

Judith Barry *Border Stories* 2001/2006

A development of an earlier series of video portraits by Barry, *First and Third* (1987), and originally projected in the windows of a disused bank located between the sanitized tourist downtown of San Diego and the run-down port city, *Border Stories* concerns the ambiguities and contradictions of the positioning of subjects in urban and domestic space, and in particular in relation to class, something of a blind spot in American culture.

In the first film an upper-class, white woman uses the cell phone in her stolen car to trap the thief who has stolen it. The second shows a Mexican woman passing between homes and jobs: offered a job in Guadalajara, she instead goes to Tijuana where she is taken in by the wife of a “coyote” (one who takes illegal immigrants across the border), works in a factory and then a bar, and harassed by the husband is forced to leave. We next see her in the bedroom of another house packing, and furtively leaving—that her departure is described by a man who sounds as if he is from the US middle-class, suggests that she might have crossed the border. The third opens with a Latino man gardening in front of a lavish estate; he is then shown running along a street and passing through seemingly endlessly revolving doors—symbolic of his switching between many roles—to work at the front desk dressed in a suit, and later as a waiter in a restaurant, finally returning in his car to his home. We see him driving across the border to a rather luxurious house, replete with Mexican crafts. A master in his own domestic space, he has taken advantage of the difference between the two economies.

In documentary, the voice-over that narrates serves as a representative of the people depicted in such a way that, through the transcendence of the voice, their situation is universalized. In the first it is the beautiful daughter of the woman whose car has been stolen; in the second it is a middle-class, American man who is the Mexican woman’s employer in the house that she leaves at the end—he seems like a well-meaning academic puzzled at her behaviour; and in the third it is a man in the restaurant who tells us of the Latino’s many jobs, ending with “He’s a great guy.” It is as if the narrators have to tell the stories precisely because they cannot grasp their own position in the class and race relations involved. Sometimes with only minimal clues, the viewer is drawn into trying to socially and geographically locate the characters in films shot in a way somewhere between low-budget sit-com and documentary. By doing this, the viewer becomes aware of his or her own position. Thus the implication of the narrator creates a self-consciousness in the viewer of being an interpreter of the story who, while knowing more than the narrator, is made to reflect on her or his own ignorance.

The role of “speaking for” is thrown into question by the obvious partiality of the narrator. The narrator has an economic relation to the Latino protagonist. The two senses of representation – speaking for and projecting – combine.

Throughout the medium moves between an apparent transparency or neutrality to self-awareness. We become conscious of the medium as something that transports us between spaces. Thus *Border Stories* enacts ethical and political responsibility.

Michael Newman