

Heterochrony in the Act: The Migratory Politics of Time

Mieke Bal

Introduction

Video is the medium of our time, available to many, and put to many uses. It is also the medium of time; of time contrived, manipulated, and offered in different, multi-layered ways. It offers images moving in time – slow or fast, interrupting and integrating. Migration is the situation of our time. But it is also an experience of time; as multiple, heterogeneous. The time of haste and waiting, the time of movement and stagnation; the time of memory and of an unsettling, provisional present, with its pleasures and its violence.

Video and migratory life have, thus, a complex and sometimes confusing, challenging multi-temporality in common. Video is, arguably, eminently suitable to understand what this means – to feel it in our bodies. Through this medium, we can grasp, perceive, and experience traces of the lives of those who live among us, but of whom we know so little. The phenomenon I call multi-temporality; the experience of it, heterochrony.

I argue that the concept of heterochrony is indispensable for insight in the “micro-politics” of migratory culture, and that, therefore, it should be added to the toolbox of cultural analysis. To make this argument I follow two key arguments from the work of anthropologist Johannes Fabian. He repeatedly argues, firstly, that “culture” is not a situation, space, or state but a process of confrontation. Secondly, attempts to study cultures otherwise invariably rely on an “allochronic” approach that relegates others into a contradictory pastness and timelessness. Such an approach

denies the coevalness of the encounter that is the *conditio sine qua non* of any study of cultural alterity.¹

In line with this dual argument I take current migratory culture as key to understanding such a process of confrontation, since it is clearly based on coevalness as well as its spatial counterpart, co-location. But neither shared space nor shared time is homogeneous. Restricting my argument to time, I put forward the concept of heterochrony to foster insight into the state of migratory culture and its politics, and seek to demonstrate how it helps understanding video art related – however loosely – to the migratory.²

Video and migration are both anchored in the conceptual metaphor of movement – but a movement that cannot be taken for routine, “natural”, or realist. On the one hand, the moving image with its video-specific effects that multiplies and complicates, and then frames it; on the other, the moving people with the moving – including, emotionally – images they generate in the social landscape. In the following section I present three works that demonstrate the concept of heterochrony I wish to put forward. From the vantage point of these three works, here considered as “theoretical objects,” I

¹ For an expose of micro-politics, or “nano-politics” as Hernández calls it, see his contribution to this volume. Fabian forcefully proposes the concepts of allochrony and coevalness (1983). His later work continuously reframes these issues. I rely on his 1990 book for a demonstration of an alternative, performance-based approach, congenial to the exhibition discussed in this paper. His 1991 book usefully sums up the relation between a static concept of culture and the denial of coevalness. In 2001 the issue of temporality is brought to bear on the “-graphy” of ethnography and by implication of, my case here, videography.

² On the concepts of time in narrative theory, see my handbook on the subject (1997). On film analysis, Verstraten (2006) helpfully aligns himself with narrative theory. The handbook by Bordwell and Thompson (2004) is most widely used. On performance and performativity treated as neither identical nor entirely distinct, see Bal (2002)

will point out the forms of heterochrony and their political potential in a number of works from the exhibition 2MOVE.³

Performance and performativity help understand the conjunction between video and the experience – both of migrant and non-migrant subjects – of heterochrony that this concept foregrounds. One obvious realm of experience and aesthetics, where heterochrony is performed as relevant for both migratory culture and video, is memory. That is why I discuss memory's entangled relationship to both movements. In a final section I discuss heterochrony in the present, the here-and-now of migratory culture, its violent potential and the ethical possibilities to deal with it within the migratory culture of the present.

Videos of Temporalization

As soon as we consider the first work of my introductory trio, Roos Theuws' *Gaussian Blur*, we notice that time is a key player in this video. A kind of timelessness infuses the undeniable but exceedingly slowed-down movement. While the viewer is physically aware of the external temporality of his or her body – an awareness increased by the points of light that prick us with a very different pace – another temporality reaches out, interferes with ordinary haste, and insinuates slowness into the sensation of looking.⁴

³ 2MOVE: Migratory Aesthetics was first held in Murcia, Spain, in Sala Veronicas and Centro Páraga, 4-2 to 11-5 2007, then in Enkhuizen, Netherlands, Zuiderzeemuseum, 19-9-2007 to 13-1-2008. [This exhibition, which I co-curated with Miguel Ángel Hernández Navarro, opens its second instalment on Wednesday September 19th, 2007. Since all participants will have seen it when this paper is discussed I will not describe the works at length.]

⁴ *Gaussian Blur* and *Measure of Distance* were the two starting point of the exhibition. While the former is a self-reflective work on video and the latter on migration, putting them together turns the tables on these thematic divisions.

Far from being a video *on* migration, it is an abstract work, in several ways that all bear on the temporality I consider significant for migratory culture. Hence, while this work lacks thematic engagement migration, it nevertheless sets the tone of the inquiry of the exhibition. The first form of abstraction emerges from experimenting with movement on the edge; movement, that is, dressed down to its bare essence. Since one of the tools used (but by far not the only one) is extreme slow-down, the second abstraction resides in the experimentation with temporality that video as a medium allows. When we approach this work, heterochrony sets in as it confronts our routine temporality with the artificial one presented. The third comes from the uncontrollable figurations, the sensation of inadequacy of our routine templates and narrative fillers. The fourth is best characterized as an entirely new, sensate production of surface as skin. That the flickers of light seem blisters is no coincidence. They hurt; they touch us; they make contact, but not an easy, self-evident contact. The cuts from clip to clip, “behind” the skin of the video, are, significantly sharp, never mitigated by smoothing transitions. The flickering points of light as blisters are the skin of the visible, kinetic world. The work’s varied forms of abstraction harbour confrontation as its “natural” state.⁵

A second key work is Mona Hatoum’s *Measures of Distance*. This video, in contrast, is thematically devoted to migratory culture. It consists of still images overlaid by Arabic letters, a soundscape of the home in Beyrouth, and a voice-over of the artist reading the letters of her mother in English. The bi-directional but asymmetrical movement of migration is aesthetically elaborated. If we look back, “preposterously”, from the now, with Theuws, to this earlier work from 1988, we see how it, too, elaborates on video’s potential in ways that integrate the double movement of

⁵ I have developed elsewhere the concept of abstraction I am using here. (2007)

migration. In her mother's letters, there is a movement from "home" to the far-away place where the daughter ended up; the other movement takes place in the memories of the daughter. These memories are presented through the voice, the lettering, and the body in the shower. All these media deploy different temporalities, so that multi-temporality is installed within the work itself. Thus, the video "represents," "explains," or conveys the experience of heterochrony.

Hatoum's work harbours the most significant characteristics of video as a moving medium in the double sense. In this respect it is important that the movement is constructed, made, not recorded. Stills are blurred into one another. The movement, then, is only that of the surface, the screen, not of the figures "in" the image. Hatoum's work, layered like Theuws's, makes the surface of the screen opaque, and only slowly reveals the mother's body. First covered by the opaqueness of the shower curtain so that it looks abstract, then by water, and all through, by the Arabic lettering of her own words, the mother is not given over to the viewer without several layers of protection. The transition from one still to the next, the rapid Arabic spoken followed by a slower English voice, make time a multifaceted experience; a heterochrony. The delayed temporality of epistolary contact, moreover, is another layer that complicates visibility.

These two works respond to and complicate each other's relationship to migratoriness and time. A third work that can serve to introduce the issues at hand is Gonzalo Ballester's work *Mimoune*, a work that appears at first sight much more simple and straightforward than the other two. Like Hatoum's work, *Mimoune* is based on epistolary aesthetics. Instead of consisting of letters, however, it is a letter, a correspondence conducted by means of video. In this guise it demonstrates that the aesthetic dimension of the social phenomenon of the movement of people moves in two asymmetrical directions. On the one hand, the influence of migrants on the host countries' culture, enriching it with new

possibilities of experience; and on the other hand, the host countries' influence on the subjective relationships, primarily entertained through memory. The former is future-oriented, the latter anchored in the past. But memories are often permeated with longing, the unbridgeable gap of desire. And desire, in turn, is infused with futurity. These relationships of migrants to their homeland aggrandize the sense of pastness that furnishes the temporal sustenance of existing in the now striving for a future. This happens regardless of the question whether they have personal memories of that homeland or not; whether this homeland is imaginary or the product of "post-memory".⁶

These three works propose specific elements to flesh out the concept of heterochrony. *Gaussian Blur* emphatically slows down, offering a meditative viewing experience that counters both routine pace and narrative ("page-turning") haste. *Measures of Distance* offers a temporal cacophony of different paces within a single videographic space. This entices the viewer to juggle different temporalities at once. *Mimoune* stages the discrepancies in the gap between emission and reception, eliding the real time of slow epistolary traffic. Thus it, too, foregrounds the heterochrony inherent in video – the gap of the cut. These videos transform our experience of time – they temporalize.

Now Versus Narrative

Heterochrony, then, is a primary point of intersection between the videographic and the migratory. The super-impositions, tensions, and incongruous encounters of different temporalities alert us to the simple but oft-forgotten fact that time is not an objective phenomenon. A relentless clock and

⁶ Epistolary aesthetic has been put forward by Hamid Naficy in his discussion of "accented cinema." (2001) The term postmemory has been proposed by Marianne Hirsch (1992-3, esp. 8-9). Ernst van Alphen contests the appropriateness of the element "memory" in this term (2006).

the fixed schedules it prescribes regulate our lives. This makes other temporalities we also live almost invisible. This regulation based on calendars and clocks, on productivity measured in time, and capitalist governance is called time reckoning. It interferes with rhythms and durations that have personal impact on individual lives. In time, politics enters the private lives of all. People in situations of migrancy are often torn between haste and standstill. This simple experiential discrepancy is compounded by political and economic temporal multiplicities in the post-colonial era.⁷ Time, in all its internal differentiation, is usually, sometimes forcefully, subjected to one of its aspects only, that of chronology. This linear logic has a profound sensate effect on everyone, and more strongly so on those whose relationship to the local chrono-logic is oblique. (Toufic 2003, 31). Thus conceived, chronology is a stricture that looms over events and thus colors the experience of time with a dark shadow of inevitable inadequacy.

Imagine the everyday life of someone who is waiting for legal residency, or for much-needed employment permits, or for news from far-away family members. At the same time, the clock is ticking. That person needs to earn money to support his family “back home” and thus justify the tearing apart of his family, his life. This is, in short, the stage of *Mimouné*. In such situations, the hectic rhythm of social and economic life, always too fast, contrasts sharply with the time of waiting, always too slow. Although temporal discrepancies and disturbed rhythms occur in all human lives, it is easy to realize that multi-temporality is specifically tangible in the life of someone who is permanently, as the saying goes, on the move.

Heterochrony is more than subjective experience, however. It contributes to the temporal texture of our cultural

⁷ For a comprehensive presentation of issues of temporality in anthropology, see Munn (1992) and, more detailed but more limited in scope, Gel (1992).

world and thus, our understanding and experiencing it is a (nano-)political necessity. Gaussian Blur captures the profound and physical sensation of a multi-temporality that entails the experience of heterochrony in its bare essence. There is a relentlessness about the slowness, an insistence on the ongoing quality of time, precisely due to the almost unbearably slow pace. The storm-riddled tree branches, a dark leaf falling on a child, become more threatening as a result; the human figures, the horse, detach themselves through this slow movement from the still impressionist idyll. They move infinitely slowly, yet infinitely faster than their painted counterparts, the visual memory that infuses them. Meanwhile, the flickering of points of light keeps us aware of the fleeting speed of time “outside” these slow movements. The time of the surface is disjunctive from the time of the images it covers.

Mimoune, in contrast, appears set in real time. This work is based on a very simple fact. It is a postcard – made video – with a second card sent in response. As in all epistolary traffic, between sending and delivery a time gap occurs. This gap is constitutive of writing, with all its political and juridical consequences. At the same time, it is a profoundly personal experience. This makes it so poignant, for the viewer, to see the senders and receivers alternate more rapidly than the reality would allow. We see Mimoune sitting down and saying hello, then immediately we see his wife, children, and other relatives watching and reciprocating the greeting. It all looks so simple, so normal, yet it is impossible. Time, its elision, lies at the heart of fiction – the fiction that is truer than truth. ⁸

The simple aesthetic that this work mobilizes makes that fictionality look deceptively real. In stark distinction from

⁸ The plot of the biblical Book of Esther is largely based on this motive of epistolary delay. See Bal (1991). The temporal discrepancies of writing are, of course, most forcefully explained by Derrida (1967).

the aesthetic of both *Gaussian Blur* and *Measures of Distance*, the look of the images recalls home video. Far from being a simple aesthetic, this look creates a surface that sometimes evokes an uncertainty of looking – wavering between its possible inappropriateness and its necessity. We see people who long to be together, yet seem to have little to say; a heart full, probably, but not enough time to say it. Groping for words to utter, they slow down the event of speaking. Pressured to speak, however, they also speak before they find the words. Time is entirely messed up.

In other video works, too, double or multiple temporalities are the motor of a heterochronous viewing experience. While Ballester overlays time frames separated by migration, then closes the gaps between them, using video editing as his tool, Gary Ward's installation *Inflection* gives shape to heterochrony as a sense of stagnation through circularity. Usually, circularity, or circular rhythm, is opposed to the relentless linearity of evolutionist culture. (e.g. Kristeva 1986) But, as Nancy Munn (1992: 101) and others have pointed out, circularity is not quite the opposite of linearity; each repetition necessarily occurs later than previous ones. Both the circularity-in-linearity of time and the loop that is constitutive of exhibitionary video are the principles of his installation. Circularity is embodied in the loop. In Ward's double reflection, with two earlier works, *8Till8* and *Kofi Cleaning*, installed at a 90° angle, time is (fictitiously) presented as circular. One wing of the installation is a self-portrait, the other an allo-portrait – a portrait where self meets other.⁹

In the self-portrait *8Till8* the spinning of the washing machine in the eye of which the artist sees himself distorted, proclaims the circularity in which people can be caught. The machine is the maddening clock that goes round and round and doesn't let go of the subject caught up in its wheels.

⁹ I have used the term allo-portrait with a slightly different inflection elsewhere (2003).

Ward's face is distorted and mangled by the turns. This turning can be seen as a critique of capitalist time. A quiet voice speaks of climbing mountains in search of confidence and security ("you trust the rope"). The rhythmic contrast between the turning machine and the voice installs multi-temporality in the psyche of the work. The mountain climbing thus becomes a "little resistance."¹⁰

Then, when the viewer looks to the other screen, in Kofi Cleaning that circularity becomes one of labour, and the pace, of boredom. Slowly moving around the wet mop that cleans the floor, Kofi is both invisible and an indispensable condition for life in the building to continue as usual. The pace of each of the two loops is different, as if they were slightly out of sync. At the same time these two portraits need and sustain each other. Their simultaneous display instates a different multi-temporality, a psycho-social one not within but between the two wings of this diptych. Together, they explore the irruption of otherness within the self and between self and other.

This irruption is visible both within 8Till8 and in that self-reflexive work's encounter with Kofi Cleaning, which, exhibited at a straight angle from it, literally touches it. It is between the two screens that otherness irrupts. Hence, there are three, not two time frames, each with a different rhythm: the self-portrait with the wildly turning door of the launderette; the mop of the slowly cleaning Kofi, turning around in circles as does his life; and the time of the two videos joint together, out of sync yet embracing each other in a silent dance. This joined and out of sync quality turns the encounter with otherness into an everyday moment of migratory culture. In Ward's loops, the migratory erupts to stipulate that one plus one makes more – a world.

¹⁰ For an important discussion of capitalist time and alternatives, see Casarino (2003). I owe the term "little resistance" to Hernández' catalogue essay to the exhibition.

Like Mimoune, William Kentridge's *Shadow Procession* appears temporally straightforward, yet harbours great complexity. Cut-out silhouettes march from left to right across the screen, to the tune of merry street music. Two temporalities are merged, yet inscribe opposite moods in the viewing experience. First the haunting street music entices cheerfulness; then by the relentlessly ongoing procession, including absurd figures, becomes an unsettling display of unsettledness. The rhythm of the figures' movements is unreal in its regularity. This is yet another way of foregrounding and de-naturalizing time to political effect. Implicit in this heterochrony is the double historical reference to two distinct, early forms of political art, Brecht's anti-empathic theatre, and Goya's ambivalently dark, yet often comical drawings. Depicting horror, the awkward poses of his figures recognizable in Kentridge's, produces an openness and ambivalence of mood that "democratizes" affect. The theatre as play(ful) and as public ritual, and the still image as record, merge in this work.

The paradoxes of these artists' works raise the issue of time in exemplary fashion. Time made so dense, contradictory, and almost un-linear first sharpens, then overcomes the opposition between "still" and "moving" images. Hatoum's video consists of still images, only made to look moving by means of fades. Theuws's work also exemplifies this overcoming, by means of a slowness that all but cancels the movement. The importance resides in the affective impact of the resulting slow-down. For, through this, it also overcomes the gap between an object and its affective charge, in other words, between the object perceived at a distance and the viewer whose act of viewing affects her, below consciousness. That is Gaussian Blur's proposal for an aesthetic. Among the consequences of this paradoxical "state" is a complex relationship, not only with representation and figuration – the work with the human form – but also with another aspect of "human nature", the one of existing in time.

The aesthetic and the migratory intersect at these different aspects of temporality: heterogeneous time, slowdown, the past cut off from the present, and the need for active acts of looking in actuality – as Attridge would have it, “in the event” (2004). The exhibition has the ambition to draw viewers into the heterochrony of video and the migratory. This is where it can gain actuality – not or not only, political actuality, but aesthetic, social and semiotic actuality as well. Actuality is the experience of the now taken out of its drabness. Actuality can come across as a moment of shock, as in some frames in Ursula Biemann’s video essay *Remote Sensing* where the drabness of existence seems to suddenly come to life. This is an effect of the temporal discrepancy between the times of the past and the present, when our acts of viewing become, suddenly, acts of a different nature than just that of routine looking in a continuum.

Something happens that links the violence of such moments, the disappearance of linear time itself, to us, now. It is a mobilization of actuality as a temporal unit, an experience, and a political urgency. Attention and actuality together begin to approach the kind of temporality that is at stake in Biemann’s ongoing search for an effective, newly conceived political art through temporal and spatial foreshortening. Actuality sometimes pricks us suddenly, sometimes pops out of its dreariness, stretched out as if after sleep. Representational third-person narrative as a readerly attitude is no longer possible here. Biemann’s sequences of dramatically different shots preclude that. Her film relentlessly moves from global perspectives from above to the horizontality of fast-riding trains to unsettling proximity of people in the drab streets in the night.

Biemann’s work foregrounds the anti-narrative thrust of heterochrony. Narrative strives to an end – a word that intimates both death and goal – and its suspension or disruption constituted the politics of time of the avant-garde. (Osborne 1995) Biemann’s work surely qualifies for avant-

garde status in this sense. More importantly, on the basis of her video we can also see that the migratory of contemporary culture – its de-familiarizing multi-temporality, its suspension of narrative linearity – is itself infused with such an avant-garde “politics of time.”

Remote Sensing exemplifies a genre that mediates between documentary and narrative fiction. Her chosen genre, the video essay, is particularly apt to propose visions of migratory culture that neither of the two traditional genres can capture quite so effectively. She sees the video essay as falling between institutional contexts:

For a documentary, they are seen as too experimental, self-reflexive and subjective, and for an art video they stand out for being socially involved or explicitly political (2003, 8).

Temporality is, again, the issue. Biemann aptly sums up the positive features of the genre in relation to its literary counterpart:

The essay has always distinguished itself by a non-linear and non-logical movement of thought that draws on many different sources of knowledge (2003, 9).

This formulation – non-linear, non-logical – resonates with the notion of multi-temporality that informs heterochrony. In this sense, the video essay, rather than being marginal, can be seen as central to the concept of this exhibition. When, a bit later, Biemann characterizes the video essay’s aesthetic as “more dissociative, multi-perspective and hypertextual in the structuring of images and sounds” (2003, 9) this is as good a characterization as any of the work(ing)s of 2MOVE as a whole. The genre of the video essay is both subjective and speaks from “placelessness” (2003, 10); it displays the traces of mediation and the processes of perception, in and through temporalities that allow for heterogeneity.

Heterochrony can be seen as a form of foreshortening – temporally, not spatially. Foreshortened time is distorted – made wider or thicker – and condensed. It thus comes forward

to touch the viewer, so that we experience the almost tangible push of time. It also challenges the ontological temporal cut made between past and present. In terms of grammar, time becomes what French linguist Benveniste called “discourse” (as opposed to “story”). It is expressed in tenses and verbs. Tenses that connect the past to the present, as opposed to ones that separate the two moments. And verb forms of the first and second person between which speech emerges, rather than in those of the third person who is being spoken about. The viewer is thus drawn into the work, because, as the second person to which it speaks, she must in turn, following the example of Mimoune and his family, take on the exchangeable role of first person.

With foreshortened time, this also happens between the viewer’s present and the past that the work so precariously holds. Thus, video effectuates the visualization of duration, as can be sensed in works that are both time-specific and time-dependent, in terms of the works themselves, of the past they carry, and of their relationship to the viewer. This time-specificity raises a question that is crucial to video in installation: that of the meaning and performativity of actuality.

Actuality – the actuality of viewing, the actuality of the transformations of migratory culture – is the arena in which this heterochronous aesthetic works. It is the “now-time”, of the viewer, the existence and significance of which the latter is hardly aware. Each moment of viewing takes one such instant – between the ticks of the watch, a dark moment between the flashes of ordinary life (Kubler 1962, 17) – and captures it, in an image, a frame, a slowed-down or sped-up sequence, where it then lingers. Thus the art fights the standard narrative of the end, and the anonymity as well as the ephemerality of actuality. This is how actuality makes time for memory.

Memory and Forgetting in Now-Time

For, if heterochrony disrupts the traditional linear narratives onto which routine responses and images are grafted, it offers temporal shelter to memories. And memories are themselves heterogeneous, multi-sensate. The most important and perhaps counter-intuitive thing to realize about memory is that it takes place in the present. Memory is not a passive recall, a kind of invasion of the mind by the past. It is neither passive nor past-based. People perform *acts* of memory, and they do so in their present moment. Without memory there can be no liveable present. Without a position in the present one cannot “have” – better: perform – memories. In times of political and social hardship in the present, acts of memory become both indispensable for psychic survival and a comforting allure of a privacy one can fall back on. And because memories are acts, they can be performative in the agential sense of speech-act theory.¹¹

Video can serve as a tool to bridge the gap between the illusion of privacy and the need for public recognition of the importance of the memories of others. The fleeting instants of actuality within which someone who is subject to the chrono-logic of Western temporality lives, do not offer sufficient time to harbour the necessary memory acts. Here lies another relevance of the heterochronous variability of video that contributes to our awareness of that lack, and point up a way of remedying it. The video works fill actuality's voids, or dead moments, stretching their space to *make time* for a remembrance of the past now lost but which is, often violently, present in actuality, irrupting when it is least desired.

Migratory experience exemplifies the presence of the past within the present. It is what rhythmically defines the

¹¹ For the various consequences of this view of memory, see the essays in Bal, Crewe and Spitzer (1999).

letters – written, read – of the mother in *Measures of Distance*. Time is foreshortened to the extent that it is distorted, so as to stagger back from the black hole of linearity. Walid Raad's *Hostage* struggles and plays with this foreshortening, while also exploiting it to poke fun at the television-fed viewer's confidence in news media and its duration of the sound bite. The artist presents this work as a deadpan documentary project while, in the same presentation, he uses words that indicate fiction. (Raad 2003, 45)

The narrative act of Raad's work is double. Memory-based, it does provide information. But are these facts? Taking away the trust in the facts – a trust that is, in spite of all ideology critique, still rampant – the artist performs an act of memory that is, *because* of its documentary status, inherently distorted, fictionalized. Thus, he questions the terms on which "facts" can be made visible, and thereby precludes the escapism of the belief in truth. War, violence, hostage-taking, and other atrocities committed in the world, and in Lebanon's war scenes in particular, cannot be distanced – neither in time nor in space – as long as such distancing comes with the documentation of the truth. The figure taken hostage and held captive during many years tells the viewer about it in front of a cloth that looks like a film screen but then, improvised, sloppy, and too small; a Hollywood unmasked. That makeshift screen is also an interface between cinema and the genre of videotaped confession, as well as of martyrs' last speeches – notoriously hard to date, hence, time. But all the tricks that infuse this video with allusions to the different temporalities of media culture still keep the "contemporary history of Lebanon" present and actual, including the event from the past it "tells." In view of Summer 2006, the work can even be called prophetic. This is how history catches up with its memories to become now-time. Fiction is deployed, then, to propose prophetic memory as a tool for political action.

In terms of heterochrony, *Hostage* uses its disturbing merging of fact and fiction to make the following point.

Foreshortening remains an illusion, but one whose deception flaunts itself. Foreshortened time is both irresistible and disenchantingly unreal. At no time does the foreshortened duration offer us a bridge to the past, to the other (life), yet it makes time so sticky that it feels as though we are touched by the past. We cannot suffer with the displaced among us or inhabit their longings. Sympathy, compassion, even identification, do nothing to reduce the unspeakable traces of what is buried in another time. But what we can do is remember-with.

In *Felix in Exile*, one of the Kentridge's most famous animations, the tool to achieve heterochrony is the trace. A hyperbolic focus on the trace makes a point concerning migratory politics as it is temporally defined. It does so in three ways: through a slowness that competes with historical time; through manual labour in solidarity with workers; and through inscription comparable to the traces left by the suffering that pushes people away from their homes. Kentridge makes his films out of large-scale drawings in charcoal and pastel. Each drawing contains a single scene. He photographs it, and then alters it, erasing and redrawing the scene. After a while the sheet becomes a palimpsest of its many earlier stages. This, of course, can be read as a metaphor of memory, but it is much more than that. It is the result of labour – a labour of love, or of solidarity; of hope, of making as building. Like Theuws, who painstakingly imitates the easily accomplished video effect called Gaussian blur without using it, Kentridge also uses the model of a much easier mode of achieving the effect, here, of animation. Instead of many drawings leading to one film, a single drawing slowly emerges as a film out of many photographs, before it is transferred on video.¹²

¹² Kentridge's technique is extensively described by Boris (2001), a useful essay to understand the meaning of the acts of memory the artist performs.

This reversal is a *matter* of time – a materialization of time. Thus, the labour-intensive method becomes homage paid, by means of a humble aesthetic, to the subject that emerges ever so slowly. Accompanied by haunting music by Philip Miller and Motsumi Makhene, the character recurring from the artist's earlier films is alone in a hotel room pouring over the drawings made by Nandi, an African woman. These drawings represent – or rather, explore and remember – the violence committed to South-Africa – the land and the people. The drawings that float through Felix's field of vision are of the devastated landscape of mining and massacre. The land itself bears the traces of its violent history. Nandi's drawings result from her activities surveying the land, watching bleeding bodies. When Felix looks into the shaving mirror, he sees Nandi as if at the other end of a telescope. Close proximity and cosmic distance are joined in an unbreakable bond. When Nandi is shot and melts into the landscape like the subjects she was drawing, Felix's hotel room is flooded with blue water, of tears, of animation itself, of the possibility of new life. When Felix is almost flooded by the water (of his own tears?) he almost merges in the history whose traces the artist and his African-female counterpart are insistently keeping alive.

Traces, then, are more than leftovers of the past. They are the stuff of this work; they *are* the work. Temporally speaking, they bind the past to the present and are thus multi-temporal by definition. Traces on Kentridge's drawing, which transforms itself without erasing its past. Traces on the land scarred by the mining and the digging of graves. Traces of the African woman's drawings, of her drawing the traces. The brutality of the racist regime cannot be erased, these indelible traces on the palimpsestic images suggest. Forgetting, necessary as it sometimes is, must be paired with acts of remembrance. Drawing is such an act. Drawing traces is a manner, a method, of animating history and the memory of it in the present. And if the single sheets that bear the charcoal

traces of their earlier appearance also present layers of landscape and layers of history, this means that both time and space must be kept alive in the present.

But heterochrony has more layers than this memory-complex. While erasing the past is neither possible nor acceptable, the very mode of setting the images *in motion* in both *Felix* and *Shadow* also intimates the changeability of space, of history, and of the landscape in now-time. The procession of the latter has neither beginning nor end; the slice of time that moves on and on also refuses to yield to the pressure of a narrative of closure. In *Felix*, Kentridge's acts of drawing foreground the movement that is so essential for video as well as for migratory existence. *Felix* demonstrates that space, while bearing the traces of its past, can be transformed. The work constantly produces transformations, from drawings into landscape, from one figure into the other, from bodies to the ground in which they disappear. This is how this artist makes actuality – the time for memory in the present.

Temporalizing Politics

In the exhibition, an event that is by definition situated in the present, the participation of these works harks back to the movements, slow or fast, heterochronic, that underlie the other works in whose proximity they are installed, and whose political force they help sustain. I understand the ensemble and installation of the video works here not within an art-historical movement – within the story of video's evolution – but as a moment, a slow-down, of visual politics, anchored in philosophy. This exhibition deploys heterochrony to question the ontological distinctions that define fiction as distinct from political reality. This is why Ballester's erasures of the temporal gaps of epistolary traffic is a way of making fiction, on the basis of a profoundly political reality.

Raad's work questions the possibility of media to even be "in touch" – in the actuality – with reality. His work

exemplifies a crucial ambivalence that defines political art today. It proposes how narrative as the carrier of preconceptions can yield to a new narrative anchored in heterochronous actuality. This attitude allows the work to tell the story and, at the same time, identify its constructedness. It is in his acts of undermining the (classical) truth status of his character's testimony that he offers his own "touch" with reality – the reality of media as mediation and fabrication. One ground where the truth status of media reporting flounders is language. Bachar translates his own discourse into an English that does not quite match the Arabic, then insists that it be read by a young female voice in the target language. When asked by his alter ego why the English does not match the Arabic he says: "I have nothing to say about the second part of your question" (2003, 38). Asked why he insists on a female reader, he answers with a comment on media:

A fascinating and revealing aspect of books written by the Americans [his fellow hostages] is that of the literary contributions of the hostages' girlfriends and wives . . . In many reviews of the books in the US popular press, I was surprised that critics have characterized the contributions of the wives as "odd" and "distracting" (2003, 40).

Questioning "from what" these accounts of the women distract, Bachar questions not only the struggle about who owns the truth of events, but beyond that issue, he expands the event itself. The women's experience of being excluded from the (political) event and the act of remembering it in writing, the interview intimates, is no less real than the captivity narrative Bachar characterizes as male.

Bachar's appearance and the female voice that speaks "for" him, over his voice, slightly belatedly, capture the heterochrony of this narrative. Temporal aspects of this order are discrepancy, belatedness, delayed focusing, vanishing and re-emergence, and performance; in short, a multi-faceted heterochrony. The resulting temporal foreshortening is a device of primary importance. This is what makes these works

political in a specific way without it being “about” migration – or “about” politics, for that matter – as theme. It is their timing that constitutes the politics. In different ways, the temporal foreshortening at work deploys the specificity of heterogeneous time in migratory culture. The artist is a witness able to make this multi-temporal, heterogeneous experience visible in a bodily manner.

A final example shows how memory acts can in and of themselves transform violence into political agency. Melvin Moti, in search of his ancestors who came from India to Surinam in the early twentieth century, turns the travelling shot of the landscape, the haunting song, the slow speeches and the old faces into tools for acts of remembrance with such political effect. Moti felt an urgency to make a connection to the past of his ancestors, a past about to be extinguished, even extinct, receding in oblivion as the elderly people were disappearing. He wished to acquire their memories as his heteropathic memories, which he needs to be who he is in the present. This is how *Stories from Surinam*, a collection of memories captured like butterflies, becomes itself an act of memory – such an image that can stop the relentless course of a time moving too fast. “It is only as an image, which flashes up in the moment of its cognizability, never to appear again, that the past can be apprehended” wrote Weigel (1996, 9), paraphrasing Benjamin (1968, 257).

As the provisional outcome of an ongoing search for the possibility of deploying time as a weapon against oblivion, the gap between the occurrence of the event and its remembrance is made visible. The event flares up for those same, but belated, hours in the present that the event had occupied in the past, and the memory could only effectively inscribe itself – in the culture whose memory it was – in the brief experience, in the shock of recognition of the passers-by or the visitors in the gallery who are witnessing it. Their acts of seeing constitute the visual event these works meant to effect.

This brings me back to Theuws's work, exemplary because abstract. Through the abstraction the work makes possible the emergence of forms or shapes within which the images of the past can be encapsulated. It hosts past images in now-form. Slow-down, in art, has political ambitions in itself. Beyond the everyday bombardments of fleeting images, art seems a suitable place for us to stop and invest the events from people's past they carry on their backs (Kentridge) or that resonate with the epistolary reminiscing of Hatoum's mother, with cultural duration. According to my interpretation of temporal foreshortening, Theuws's work thickens time to the extreme *without entirely freezing it*. This does not make the images still and available for contemplation. On the contrary, they are just barely, with difficulty, available for participation. Moti shows that need for time in now-images retrieved from the past.

Let me give an example of how this works. At the beginning of *Stories*, a hand-held shot of a decrepit building remains in the frame for quite a long time. During this shot, a haunting song sets in. This song, sung by an elderly voice, tells the story of the cruelties committed in the past the singer has presumably experienced. The shot is rather wobbly; not because it is poor camerawork, but because it is empathic camerawork: it moves on the rhythm of the song. This coordination of the image to the song foregrounds the sense of the present; singing by definition happens in the present, even if it tells a story from the past. The precariousness of the trans-generational passing on of what are memories for the singer and building blocks for his identity for the filmmaker is thus given shape in the interstices of the irreducible gap between the audio and the video.

The experience of belatedness Moti stages is, ultimately, the political arena – a migratory politics of temporality – in which these video works seek to transform the relationship to a past we cannot reverse, to a present in which we can work. It is the intersection of form and time as

the construction site of a politically effective affect toward which the deployment of the video imagination works. The interval that separates us from the past where the violence, exploitation, depletion occurred is the moment, the sub-moment, of actuality that is foreshortened. Not quite frozen, but slowed down below perceptible time – thus making now-time “sticky.” As a result we cannot ensconce ourselves in the ethical indifference of aesthetic contemplation defined in a misguided distortion of Kantian disinterestedness, for we are “touched” by that moment, now, even though we cannot appropriate it. But it does leave a remainder – if only we can hear it.¹³

For “every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably” (Benjamin 1969, 255). And that present, that here-now, is a corporeal time. We need the heteropathic memories, traces, and fictions that constitute the texture of the migratory culture we share, in order to live in an actuality saved from its dreariness.¹⁴

References

Attridge, Derek

2004 *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading (Literature in the Event)*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press

Bal, Mieke

1991 “Lots of Writing”. *Semeia* 54: 77-102 (reprinted in 1999 *Ruth and Esther: A Feminist Companion to the Bible (Second Series)*). Ed. Athalya Brenner, 212-38. Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press)

¹³ I borrow the term “remainder” from Lawrence Venuti. In three different uses of the term (1994; 1995; 1996) this author makes a fabulously productive, differentiated use of this concept.

¹⁴ I borrow the concept of heteropathic memory from Silverman (1996), a study that is, in its entirety, extremely relevant for our topic.

1997 *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*.
Toronto: The University of Toronto Press

2002 *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough
Guide*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press

2003 "Allo-Portraits". In *Mirror or Mask: Self-representation
in the Modern Age*. Eds. David Blostein and Pia Kleber, 11-
43. Berlin: VISTAS Verlag

Bal, Mieke, Jonathan Crewe, and Leo Spitzer, eds.

1999 *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*.
Hanover, NH/London: University Press of New England

Biemann, Ursula (ed.)

2003 *Stuff It: the Video Essay in the Digital Age*. Zürich:
Edition Voldemeer

Bordwell, David and Kristin Thompson

2004 *Film Art: An Introduction*. (7th ed.) New York etc.:
McGraw Hill

Boris, Staci

2001 "The Process of Change: Landscape, Memory,
Animation, and *Felix in Exile*". 29-28 in Kentridge

Casarino, Cesare

2003 "Time Matters: Marx, Negri, Agamben and the
Corporeal". *Strategies* 16 (2): 185-206

Derrida, Jacques

1967 *De la grammatologie*. Paris: Editions de Minuit
(English: *Of Grammatology*. Trans. and introduction Gayatri
Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University
Press, 1976)

Fabian, Johannes

1983 *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object*. New York: Columbia University Press

1990 *Power and Performance: Ethnographic Explorations Through Proverbial Wisdom and Theater in Shaba, Zaire*. Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press

1991 "Culture, Time, and the Object of Anthropology." *Time and the Work of Anthropology: Critical Essays 1971-1991*. Chur, Switzerland: Harwood (191-206)

2001 "Time, Narration, and the Exploration of Central Africa." *Anthropology with an Attitude: Critical Essays*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press (140-157)

Gel, Alfred

1992 *The Anthropology of Time: Cultural Constructions of Temporal Maps and Images*. Oxford: Berg

Hirsch, Marianne

1992-93 "Family Pictures: *Maus*, Mourning, and Postmemory". *Discourse* 15 (2): 3-29

Kentridge, William (ed.)

1995 *William Kentridge* (exhibition catalogue). Chicago/New York: Museum of Contemporary Art/New Museum of Contemporary Art

Kristeva, Julia

1986 "Women's Time." Trans. Alice Jardine and Harry Blake. In *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi, 188-213. New York: Columbia University Press

Kubler, George

1962 *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things*. New Haven: Yale University Press

Munn, Nancy D.

1992 "The Cultural Anthropology of Time: A Critical Essay." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 21: 93-123

Osborne, Peter

1995 *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde*.
London: Verso

Raad, Walid/The Atlas Group

2003 "Civilizationally, we do not dig holes to bury ourselves". 35-45 in Biemann

Silverman, Kaja

1996 *The Threshold of the Visible World*. New York:
Routledge

Toufic, Jalal

2003 *Vampires: An Uneasy Essay on the Undead in Film*.
Sausalito, CA: The Post-Apollo Press

Van Alphen, Ernst

2006 "Second-Generation Testimony, Transmission of Trauma, and Postmemory". *Poetics Today* 27 (2): 473-488

Venuti, Lawrence

1994 "Translation and the Formation of Cultural Identities". *Current Issues in Language and Society* 1: 214-15

1995 *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*.
London: Routledge

1996 "Translation, Philosophy, Materialism". *Radical Philosophy* 79: 24-34

Verstraten, Peter

2006 *Handbook Filmnarratologie*. Nijmegen: Vantilt.
(English translation forthcoming, Toronto University Press)

Weigel, Sigrid

1996 *Body- and Image-Space: Re-reading Walter Benjamin*.
Trans. Georgina Paul, with Rachel McNicholl and Jeremy
Gaines. New York and London: Routledge

