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Butterflies

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The School

The starting point for the project *If You Could Speak Swedish...* was Ersen's three-month stay in Stockholm. In order to find out more about the situation in the language training that is organised as part of Sweden's immigration policy, Ersen registered at InfoKomp, a school that teaches asylum-seekers and immigrants on commission from the Swedish Migration Board and various municipalities. The SFI course (Swedish for Immigrants) is reserved for those whose application for integration into the Swedish community has been accepted. For asylum-seekers whose application has not yet been decided on, or who are only allowed a limited stay, there are other courses. Directly at the entrance to the school a sign divides the "different" participants into those who will profit from such a course and those for whom the long-term benefit makes no sense since they may have to leave the country. They all meet up again in the canteen.

Almost all the course participants whom Ersen met during the project live in the suburbs south of Stockholm. The people at the school share a common experience: for them learning a new language is not the side-effect of travel occasioned by tourism or business interests. For immigrants the acquiring of a new language stands for a process of integration into the coordinates of a completely new cultural system. In very few cases, the process is based on a voluntary decision. For the most part, it is directly coupled with a loss of homeland, friends, family and vocation. By developing her work *If You Could Speak Swedish...* in one of the language schools, Ersen locates it directly in a situation with the greatest potential for conflict. And the conflict is not one restricted to Sweden, but should be seen and treated as an eminently European topic.

Integration and Productivity

In December 1997, with few dissensions, the Swedish Parliament, the Riksdag, agreed not to classify immigrants as a distinctive group solely because they were immigrants. Accordingly, regardless of his or her ethnic or cultural background, everyone receives the same rights and the same chances, a policy called integration (not immigration) policy. There is no disputing the fact that joblessness is a serious hindrance to the integration of immigrants. Almost all the political programmes of the European countries who take in immigrants - thus also Sweden - emphasise the need to promote employment for immigrants by assuring them adequate language teaching and vocational training. This resolve is taken very seriously in Sweden. In 1998 the Swedish Integration Board was founded, a new authority with comprehensive responsibility for this integration policy. One result is that every municipality in Sweden is responsible for offering educational possibilities - "Swedish for immigrants" by name - in the Swedish language and for providing a basic knowledge of Swedish society.

The extensive programme of language courses and vocational training in Sweden derives, for one, from its role and its history as an immigration country, and secondly points to a widespread programme in Europe for productivity and efficiency. This orientation of politics towards modern management is symptomatic for the industrial nation's political programme and also marks the aims and mechanisms of their immigration policy. Politics that are openly xenophobic and isolationist are simply inefficient and have therefore become fossilised, which - above all in the social-democratically governed countries in Europe - were replaced by so-called integrative programmes. Under the sign of efficiency and productivity, an immigration discourse has become possible that is argued on "humanitarian" and ethical principles, without being primarily derived from them.

Wanting to Say Something Elsewhere

The project *If You Could Speak Swedish...* is available as a 23-minute video that can be presented on its own, and which also documents the process of the project that took place in one of Stockholm's local language schools (InfoKomp) in the fall of 2001, based on the collaboration between Esra Ersen and the course participants. As noted previously, the school courses are exclusive to immigrants and asylum-seekers. At Ersen's instigation the participants wrote down what they would say in Swedish if they could speak the language adequately. Naturally they had to do this in their respective native tongues, since they could not yet speak enough Swedish. There were no guidelines as to the content or the length of the texts, only that the statement should be personally and urgently felt. The very different replies - some emotional, some political, sometimes brief, sometimes long - were translated into Swedish (from Chinese, Arabic, Russian, Spanish, Bengali, among others). Already at this point in the video it becomes clear that the desire for integration shows the practical need for a policy that has to react to world-wide changes (catch phrase: globalisation) and the phenomena (catch phrase: immigration) that are being uninhibitedly promoted by political decisions in these industrial states. The result has been that, by the end of the nineties, 19 percent of Sweden's population was either born outside of Sweden or were children of at least one foreign-born parent (compared to 25 percent in the USA). The number of people who are not from any of the Nordic countries, i.e., who are not from Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Iceland, or Finland, has more than doubled since 1980.

This development is explained by the increase in non-European refugees and by the consequential immigration of their kin. For immigrants the chances on the job market are very varied and, according to statistics, break down relative to origin. Those citizens who are not from one of the Nordic Countries have the greatest difficulty, especially those with no European or North American nationality. Consequently the job market situation for non-Nordic citizens in Sweden is much debated. It is striking that the situation does not run analogically to the total economic picture. Whereas the job market in the eighties was more favourable, the employment rate for non-Nordic citizens has actually fallen since 1980. While at the beginning of the fifties immigrants had an employment rate of about 20 percent higher than that of Swedes, it was about 40 percent lower than that of Swedes by the end of the nineties. Between 1990 and 1998 the unemployment figures for Swedish citizens have risen from less than 2 percent to about 6 percent. In the same time period, unemployment jumped from 5 percent to 27 percent for non-Nordic citizens. (Source: Statistics Sweden.)

Swedish for Immigrants

The factor leading to unemployment among immigrants that is repeatedly named is the lack of proficiency in the language of the new country. Others are a deficiency in other required languages, of professional skills, of cultural competence, of access to the social network, as well as the difficulty of comparing qualifications. The language competence of the immigrants is often unthinkingly linked to their basic educational level. It is thus argued that immigrants are less productive than Nordic citizens because of their poor education and/or poor knowledge of Swedish. The language ability of the group is the main argument for explaining the overall social situation. It is indeed questionable if the arguments listed to explain the problems of integration are sufficient, because immigrant unemployment has risen in reverse proportion to actual immigration.

Also the education level of non-Nordic as compared to Swedish citizens registered with the state employment agency is not explained by the model of "unqualified foreigners". Although the proportion of those who had only a compulsory grade school education as their maximum educational level was higher among the non-Nordic population (40 percent) than among Swedish job-seekers (almost 30 percent), a greater proportion of the former (16 percent) had an education beyond secondary school in comparison to unemployed Swedes (12 percent). Also the non-Nordic citizens had a longer period (at least three years) of

secondary schooling, whereby the East Europeans make up the greatest share of these. This means that immigrants from non-Nordic countries do not, in general, have a lower educational level than Swedes do, even if they are over-represented among the group of job-seekers with a maximum of what corresponds to only compulsory school education. (Sources: The Standing Committee on the Labour Market; AMS - The National Labour Market Board; and Statistics Sweden.)

Based on this brief explanation, the system of language schools and vocational training courses for foreigners and immigrants is given the important function of a "hinge" between a so-called successful and an unsuccessful or incomplete naturalisation process, i.e., integration. Almost all unemployed people with non-Nordic citizenship in Sweden are in some kind of programme for further education. This means that for a large group of people, the daily routine of the language school is linked directly to the procedures and problems of one's own integration, a process that is not seldom seen as the compulsory assimilation into a cultural system that stands in contradiction to one's own values and norms. One third of these people are taking courses within the framework of the "Swedish for Immigrants" programme. The guideline for the course is an average of 525 teaching periods (one period being 45 minutes), but its duration may vary. Less than 50 percent of the participants pass the final exam within a two-year period. Of those who began a scheduled course in 1993/94, only 37 percent passed the final exam after an average of one year. This is not a specifically Swedish problem. In the Netherlands, whose integration model is similarly based on language and training, only 15 percent of the participants pass the language course of approximately 600 hours of teaching. Also in the Netherlands, language (in)competence - which in the country's current mood is clearly registered - is the main argument for proving immigrants' unwillingness to adapt, as well as an explanation for their difficulty in entering the labour market; it is also enlisted to explain an allegedly inevitable decline into criminality.

This assessment raises language, on the one hand, to an important instrument for living in a culture, but at the same time reduces it to a supposed indication of integration (un)willingness or even of law (un)awareness. Language is often used as an alibi for a dominant groups' dislike of something about the foreigner (money, religion, skin colour, ethnicity, gender, etc.). If a French woman in Berlin speaks broken German, everyone thinks it charming. If a Chinese immigrant in New York earns a lot of money with his restaurant, his broken English is cited as a guarantee for the quality of his authentically Chinese cuisine. This problem is mirrored in an observation that Ersen has noted repeatedly as a native Turk during her countless travels and stays in Europe. "If you come from a European country and travel through Europe, language does not have the same significance as if you come, for instance, from Iraq, Iran or Peru. To Swedes it may seem nice when you as a German try to speak Swedish and make mistakes. The same tolerance is not shown an Iraqi." In this text I assume that behind the language argument lurks a deeply rooted and, at the same time, irrational claim of cultural hegemony, the demand of "residents" for a comprehensive cultural adaptation on the part of the "immigrant".

Translate and Intonate Correctly

The second phase of the project documented on the video shows how the individual participants study the right pronunciation of their texts with the help of the teacher. The teacher's voice comes from off-screen. You only see the respective student speaking frontally to the camera. The camera thus takes over the teacher's perspective. The resulting video offers observations on at least two levels. On the one hand, there are the texts spoken by the students that are the result of their personal reaction to Esra Ersen's stimulus, the content of which becomes the didactic material. On the other, the video develops an iconography of the institute, in which the students who speak in front of a rolling camera are standing at different locations in the school with details of its furnishings and equipment as background.

It becomes clear that no aspect of the language school appears to be "arbitrary", and that at every point, the interior decoration also refers to the function, or rather doctrine, of the place, whose aim - language teaching - also includes the projected integration of "strangers" into an already existing community. In the interface between the two levels of the video - the students' remarks and the school interiors that provide a frame for what they say - it becomes clear how the individual perspectives of the participants relate to the social and ideological context of the institution. The overlap of these two levels is also reflected in Ersen's camera focus, which, although showing the students from a fixed perspective, changes the relations by constantly zooming in and out, thus changing the way the speakers' faces and figures are framed within the rooms. The school's visual contextualisation of the speakers is made into a portrait of the institution, in which the picture that the institution projects of its "users" is articulated, providing an insight into the concept and ideology of the school.

Photoshop

Siamak from Iran raves about his arrival in Sweden: "I saw beautiful forests, rivers and lakes that resembled a beautiful work of art created by a skilful artist, using different colours on a large canvas." He is standing in front of an aerial photograph of Stockholm, with houses and blue waters. The poster consciously underlines the natural colours of the sky and the water, while the facades of the houses sparkle in the sun. Siamak's words seem to find their corresponding image in this depiction of Stockholm. Not only because the city is portrayed both by him and the poster as "beautiful", but also because the painterly comparison of this image of Stockholm with a "work of art" has overtones of an aesthetic construction. The "skilful artist" he speaks of as a "creator" and whose work he praises, appears to be, against the background of the poster, the Stockholm tourist office instead.

Absurdly, the three basic colours of the poster - light blue sky, dark blue to black water and yellow-bronze house fronts - are mirrored in Siamak's clothing and facial complexion. It looks as if the immigrant possesses the ability of a chameleon to take on the colours of its surroundings, in order to protect itself by attracting less attention. Siamak's comparison of nature with a "canvas" can almost be carried over to himself, apparently embodying the adaptable immigrant. The comparison brings to mind the fact that European immigration or (so-called) integration policies always also compose a certain ideal picture of an immigrant who adapts voluntarily. A negative highpoint of this discussion is represented by the concept that the German CDU politician Friedrich Merz expressed: "leading culture". This behaviour codex for foreigners is meant to turn the dream of a "photoshop asylum-seeker" into reality, one who - like a canvas - is willing to be painted over with the respective values and norms of the immigration country's culture.

In any willingness to trace the failure of many language school students, especially the learning (dis)ability of the immigrants, we would be endorsing the current, increasingly noticeable, self-asserted and nationalist-oriented thinking in Europe. The subject demands a more complex analysis of the phenomenon of a language school for foreigners, its mechanisms and its power-political as well as ideological networking with the state institutions of naturalisation. Imparting a language is also always linked to imparting a culture. With her project Ersen seems to be interested in the question of whether the claim of a "leading culture" is being formulated in the metaphors and signs produced by the institution of the language school for immigrants.

Familiar/Exotic

The school that has been conceived, i.e., consciously furnished, for asylum-seekers and immigrants, is in Ersen's video readable as a picture that constantly produces a dichotomy of the "exotic" and the "familiar". Mahir Kadifa, for example, answers Ersen's question with a description of the reasons for his flight from Iraq:

"When he sought to make me one of his tools of oppression I declined. He sought to make out of me a murderer of innocent and unarmed people... I left my friends and family and came to Sweden." While Kadifa is learning the correct pronunciation of the words from the teacher, he is seated before a colourful poster of different fruits and vegetables. The white colour of his shirt makes the saturated colours of the culinary objects shine more brightly. The largest portion of the poster is filled by a sliced watermelon. The fruit is considered exotic in northern countries and expresses a longing for far-off places. The poster wants to stress the exotic aspect of the fruit by making the red of the melon brighter than a melon would naturally be. The melon shows traces of "improvement" from the viewpoint of whoever produced the picture. Instead of speaking here of improvement, we note that the picture of the melon has been overstated by the graphic designer. In addition, the decorative arrangement of the still life of fruits and vegetables is clichéd. The bright red of the melon corresponds to the bright red of a fire protection pictograph, which is also mounted on the wall behind Kadifa. The pictograph depicts a flame as a danger and as an abstract sign. Similar to the stylised flame, the image of the melon is readable as a sign of "nature" that, in the process of its depiction, is already being inscribed into a system of control. The exotically inflated melon in a circle of partly home-grown fruit can be read by the immigrant in his situation as a metaphor for a claim of domestication, not only of the pictured fruit but also of himself.

What is striking in the entire video is that the school displays decorative images of strange plants or animals in stylised form - as a surrogate or pattern. For his pronunciation lesson Asoul Alilou from Iran is seated in front of a curtain printed with a design of fictitious sea shells. Alilou's statement refers to his relationship to Swedish citizens, whose sympathy he underlines as positive, but which makes him feel somewhat marginalized: "...for example, when one says to a Swede (in this case a teacher) that one has a problem, one is met with empathy. The Swede responds with an emotional sigh even when one says that, for example, one's pen has got broken." His text points to the different degrees at which something is felt as a problem. At the same time there is a rejection here of the idea of cultural interaction as a well-meant but meaningless phrase of sympathy. It is unclear if the well-meant foreign shapes of the shells on the curtain point to their origin in far-off seas or whether it is more a case of fantasy and "artistic licence". The curtain could stem from an IKEA collection and its exoticism be meant to beautify northern living-rooms.

Paradises

In contrast to the stylisation of exotic motifs, the northern flora and fauna are always portrayed as naturally as possible. While Hada Al Dujaily compares his flight from Iraq to Adam's expulsion from paradise, a poster looms behind him showing northern wood creatures - probably a lynx and squirrel - in the snow: "Ah, beloved Baghdad... When I left it I felt like Adam did when he was forced to leave the kingdom of heaven." Meanwhile the background pictures show Sweden as a paradise, as an unspoiled natural landscape. In this way the video also underlines the constructive means used to represent the homeland, which are valid both for the school and the immigrants: one's own native country is depicted as a "paradise".

Against this background the question arises as to whether the posters and other pictures were deliberately designed for institutions of naturalisation such as the school, or whether they turned up by chance, say, via the teachers' wish to decorate their classrooms. Even then it would be a mistake to speak of this as pure chance, since putting up pictures is always based on conscious and unconscious choices. Rather the range of different depictions of foreign and native places can be read as an indication of an institution's use of its signs to constantly assert its culture, not only in order to enlighten us on Swedish nature and civilisation, but to separate the institution clearly from other cultural spaces, which it then stylises to exoticism.

Teaching Material

In another sequence, a family photograph almost completely fills the video frame. A man's voice repeats the word "family" several times, and is corrected each time. This is once again Dujaily, who is not himself seated before the camera, but during a break holds up a photo of the family he left behind in Iraq. The struggle to intonate the word "family" correctly defeats any attempt at a personal narrative of his family. The camera angle is such that the edge of a school desk is made to function as the photo's missing picture frame. Framed by the desk the photo signals the fact that a personal story undergoes a sea-change in school: one's own biography becomes reading material and is reduced to a phonetic exercise. This take is part of a whole series of short sequences of details Ersen shot in the breaks between the individual reading exercises. Another detail shows a Swedish text being transcribed word for word into Arabic characters. Similar to this is another scene in which a young woman looking up a certain word in the dictionary repeatedly skips to the wrong line. We see a detail of the index finger gliding back and forth in the dictionary.

All these pictures show how unyielding the language material is and how painstaking the daily navigation in the foreign language. Between the young Afghan Muhammed Azim and the language teacher (not visible here), a kind of aggression is built up while he again and again pronounces a word with the wrong intonation and is repeatedly asked to try again. His impatience is palpable and, in consideration of the goal he has set himself, understandable. He would like to live in such a way as to achieve something useful for future generations: "I would like to say that it would be good if we, like other people in other countries, did not have any problems. We could have what we wished for in order to be useful for coming generations." While he loses himself in the practice of the correct pronunciation, the content of his words get lost and suffer a lack of conviction, noticeable even to himself. Here, too, Ersen uses the camera angle as a possibility for comment, by showing Azim from below against the backdrop of an oppressive situation. In this sequence, the classroom seems constricted and its receding planes correspond to the coordinates on the map of Scandinavia hanging in the background.

Butterflies

The problem that becomes doubly recognisable in the video is that of the translation. For one, the fact that the personal story of the students must be retold in Swedish shows the gap that exists between their own biography and the context of their new life. This becomes quite clear when the translated texts suddenly seem strange to the students and resist their pronunciation. On the other hand, the translation problem is a vivid confrontation of the immigrants with their situation: can identity and an individual's world be so simply "translated" into a new cultural context? Can a person live on under completely different signs? In answer to this question Pejman, a young Iranian, reacts with a text on butterflies. In Iran the butterfly is a symbol for patience. The story is meant to encourage friends and other immigrants who are far from home. Becoming a butterfly means turning from a caterpillar into a chrysalis. It possesses the potential to change. Its existence as a caterpillar makes it vulnerable and symbolises life's struggle. Once in chrysalis form it must be patient before it can begin another life: "...it becomes a pupa. The pupa is a result of many days of hard work... In the end, when it has struggled enough, it is transformed through lovely meditation from a creature without arms and legs to a beautiful butterfly with wings to fly with."

Pejman recites his text in front of a large scientific poster of butterflies. The different kinds of butterflies are "cartographed" according to a biological method – lined up and pinned as though in a showcase. By means of an objective description and classification, the poster represents expertise and translates nature into an assessable model. Presumably Pejman himself chose the poster as a background to lend expression to his personal emotional situation in the school. The butterfly, for him a metaphor of his own patience that also stands for the efforts immigrants make to achieve a new autonomy ("Now the butterfly is independent"), is encountered in the school as a natural history catalogue. By means of such associations, provided by the school itself, the video shows the institution to be a place that links its concept of knowledge and learning

permanently to methods of control, of (graphically portrayable) systematisation as well as of "improvement", i.e., domestication. In addition, the poster is problematic for the very fact that Pejman's metaphor of the butterfly was not invented by him; it is a widespread document among immigrants - a psychological prop that must also be known to the teachers: "This short story is written for friends who have recently come here. To those who look at life from a hopeless perspective."

The Object of Instruction

The potted palms and ferns, which are scattered around the school en masse and recall the rain forest and the tropics, could well have been designed on the computer: they are that strikingly green and well-cared for. No leaf is allowed to turn brown, no bug allowed to prosper. Several of these plants frame Adanelh Berta, a young woman from Ethiopia, when she states: "If you reach up for more, you will drop what you had under your arm." The plants are well-placed surrogates of nature. Planted orderly in pots and individually aligned, they stand for the way nature is represented in the lobbies of banks or insurance companies. Also in this sequence the relationship between image and text is interpretable: just as each plant makes do with its flowerpot, so is each immigrant expected to be content and not ask too much. The way the institution is furnished with plants from tropical lands contributes to the picture that is ever more insistently expressed in the video, that the school is a place that, along with language teaching, has the goal of permanently assigning the students a social "role", i.e., of suggesting as quite natural a conduct that is suitable to this role. Whereby the institution (with all the means available to it) defines the immigrants, for one, as different, but, then again, as integrationable by an adaptation to the common canon of values and norms, i.e., those of a diffuse, national and leading culture. From the perspective of the school's interior decoration, its objects and depictions, one can discern an ideal image of the "good immigrant".

The video enables us to pose the question whether the problem of the language schools, i.e., the idea of integration, does not lie in the fact that the individuals are not accepted as "different". Just as the language - whether consciously or unconsciously - serves as an alibi or outlet for a more profound cultural uneasiness vis-à-vis foreigners and their cultural values, so is also the object taught in the schools - language - only a superficial object of instruction. The actual object in question seems to be the adaptation of the students' cultural identity to the values of the immigration country or making it into something as compatible as possible. Examples can be found in anthropology and ethnology of how in earlier stages of development the acceptance of strangers into a clan or tribe was carried out by means of a complicated ritual. Esra Ersen presents a symbolic and political perspective on the language school for immigrants that makes it into an object of study as a place, as well as an instrument, of just such a ritual in today's world, conveying to us the European idea of integration as ambiguous.

(from: Moderna Museet Projekt-Catalogue "Esra Ersen", 2002)