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Editorial

To continue the journey, here comes an Interview with Lisa Parks. She is an Associate Professor of Film and Media Studies at the University of Santa Barbara and currently lives in Berlin, where I interviewed her. I hope you enjoy it as much, as I did. Francis Hunger

Lisa Parks

Could you shortly explain your concept of satellite witnessing which you developed in the book *Cultures in Orbit* (Duke University Press, 2005)?
A lot of this comes out of the desire to contest the military history of satellite technology, so since satellites have been publicly funded at least in the US by US citizen tax payer dollars. We need to imagine other ways of using satellites and satellite images that are not just about military monitoring of the planet and scientific diagnosis of a problem. I think it's really important that people realize that they can use satellite images as zones of critical engagement, as zones of playful experimentation, aesthetic and artistic interventions (which we can see happening with Google Earth). In some sense, the idea of satellite witnessing draws and builds upon some ideas in Donna Haraway's books *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* and *Modest Witness*, where she discusses witnessing in relation to various regimes of vision and technologies.

What was your experience of witnessing, when you went to Srebrenica?
One of the reasons that I went there is that I was trying to develop some kind of sky to ground chain of investigation. One of my preliminary assumptions was that if I somehow got closer to the site of atrocities that I would understand more, that proximity would lead to a better understanding of what I was being asked to watch from far. But the irony and the paradox is, that once I got to the site I realized that such events of war and especially wartime atrocities are so complex and difficult to comprehend that I felt possibly even more far away from these events and even more alienated and confused about them even when standing in the very place where they happened.

I was very impressed by your Postwar Footprints project, which you exhibited together with Angela Melitopoulos and Ursula Biemann at Kunstwerke, Berlin in 2005-2006.
What I tried to do is to develop a critical practice that I'm now calling footprint analysis. It is a way of trying to make visible these invisible zones where signals circulate. That project led not only to a research essay but I also had the chance to work with some cartographers to generate a map of satellite economy of former Yugoslavia. On the map people can see which specific satellites are being used by the new states of former Yugoslavia. They can see various footprints on different continents and will get a sense of how signals are sent out to reach diasporas around the world – that is, people who were either been displaced after WWII, who migrated for work during the 60s and 70s, or who fled the region during the recent war of the 1990s.
So I identified these satellite and wireless footprints and I also tried to take photographs of what I'm calling „signaling elements" - transmission towers, satellite uplink- und downlink-facilities, satellite dishes on apartment buildings, wireless towers and billboards, among other things. I'm also working on footprint analysis in Turkey looking at the many hundreds of TV channels that the Turks use to address the diverse diasporic populations who live in countries around the world.

How would you describe the situation for Turkey?
What's interesting about Turkey is that they have been really aggressive in using satellite TV. They own their own satellites, one of their most heavily used satellite is Turksat 2A, which has a footprint that covers most of Europe. There are hundreds of Turkish channels that circulate on Turkish satellites, which means that there is a degree of vertical integration in the sense that Turkey owns the satellites, and there are Turkish companies that produce the shows and send the signals up, and there are Turkish companies that sell satellite dishes so viewers can receive them. So the use of satellites has resulted in the re-composition and dispersion of Turkey – it is not only a nation-state in geo-physical and legal terms, but helps to make up transnational footprints in which electronic signals and cultures circulate. Turkish signals are available, for instance, to the 300,000 Turks who live in Berlin.
And the other issue is that I attended the Caspian Sea Telecom Conference in Istanbul in April 2007. There are new wireless and satellite footprints forming across central Asia into Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgystan, Moldova, Azerbaijan, Armenia and so on. Representatives from many of the former Soviet republics were present at this conference, even all the way out to Mongolia. Turkey is serving as a regional center from which new satellite, wireless and web infrastructures are being discussed and developed. It is strategic for these new states to form their own infrastructures and figure out ways to integrate with the transnational flows of the economy and culture, while keeping local/national/regional control of these systems. Satellites and wireless footprints become spaces in which new national identities are emerging and these will be sites for future research. Some of these systems are being developed alongside new oil pipelines or other routes of commerce and trade.

You mentioned that you have been in Mongolia just a few days ago but also already some years ago. What makes you being interested in Mongolia?
I first went in 2004 to do an exploratory research trip, because I was interested in the first Soviet satellite, which is Mongolia. It was the second country to become part of a sphere of communist influence. They had a revolution in 1921, which was Soviet supported. In my research I'm trying to describe the relationship between metaphoric satellite politics and literal satellite politics.
A lot of people who live in the countryside work as herders and live in gers, nomadic tents. Many of them now have television, computers and mobile phones. But in such conditions television is most often powered by solar energy and windmills since these people live off the grid so to speak. There is a company that distributes satellite television, computer and power equipment called Malchin (which means cowboy) and it is really targeting these people who have a nomadic life in the countryside. They are downlinking signals, so they can keep track of what is happening in the urban areas in Mongolia. Satellite technology allows Mongolians to continue to live nomadic lives off the grid and still remain integrated and connected.

For me it is fascinating how you integrate this field research trips into your academic work. How are the prospects of it?
I think we need theories that really think in spatial terms about the organization of the electromagnetic spectrum and the infrastructure that has produced not only networks, but footprints and fields of signal distribution, so I'm trying in my new book, Mixed Signals, to deal with signal distribution in a material way and trying to move toward a theory of cultural atmospherics.

Selling solar panels and satellite dishes at the black market in Ulan Bator. Photo (c) 2007, Lisa Parks.

For more information see: www.lisaparks.blogspot.com