor, decides and acts who he thinks he is through this process that never stands still. In this faltering and shifting the stranger and the friend move around, outside the safety of the neighbourhood watch scenario, in a city where multicultural spaces are negotiated through the encounter. In this way the film allows the viewer to experience the instability of the immigrant experience while at the same time questioning the fallacy of neat partitions between who might or might not be the stranger. In *You're Joking 4*, for example, the African is liked but not known and the white man is known but not liked. Wayne oscillates between positions and tries but fails to understand the differentiation between them. He finally recognises the re-interpellation of himself in relation to the African and refuses it, uncertainly.

**Home**

*Deep England* is driven by two competing but impossible images of 'home': on the one hand, there is the swinging tree house, that swings and twists too much to ever be available to birds. The other 'house' was built as a synagogue, rooted and solid but now used as a church. Between these two buildings, both impossible to enter, lie longing, nostalgia, and a joke. The joke is told in a fragmented form. Each phrase is uttered as a freestanding entity, separated by several minutes of images that suture time and space: a village, a bird house, the bedroom windowpane as well as quotations from Shakespeare and Jonas Mekas. The separation of each phrase makes it difficult to hold onto the whole form of the joke, straining the limits of the joke form. The joke is about a shipwrecked man who built two synagogues (*shuls*)on a desert island. When asked by his eventual rescuers why he, the sole inhabitant of the island, had built two *shuls* he responds: 'This is the one I go to and that is the one I don't go to.' This longstanding Jewish joke can be understood through Ahmed's proposition that the stranger is the one who is known as not-known, or rather, the one with whom we choose not to consort. The joke also demonstrates the need to make a home even if the conditions for home are absent (those with whom I will not pray even when they do not exist).

This film is as much about looking for strangeness as looking for home. One of the opening quotations is from Jonas Mekas in his film *Lost Lost Lost*: 'I was looking at the landscape. What am I doing here, I ask myself? The landscape didn't answer me. There was no answer'. A voice recites this over the image of a Shropshire landscape. The viewer looks and is required to identify with the voice. After this romantic encounter, the camera focuses on fragments; window frames, sellotape

on windows, trees swaying in the wind. It is a searching look of the camera and the camerawork makes the viewer aware that everything is deracinated from its context, as is the joke. However, the strangeness here is at home, in the home, seen from the home; the inside looking out is as unsafe and as full of longing as the outside looking in. The tension is in the dialectic of home/not home. The rhetoric of neighborhood watch collapses in the lack of absolute distinction offering no absolute solution of safety.

For Ahmed, the possibilities of a diasporic state are that it is experienced in two ways: through speech and through sensation. Critiquing Iain Chambers, among others, for constructing the home as a pure space, Ahmed says that such an argument is like arguing for the purity of nation or state. She posits, following Avta Brah,[5] that 'home is the lived experience of locality',[6] but this experience is a porous one; subject and space, through speech and sensation, leak into each other. Diasporic people, she states, form new communities through the processes of estrangement and through the lack of commonality itself.

> Migrant bodies, selves and communities cannot be understood assimply on one side of identity or the other, on one side of the community or the other: rather, it is the uncommon estrangement of migration itself that allows migrants to remake what it is they might yet have in common.[7]

Arguably then, from the processes of estrangement can come an uncertainty that in itself can make and remake new, more open communities.

**NOTES**

1. Sarah Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality,* London: Routledge, 2000, p. 22.
2. Here I am figuring the stranger as a symbolic entity rather than an actual stranger.
3. Paul Willemen, 'The Fourth Look: The Films of Stephen Dwoskin', in *Looks and Frictions: Essays in Cultural Studies and Film Theory,* London: BFI. 1994, pp. 99 183.
4. For a more complex explanation of this see Amelia Jones, 'The Undecidability of Difference: The Work of Rachel Garfield' in *You'd Think So Wouldn't You?,* Hatfield: UH Press, 2005, pp. 20 25.
5. See, for example, Avta Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities,* London: Routledge, 1996.
6. Ahmed, *Strange Encounters,* p. 89.
7. Ahmed, *Strange Encounters*, p. 94.