

**“What You See is NOT What You Get:”
Musings on the Role of Seeing, Image, and Imagination in Media and Tourist Discourses”¹**

A middle-aged woman lies in bed in a hotel room somewhere in Austria. Consuming the contents of the minibar, she zaps through the TV channels, mindlessly gazing at fragments of the news, a bicycle race, an Austrian folksong performance, and other short clips. In a voice-over, she formulates a postcard with the following text: “Dear Uncle, The weather is fine. And people here are rich and friendly. I found a nice hotel with hot water, drinks for free, and thirty-two TV channels. This is not America, but my first holiday since honeymoon, I guess, and a good place to hang around. So I will do my best. Los Angeles is far away, and so am I. Please don’t forget me.”

As one might have guessed by her surprise about the many TV channels, the free hot water, and by her misconception that the minibar would be complimentary, the woman in this scene is not your typical tourist. In fact, Nana Iaschwili, so her name, is the protagonist in Austrian director Florian Flicker’s film *Suzie Washington* (1998), and in this scene we see her taking a break from being on the run from the law. The teacher of French from the former Soviet republic of Georgia had been arrested by Austrian authorities during her layover at the Viennese airport, after it had become apparent that her passport and her visa to the United States were forgeries. With her request for asylum rejected, Nana had used a chance opportunity to escape from the airport’s transit zone and join an American tourist group bound for the Austrian lake district. Under the pseudonym Suzie Washington, Nana then had embarked on an at times bizarre journey through Austria’s tourist landscape, pursued by the police, harrassed by smugglers and criminals, until she had found this isolated bed&breakfast, where she is courted by a lonesome German tourist looking for a holiday fling (Flicker).

The first half of the film addresses (and undermines) the assumption that the visual—whether it’s still photography or film—constitutes “hard” evidence for establishing someone’s identity. When we first see Nana, she rushes through the airport to her connecting flight. The shaky hand-held camera that follows her as she moves along with hundreds of other travelers is reminiscent of countless other personal videos shot in the arrival terminal of an international airport. After her arrest, Nana is held in the airport’s transit area. In several long shots and high-angle shots the cinematography mimicks surveillance cameras and visually categorizes Nana as an illegal immigrant. This very obvious change in cinematography reveals to what degree that which we see is shaped by the means through which we see it. Although Nana’s outer appearance has not changed, and although she is still walking through the airport building like any other traveler/tourist, she is now labeled an illegal migrant.

Flicker’s *Suzie Washington* engages with contemporary xenophobic discourses in Austria’s politics and media which hold that there is a self-evident *visual* difference between tourists and illegal migrants or asylum seekers. In often satirical ways, the film highlights the fact that these identity positions are constructed socially and culturally, and that the visual plays a very arbitrary and ambiguous role in these constructions. Whether a person appears to be a tourist or a migrant is contingent not so much on this person’s behavior but more on—often unacknowledged—Western traditions of seeing. For instance, at the film’s beginning, Nana’s Georgian passport and her accented English frame her as an “ethnic other” in ways that attract the attention of the Austrian police. Yet, shortly thereafter, this apparently objective

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categorization is revealed as arbitrary and based on racist and gendered “interests” of the dominant Austrian/Western collective: Nana escapes from the airport disguised as a cleaning woman, pushing the janitor’s cart down the airport’s corridors with none of the policemen who come her way paying any attention. The allegedly threatening “visibility” of the foreigner is shown to be anything but objective or self-evident. As Nana’s successful escape demonstrates, visibility can turn into invisibility when this other serves the economic interest of the Austrian/Western collective: We just don’t “see” the people who do our dirty work.

Flicker’s film continues to mock Austrian/Western essentialist assumptions after Nana boards an American tour bus. The Austrian guide never questions the teacher’s claim that she is an American tourist. Nana’s accent and her appearance, previously the reason for her othering as a dangerous, unwanted foreigner, now become evidence for her “American” identity. The tour guide’s polite and welcoming attitude towards Nana is based on his identification of her as a tourist from a wealthy Western nation, a category that trumps racial and ethnic otherness. To put it more bluntly, the tour guide’s hospitable demeanor towards the purported American tourist illustrates recent Austrian xenophobic attitudes that reserve “*Gemütlichkeit*” for “those who do not come from Eastern and Southern Europe and Third-World countries, and who come—as tourists—to spend money” (Reisigl and Wodak 147-48).

Finally, *Suzie Washington* highlights how much the perspective of male erotic desire shapes the perception of ethnicity, nationality, and class. On her way to the above-mentioned hotel, Nana, traveling as Suzie Washington, meets the German tourist Herbert Korn. The quiet and somewhat clumsy middle-aged loner is attracted immediately to the American tourist and invites her to dinner. He even buys a swimsuit for her, hoping that she will join him for a midnight swim in the lake. Although Herbert is not of the aggressive type, his demeanor nonetheless reflects a Western male perspective that perceives the body of the female “other” as a potential “destination,” as an “imagined territory” open for exploration (Rojek and Urry 17).

By offering these different interpretations of Nana’s identity, the film challenges viewers to reflect on the arbitrariness of establishing racial and ethnic categories based on visual evidence. To be precise: These scenes demonstrate that, whenever we think we categorize, evaluate, and judge situations and people based on visual evidence, we actually refer to a complex and mostly unacknowledged web of other discourses that originate from other sources. Art historian Martin A. Berger shows this in his innovative analysis of American visual art of the 19th century. Carefully examining paintings, still photos, and early moving pictures, Berger demonstrates how visual renditions of landscapes and people reflect the white colonialist perspective even if no visible racial others are in the frame. Turning the conventional notion of visual cause and effect upside down, Berger states that “[i]mages do not persuade us to internalize racial values embedded within them [...]. Instead of selling us on racial systems we do not already own, the visual field powerfully confirms previously internalized beliefs” (Berger 1). Thus, the visual recognition and identification of Nana Iaschwili as either an illegal immigrant, a low-wage janitor, or a wealthy tourist is the result of a chain of racial and racist processes within the respective viewer, even though it seems that it was the object of the gaze that sparked the process of racial identification.

The concept of the visual in modernity encompasses not only the image but also the force of imagination, be it as a force that enables the individual to conjure up a notion of wholeness in the face of modernity’s fragmentation, or a force that empowers individuals to overcome boundaries. The former has been researched, for instance, in the context of the Weimar *mountain film*, where scholars such as Rentschler and others have argued that the cinematic capturing of nature—a highly technological and thus modern endeavor—countered urban experiences of disenchantment and fragmentation ascribed to modernization (Rentschler). The latter—the

empowerment of individuals to overcome real or imaginary boundaries—has been at the center of recent research on the connection between media and tourist studies. As David Crouch, Rhona Jackson, and Felix Thompson argue in the introduction to their edited volume *The Media and the Tourist Imagination* (2005), the concept of imagination highlights the parallels between the areas of media and tourism as well as the differences. While imagination in the media usually results in some kind of (melodramatic) solution to conflicts, imagination in tourism, although it inspires a kind of taking leave from everyday routines, is always already bounded by its utopian nature. In other words, we know that the experience we will have while we travel will not be the one we imagined we would have (Crouch, Jackson and Thompson).

Depicting the almost seamless merging of media discourses and tourist imagination, the hotelroom scene described at the beginning seems, at first glance, to suggest that imagination will solve the conflicts posed by modernity. Nana’s casual way of using the remote control and her almost childlike joy at the abundance of channels contrasts positively with the life on the run she had just experienced. Her behavior seems to underscore cultural theorist Arjun Appadurai’s claim that consuming globalized mass media also “provokes resistance, irony, selectivity, and in general, agency” (Appadurai 7). According to Appadurai, the consumption of globalized mass media must be understood as working in the space of “imagination,” which he defines as “a space of contestation in which individuals and groups seek to annex the global into their own practices of the modern” (Appadurai 4). While consumption is not a liberatory practice, Appadurai considers it a pleasurable one and therefore one that produces “agency” (Appadurai 7).

Yet, I would argue that Florian Flicker’s *Suzie Washington* probes the limits of an agency rooted in imagination. The very images that propel Nana/Suzie forward are presented as always already compromised by a capitalist system that organizes both the legal and the illegal world. Nana’s frequent voice-over postcards to her (not-existing) uncle in America as well as her performance as American tourist Suzie Washington reveal the power of the mixture of media and tourist imagination. While this combination pulls Nana forward, it also entraps her. Instead of reaching America, Nana ends up in a smuggler’s van bearing the label “Sound of Music Tours” that brings her to a remote Alpine valley, where she is abandoned and has to find her way across the Austro-German border. Los Angeles, Nana’s imaginary destination, does indeed stand for the power of globalized images, albeit in a way that hints at the exploitative nature of late-capitalist systems.

Stranded in the Alpine no-(wo)man’s land between Austria and Germany, Nana finds a brief respite at an isolated mountain inn, whose host does not ask many questions and allows her to stay. When Nana offers to work for him in return for lodging, he insists on paying her. Trust develops, and there are hints at a romantic relationship between the two characters. This experience of precarious bliss is symbolized by Nana’s discovery of an old pair of sunglasses with pink-colored lenses under one of the inn’s beds. Several times she holds the glasses before her eyes and each time the camera cuts to a point-of-view-shot of the mountains in pink. During the last point-of-view-shot, the jeep of the border patrol drives into the frame. Thus at the very moment when more conventional media narratives would suggest a solution qua *imag(e)ination*, Flicker’s film disrupts the notion that seeing things positively will automatically result in improved situations. Overall, the film addresses the many roles the visual can play in the constructions of identity—ranging from evidence to inspiration for change—without offering an answer. At the film’s end it is the visual similarity between Nana and a French tourist, whose passport Nana has stolen, that enables the protagonist to continue her journey in the guise of yet another, imagined identity.

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