

## **The globalization of the unremarkable**

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Globalization is driven by the flow of people, goods, capital, images and discourses, and tourism is a core part of the latter two. It is in tourism industries that we see what Arjun Appadurai called ‘ideoscapes’, globally distributed imageries and ideological frames for interpreting the imageries.<sup>1</sup> We get structured messages – brochures, websites, TV programs – in which particular images of places are shown and comments on these images are given. Invariably, the images show ‘landmarks’ or ‘beautiful’ places: extraordinarily lush or spectacular nature, temples, cathedrals, palaces, castles, museums, shopping areas, luxury hotels. Such places are inhabited by extraordinary people: people in traditional attire showing native arts, crafts and dances as well as authentic cuisine, beautiful people, people who cater, smiling and generous, for tourists. And all of this (here comes the ideological frame) is suggested to be ‘typical’ and ‘authentic’. It is the desired image of places, the globalized world-as-we-(wish-to)-know-it: a collection of exceptional, stunningly pretty places where happiness is there to grasp and where the serene intake of beauty will make us all better. A trip to Beijing thus takes us inevitably to Tien An Men Square, the Forbidden City, the Temple of Heaven, the Olympic Stadium, and the Great Wall.

Bert Danckaert’s trip to Beijing resulted in a very different set of images: a series of unremarkable walls, walls of insignificance, and walls that could be from anywhere else too – from Mexico, Paris or Johannesburg as well as from Beijing. We see in his work a strangely familiar universe: that of the unremarkable, undistinguished places in which all of us spend so much of our lives, places we pass through without giving them any notice, spaces that are just

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<sup>1</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*. Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 1996

trajectories, parts of a line connecting one place with another. Places, in short, that define our lives and that of so many other people in the urbanized world. The walls in Danckaert's work are a stage, though. They offer a stage for traces of human activity, for that which people do to urban space: the creation of habitats, of facilities, of litter and rubbish, the seemingly disorganised patterns of objects that raise the question of purpose and design. The walls themselves are key parts of that, perhaps even the only stable and transparent parts of it. His work suggests layers of human activity resulting in these particular, strangely familiar geometrical patterns of late-modern urbanity. The geometry is brought into relief by the presence of the walls, the human habitat, because it is around human habitation that we see the disorganised patterns of objects being clustered – that we see a city become a city.

Bert Danckaert's work compels us to reflect on what is 'typical' and 'authentic'. As said before, the images of Beijing could have come from anywhere else. And only a few images contain suggestions that this is China and not, say, France or Italy. It is only in a handful of his pictures that we see the colors, shapes and iconic features we associate, on the basis of our globalized ideological imagery, with 'Chineseness'. Yet, of course, his work is about Beijing, and the human habitats he captures are Chinese habitats. So in many ways, this could *not* be from anywhere else, this *must* be from Beijing, these images *must* tell us something about Beijing. Compare this now to Chinese restaurants in the Chinatowns of Europe and the USA. Very often, what we see there is the opposite of what we see in Danckaert's work: an exuberant 'Chineseness' proclaiming its typicality and authenticity to local customers. Red and gold colors, images of the dragon, the griffon and the phoenix, the occasional laughing Buddha, Chinese inscriptions: it is all there and it all breathes Chineseness. Yet it is often paired with sufficient information in the local language to attract customers, and the language in which the restaurant operates is usually the local language, not

Mandarin Chinese or Cantonese. In that sense, Chinese restaurants can *not* be Chinese, they *have to* be local in London, Paris, Amsterdam, Rio de Janeiro or Cape Town.

This is the strange dilemma that Danckaert's work forces us to consider: objects and spaces that look 'typical' usually are only 'typical' to outsiders, and in that sense very 'untypical' from a native perspective. For most inhabitants of Beijing the Forbidden City is probably a less important place than their workplace, local neighbourhood or super market. Local lives are organized around local ordinary places, not around landmarks. Conversely, the tourist visiting Beijing will find these locally important places far less interesting than the Forbidden City – because for him or her, the Forbidden City is 'typical', while the Chinese workplace may remind him or her too much of home, and would thus be very 'untypical'. He or she encounters the same de-historicizing brick and concrete structures as at home – the things that Danckaert focuses on. This dilemma – the reversal of 'typicality' dependent on different viewpoints – is at the heart of globalization. It defines much of what we claim to understand about the world, and it explains why we so often, in this globalized universe, bump into different perspectives, priorities, meanings and find no other way out than to call the 'culture' and 'intercultural differences'. At the heart of this misunderstanding is the notion of the 'typical' and the 'authentic', which is nothing else than the inevitable difference between members of a community and non-members. Members construct their own ordinariness, they organise space as a habitat, not as a landmark – historically, landmarks such as palaces, temples and castles emerged in spite of and often instead of or in conflict with local habitats and habitants. Non-members get drawn to the extraordinary, to that which is noticeably different between 'here' and 'there'. This contrast only exists for the outsider, and has very little of that kind of relevance to insiders.

In the history of Western science, this problem of viewpoint has been addressed by ethnography, a methodological branch of anthropology in which observers (non-members by

definition) try to get as close as possible to the ‘native viewpoint’, to the categories and methods applied by the members of a community in actual life. Ethnography (so every textbook will tell us) is characterized by a clinical gaze, a gaze which denaturalizes and abnormalizes the objects and human activities in front of the observer. It is by refusing to take things for granted – by refusing, in other words, the normalcy of one’s own viewpoint – that ethnography gets to the heart of cultural things and to the core of social organization. The precondition for that is, of course, a refusal to accept the extraordinary as extraordinary, a refusal to be amazed, shocked or shaken by what one observes, and a strong will to learn and understand (reminiscent of what in the Greek philosophical tradition was called *apatheia*, the absence of passion as a conduit for true knowledge). In ethnography, one does not re-order the world of the members of the community, and one does not expect that world to be reordered for the observer’s sake. It is all about authentic normalcy, unremarkable authenticity. Meanings need to be learned, not imposed and not implanted. And when they have been learned, the clinical gaze turns into a clinical narrative of normalcy, in which the strange ‘traditional’ ways and lore are represented as ‘just’ someone’s or some group’s life, as someone else’s way of making sense and bringing order to everyday life. Ethnographic writings are stories of the ordinary person in everyday life, and to the extent that extraordinary things happen – rituals, conflicts, moments of spectacle – they are treated as just part of that order of everyday life.

Bert Danckaert has done just that. His lens is a clinical, ethnographic instrument of observation and narrative. What his work shows is authenticity and typicality as seen from the inside, from the members’ perspective. This is alienating for all those who have been reared in the commodified imagery of global tourism, but it is inevitable. It presents us with a shortcut to lived experience, a shortcut that jumps over the layers of non-members’ categories of typicality and authenticity, to a Beijing which is genuine, authentic and real as a habitat for

millions of people. It helps us survive the avalanche of 'typical' images and messages currently burying us as part of the momentum of the Olympic year in Beijing – an avalanche of images that are perhaps more typical of us, tourists, than of them, Chinese. It is helpful to see a 'typical' Beijing which is unremarkable, and to realise that the perception of this unremarkable Beijing is an important aspect of globalization: it is the moment where we get to know the Other, where we are able to step beyond the layers of commodified typicalities and authenticities and start understanding life-as-it-is, and as it reflects itself in the organization of space as a habitat, not a landmark. Danckaert's work thus becomes a landmark of intercultural understanding, something that manages not to be trapped in the easy imageries of the exotic-typical, but brings us back to where things begin and end: in real human life. In an age of globalization, such levels of understanding are real, valuable forms of knowledge.