VIDEO, MIGRATION, AND HETERO-TEMPORALITY: THE LIMINALITY OF TIME

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Abstract

The threshold (*limen*) where encounter is about to take place can be considered and fleshed out in many different ways. In a cultural context where the visibility of difference skirts the dangers of xenophobia, racial thinking and ghettoisation, I seek out an aspect of migratory life that is not so obviously visible, yet the visibility of which could help the encounter to occur performatively. This aspect is time: a threshold of (inter-)cultural life. I approach this topic in terms of two forms of visibility: video and migration.

While the moving image and migration were both phenomena of substantial currency and effect during the twentieth-century, in the present moment it appears that the visibility of video and migration is increasingly enhanced, based respectively on the sheer volume and variety of populations on the move, and the pyramiding appeal and accessibility of video. In this article, I probe how video art can contribute to a better understanding of migratory culture through an analysis of selected video works. Conversely, I argue that migratory culture helps to engage with video art on a different, more socially engaged level than might be obvious, particularly, in terms of temporality.

I proceed in this oblique and dialogic manner because video, as an artistic medium can, arguably, provide an experiential understanding of what such a multi-temporality means. The phenomenon itself I refer to as *multi-temporality*; the experience of it, *heterochrony*. Liminal in art, in culture, and in migratory experience, heterochrony can become the existential experience marked by difference-within that enhances a cultural encounter that performs, rather than declaring "migratory culture" as the standard state of being in the world.

Introduction

In this article, I take the concept of liminality literally, as the event occurring on the *limen*, or threshold. This is not a linear transitional ritual, as ethnographer Arnold van Gennep (1960) and later the structuralist anthropologist Victor Turner (1969) had it. In my inflection of the concept, the limen is the boundary between inside and outside, not as a border, not a line, but a space where insiderness and outsiderness can be *negotiated*, transformed, and swapped. It is the threshold where encounter is about to take place.[1]

Such a concept of boundaries, and hence, also, of the threshold, fits in well with my area of interest which is migratory culture. This is not the culture of migrants but the culture shared by all people, regardless of how long they or their ancestors have been there and how long they stay. The concept of migratory culture draws attention to the migratoriness of all cultures, and specifically to the need to acknowledge the principled heterogeneous nature of culture. In a cultural context where the visibility of cultural and ethnic difference skirts the dangers of xenophobia, racial thinking, and

ghettoisation, I seek out an aspect of migratory life that is not so obviously visible, yet the visibility of which could help the encounter to occur performatively.[2]

By *encounter* I mean the event when belonging loses its meaning in favour of sharing. This happens in space – on the threshold – and in time – the time between events – which is liminal. Here, I focus on time. But for this spatio-temporal sharing to be negotiable, time itself, in all its thickness, duration, and experience, must be taken out of its unreflective neglect and brought into the limelight of the threshold. I begin such a reflection here, in relation to video art. I do not talk about South African art, of which I am ignorant. However, it seems clear to me that like most countries, South Africa is a migratory culture – a culture where older and newer, continuous and temporary settlements have always, and still, merge and mix. This migratory culture concerns all.

Figure 1: Gonzalo Ballester, still from *Mimoune*, 2006, video (Mimoune in frame), dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.

The sea as temporal threshold: heterotemporality

A striking example – with that obviousness of brilliance – is Gonzalo Ballester's video work *Mimoune* (2006) (Figure 1). This work appears, on first viewing, to be quite simple and straightforward. Mimoune, an immigrant *sin papeles* ("undocumented"), who is living in the south of Spain, enters the frame and begins to talk to his family in Morocco. In the next shot, which is of a different technical quality that fictionally suggests it was shot with an analogue camera, the viewer sees the family speak back to him.

Mimoune is about the threshold: the threshold is the sea. It is based on *epistolary* aesthetics (Nafici 2001). Instead of consisting of letters read and images added, however, it is itself a correspondence conducted by means of video. Video is an electronically processed moving image; an image of movement. Along with the mobile phone and the digital camera, today video is a widespread instrument of cultural practice. In particular, migrants frequently use it as a means to connect across great distances to family and friends back home thus supplementing their existence in movement with moving images of that existence. It functions in the way photographs used to do.

While the moving image and migration were both phenomena of substantial currency and effect during the twentieth-century, in the present moment it appears that the visibility of video and migration is increasingly enhanced, based, respectively, on the sheer volume and variety of populations on the move and the increasing appeal and accessibility of video. It seems useful, then, to see if it is possible to understand aspects of the one through the other. This would help to leave behind the moralising tendencies in discussions about migratory culture, as well as the illusion of artistic autonomy that balks at all "political" art – or conversely, the requirement that art should equal propaganda.

My view of migratory culture is primarily a positive one. On the one hand, migrants influence their host countries' cultures, enriching them with new possibilities of experience. The presence of migrants keeps a culture alive; it prevents it from becoming a suffocating monoculture. However, this is not to dismiss frustrations and losses on the side of migrants. For, on the other hand, their stay in their host countries influences the subjective relationships between migrants, their attachments and their situations with respect to their places of origin. The former influence is future-oriented; the latter anchored in the past, and primarily entertained through memory.

Memories are often permeated with longing, the unbridgeable gap of desire – in the video still shown in Figure 1, they are represented by the sea. And desire, in turn, is infused with futurality. Thus, memory skips over the present, the present as limen, as if exercising a cinematic cut of cosmic proportions. *Mimoune* is permeated with such temporal tensions that are shaped by images of longing. The sense of pastness, which is central to the relationships between migrants and their homelands, provides, in effect, the temporal sustenance for a life that entails at once existing in the now and striving for a future. Video is the medium of time; of time contrived, manipulated, and offered in different, multilayered ways. Time is "framed" – made to appear real but no longer indexically attached to the real time that it purportedly represents.

Like filmic cinema, video offers images moving in time – slow or fast, interrupting and integrating. Similarly, and again, in spite of its extensive impact throughout world history, as a cultural phenomenon, migration is an experience of *time*; 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, thus, have a common feature: both are characterised by a complex and sometimes confusing, challenging multitemporality. I am interested in how video art can contribute to a better understanding of migratory culture, especially in light of this multitemporality. Conversely, migratory culture can help viewers to engage with video art on a more socially engaged level, in terms of temporality as that which distinguishes people without them being aware of it. Video as an artistic medium can provide an experiential understanding of what such a multitemporality means.

Heterochrony is key to the micro-politics of migratory culture. In making this argument, I follow anthropologist Johannes Fabian (2001). He repeatedly argues that culture is not a situation, space, or state, but a process of confrontation. Otherwise conceptualised, attempts to study cultures invariably rely on an *allochronic* approach that relegates others into a contradictory pastness and timelessness. Such an approach denies the coevalness of the encounter between the native and the other; a coevalness which is the *conditio sine qua non* of any study of cultural difference, multiplicity, or alterity – in other words, of culture.

Clearly, current migratory culture is based on coevalness as well as its spatial counterpart, collocation. The threshold is the moment of coevalness and collocation; brief, fleeting, but essential. But neither shared space nor shared time is homogeneous. Limiting my argument to time, I put forward the concept of *heterochrony* to foster insight into the state of migratory culture and its politics, and in the following sections, demonstrate how such insight enhances the ability to understand video art that relates – however loosely – to the migratory.

Time is central because video and migration are both anchored in movement – but, this is a kind of movement that is not routine, "natural", nor realist. On the one hand, there is the moving image with its video-specific effects – of digital video, specifically in installation and other exhibitionary practices – that multiply, complicate, and then frame, time; on the other hand, there are moving people, with the moving – including, emotionally – images they generate in the temporality of the social landscape. The concept of heterochrony enhances an understanding of the double movement; the mutual illumination of the migratory and the videographic. Heterochrony in the present, in the here-and-now of migratory culture has a violent potential, but also offers possibilities for dealing with it ethically within the migratory culture of the present.

Figure 2: Roos Theuws, still from *Gaussian Blur*, 2005-2006, video, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.

Heterotemporality as abstraction: Gaussian Blur

To make the point of this mutual illumination I call on a work that is not, in any possible sense, "about" migration. Roos Theuws's *Gaussian Blur* (2005-2006) (Figure 2), has no explicit connection to migratory culture; yet, time is a key player in it. This work is an experimental video with a double-image stream, each stream moving at a slow, but different pace. The images are over-laid with points of flickering light – the points of which look like blisters – that make the under-lying images difficult to read. This layer of flickers is, literally, the skin of the video. Through the slowness of the video, the artist probes the question of whether the viewer is more deeply touched, and transformed, by image fragments that float in his/her subconscious than by more conscious responses. The underlying stream consists of images of idyllic rural landscapes, populated by animals, children, trees, barns, and water. Superimposed over these images is a layer of flickering points of light, which move faster than the underlying images, making the latter difficult to see and sometimes giving them an eerie, unsettling appearance.

A kind of timelessness infuses the video's undeniably slowed-down movement. Yet, time is at the heart of the slowness. The slowed-down movement makes vision difficult and demanding and the effort required to discern the images qualifies the viewer's participation, or performance, of looking. While the viewer is physically aware of the temporality of his or her physical body – an awareness augmented by the points of light that prick his or her consciousness with a very different pace to the underlying images – another temporality reaches out, interferes with ordinary haste, and insinuates slowness into the sensation of looking.

Far from being a video *on* migration, *Gaussian Blur* is an *abstract* work in several ways that all bear on the temporality I consider significant for migratory culture. However, it is not abstract in the common sense of de-contextualisation and universalisation; of formlessness and transcendence. The work's first form of abstraction

emerges from its *experimentation with movement* dressed down to its bare essence. This is abstraction as the presentation of what is barely visible; of looking around the corner of routine vision. Since one of the tools used is an extreme retardation of the flow of images, the work's second form of abstraction resides in its experimentation with *temporality*. When approaching this work, heterochrony sets in as the artificial reality presented confronts one's routine temporality.

The third form of abstraction comes from the work's *uncontrollable figurations* – the sense that routine templates and narrative fillers are inadequate in their capacity to enable viewers to account for or engage with what they are seeing. The fourth form of abstraction is best characterised as an entirely new, sensate production of surface as skin. The surface of the second layer of images, in its very abstraction, anthropomorphises the video. That the flickers of light look like blisters is no coincidence. They hurt; they touch; they make contact, but not an easy, self-evident contact. Surface as limen; contact zone and site of transformation; skin not as colour but as common ground. The political impact of this experimental film is obvious, if only from that final form of abstraction.

Vision made difficult; a slowed down temporality; uncontrollable, non-narrative figuration; and a sense of a new, as yet unseen, skin: these are four forms of abstraction that provide access into the migratory aspect of culture. Challenging viewers to see beyond routine, the artist uses this work as a means of mobilising abstraction in terms that can suitably address the confrontational nature of migratory culture. The cuts from clip to clip are significantly abrupt. The flickering points of light read as blisters on the skin of the visible, kinetic world, the heterogeneity of which is highlighted each of the two image streams. The work's varied forms of abstraction harbour confrontation as abstraction's "natural" state.

Distancing as political agency

A third key work is Mona Hatoum's *Measures of Distance* (1988) (Figure 3). This video, in contrast to Theuws's work and in line with Ballester's, is thematically devoted to migratory culture. But, in it the artist makes a point regarding the heterotemporality of artistic agency. It consists of still images, photographs of the artist's mother, that are over-layered by Arabic letters, a soundscape of the artist's home in Beirut and a voice-over of the artist reading, in English, letters that her mother sent to her – letters that were written and sent following their separation. The bidirectional but asymmetrical movement of migration is aesthetically articulated. In this work, as in *Gaussian Blur*, the artist elaborates on video's potential in ways that integrate the double movement of migration.

The mother's letters reflect a movement from home to the far-away place where the daughter has ended up. The other movement takes place in the memories of the daughter, which are set in Beirut. These memories are presented in layers; through the voices, the lettering, and through images of Hatoum's mother's body in the shower. The recorded Arabic voices from home speak at a rapid clip; the reading in English is slow and delayed; the lettering is permanent, and the body, rather than moving, morphs. All these media deploy different temporalities. Thus, through the video Hatoum represents, explains, generates, or conveys the experience of heterochrony.

Like Theuws, in her work, Hatoum articulates video's most significant characteristics as a moving medium in the triple sense – the moving image, the movement of people, and the emotionally moving quality of the resulting situation. These three measures of distance are the merging of the still photographs, the mesh of

Figure 3: Mona Hatoum, still from *Measures of Distance*, 1988, video, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.

the Arabic writing overlapping the image that turns the mother into a sometimes-abstract image, and the Arabic lettering that clashes with the delayed, English, Arabic-accented voice.

This is not a report on migration but a testimony of migratoriness. In this respect it is important that the movement is constructed and made, not recorded. Still photographs are blurred into one another. The movement, then, is only that of the surface, the screen, the transitions or liminal moments; not of the figures in the image. In *Measures of Distance*, which, like Theuws's video, is layered, Hatoum makes the surface of the screen opaque, and only gradually reveals the mother's body. First covered by the opaqueness of the Arabic letters so that it looks abstract, then by water, and, throughout, by the Arabic lettering of the mother's words, the mother's body is not given over to the viewer without several layers of protection.

Here too, heterotemporality is the structure of both the video and the political situation it alludes to, albeit only obliquely. Through the transitions from one still image to the next and the rapidly spoken Arabic followed by a slower and delayed English voice, Hatoum makes time into a multifaceted experience; a heterochrony. Moreover, the delayed temporality of epistolary contact is another layer that complicates visibility.

Together, these three works offer specific elements that may flesh out the concept of heterochrony. In *Mimoune*, the artist stages the discrepancies in the gap between emission and reception, eliding the real, slow time of epistolary traffic. Thus, he emphasises the heterochrony inherent in video – the gap of the cut – and, or as an image of, the cut in migration – the gap of distance. In *Gaussian Blur*, visible movement is emphatically slowed down, offering a meditative viewing experience that counters both routine pace and narrative (page-turning) haste. Moreover, the difficulty of seeing the underlying images heightens the viewer's visual engagement; the desire to see who and what is there. In *Measures of Distance* Hatoum presents a temporal cacophony of different paces within a single videographic space. This entices the viewer to juggle different temporalities. Thus, in all three videos, the viewer's experience of time is transformed.

The point of heterotemporality

Heterochrony, then, is a primary point of intersection between the videographic and the migratory. I suggest it is in that temporality that liminality resides. How does that work? The superimpositions, tensions, and incongruous encounters between different temporalities alert the viewer to the simple but oft-forgotten fact that time is not an objective phenomenon. A relentless clock and the fixed schedules it prescribes, regulates lives. This makes other lived temporalities 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. Through time, politics steps over the threshold, and enters private lives.

Consequently, video artists that solicit the performance of heterochrony by the viewer, (who is compelled to such performance by the multitemporal works on display), might produce new – albeit precarious and provisional – communities along experiential lines. If and when this happens, the works can be said to have performative force, in the precise sense of John Langshaw Austin's theory of speech acts (1975; for an excellent discussion, see Felman 1983).

My thesis here is that the genesis of such performativity lies in the most liminal of political issues, the least visible, and the hardest to grasp and address: the politics of time. 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 postcolonial era. Time, in spite of all its internal differentiation, is usually, sometimes forcefully, relegated to one aspect only – that of the chronology of divisible units. This linear logic has a profound sensate effect on most people and more strongly so on those whose relationship to the local chrono-logic is oblique. Thus conceived, chronology is a stricture that looms over events and colours 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, as they say, the clock is ticking. That person needs to earn money to support his or her family back home and therefore justify the tearing apart of his or her family, his or her life. This is the stage on which *Mimoune* is set. 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 realise that heterochrony is specifically tangible in the life of someone

who is in one way or another, as the saying goes, on the move. Seen in this light, the deceptively smooth and fast editing of *Mimoune* constitutes a series of barely perceptible liminal instants.

Heterochrony is more than subjective experience, however. As it contributes to the temporal texture of a cultural world, an ability to understand and consciously experience it is a political necessity. Living heterochrony means that lives are performed within it. Precisely because *Gaussian Blur* is a formally experimental work comprising multiple levels of abstraction, the artist captures the profound and physical sensation of a multitemporality that entails the experience of heterochrony in its bare essence, outside of the distractions of a captivating narrative. There is a relentlessness to the slowness, an insistence on the ongoing quality of time that stems directly from the almost unbearably slow pace. Due to this slowness, images such as the storm-riddled tree branches or a dark leaf falling on a child become more threatening; through this slow movement, the human figures and the horse become detached from the still, impressionistic atmosphere of the paintings.[3]

The images move infinitely slowly, yet infinitely faster than their painted counterparts retained in the viewer's visual memory. Meanwhile, the flickering of points of light on the outer layer or "skin" of the video, which make the underlying images hard to see and dreamlike, keep the viewer aware of the fleeting speed of time "outside" the slow unfolding of movement. Reminiscent of the flicker in early cinematic images, as well as of the video effect called "Gaussian blur" that is evoked but not used, the faster speed of the flow of the surface images is disjunctive in relation to the slower speed of the underlying images.

Mimoune, in contrast, appears to be set in real time. This work is based on a simple idea – a fiction. It is a postcard – made video – with a second card sent in response. As with all epistolary traffic, there is a time gap between sending and delivery. This gap is constitutive of writing, as has been demonstrated to western culture in the biblical *Book of Esther* (Bal 1991). At the same time, this gap is a profoundly personal experience. In this light, seeing the interchange between senders and receivers occurring more rapidly than reality allows for might be a poignant experience for the viewer. Mimoune is shown sitting down and saying hello and, in the next instant, the viewer sees 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 reality. The simple aesthetic that this work mobilises makes that fictionality look deceptively real. In stark distinction from the sophisticated aesthetics of both *Gaussian Blur* and *Measures of Distance*, the look of the images in *Mimoune* evokes the amateur qualities of the home video in two distinct ways. The images in Spain have the clarity of digital video, but the images of Mimoune barely fit into the frame. He records a video message under conditions of confinement. His visual confinement in the space of the frame can be read as a metaphor for his temporal confinement in heterochrony. In contrast, the images shot in Morocco have the grainy quality of analogue transferred to digital. Here the frame is larger and the homemade quality derives not from narrow framing but an uncertain engagement with the camera. The relatives are doing their best to perform the script.

Far from being a simple aesthetic, this variegated home video look creates a surface that sometimes evokes an uncertainty of looking – a look that wavers between

its possible inappropriateness, even voyeurism, and its necessity because it acknowledges the tearing apart of the family through migration. It is as if the surface affects the performance: people who long to be together, yet seem to have little to say are shown; people whose hearts are probably full but who lack the time to express what is in them. Groping for words, they slow down the event of speaking. Pressured to speak, however, they also speak before they find the right words. And the gaps are elided but not hidden. Time is completely messed up.

What I learn from these artworks fits but also exceeds the theoretical reflections on the subject of temporality. In cultural studies, time's circularity or circular movement is opposed to the relentless linearity of evolutionist culture (see, for example, Kristeva 1986). Yet, as Nancy Munn (1992:101) and others point out, circularity is not exactly the opposite of linearity; each repetition necessarily occurs later than the previous one. Both the circularity-in-linearity of time and the loop that is the constitutive form of exhibitionary video are principles informing many video works in the exhibition *2MOVE*, where these three works were shown, together with thirty other video works. All works in the exhibition addressed the issue of movement in migration and video, and the mobility they have in common, albeit in different ways. Owing to the exhibition format alone, all works were looped. This is a key point: circularity is embodied in the video loop.[4]

The paradoxes in these artists' works raise the issue of time in exemplary fashion. Time made so dense, contradictory, and almost nonlinear, first sharpens, and then overcomes the opposition between still and moving images. Hence the relevance of Hatoum's video which consists of still images made to look as if they are moving only by means of fades. Through the use of this feature in *Measures of Distance*, Hatoum also makes a point I develop elsewhere (forthcoming), namely that (figurative) images are moving by definition, whether or not they pertain to what is called "the moving image".[5]

In her video, Theuws, in turn, also exemplifies this overcoming by effecting a slowness that all but cancels movement. The importance of this slowing-down resides in its affective impact. Through this slowed-down motion, the artist is able to overcome 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 him or her subconsciously. That is how Theuws, in *Gaussian Blur*, puts forward a proposal for an affective aesthetic. Among the consequences of this paradoxical state is a complex relationship, not with representation and figuration – the work with the human form – but with another aspect of human nature, namely that of existing in time.

Video 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, or as Derek Attridge (2004) would have it, 'in the event'. This is where the threshold or limen can help video gain actuality – not, or not only, political actuality, but also aesthetic, social, and semiotic actuality. The kind of actuality thus foregrounded is the experience of the now, removed from its mundane unnoticibility. Actuality can come across as a moment of shock. This is an effect of the temporal discrepancy between the past and the present, when acts of viewing become, suddenly, acts of a different nature to those of routine looking in a continuum. Something happens that links the violence of such moments, the demise of linear time itself, to the viewer, now. Hence, the mobilisation of actuality is a temporal unit, an experience and a political urgency.

Foreshortening: the visibility of heterogeneous time

Heterochrony can be seen as a form of *foreshortening*. Compare this to its better-known spatial counterpart in painting, where figuration oriented to the picture plane is expressed by a broadening and shortening of the figure. This can be seen, for example, in Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio's *Supper at Emmaus* (1601) (National Gallery, London), where Christ's arm is strongly foreshortened. Similarly, foreshortened time is distorted – made wider or thicker – and condensed. It thus comes forward to affect the viewer so that she might experience the almost tangible push of time. It also challenges the ontological temporal cut between past and present. In terms of grammar, time becomes what the French linguist Émile Benveniste (1971) calls *discourse* (as opposed to story).

In Benveniste's terminology, discourse manifests itself in tenses that connect the past to the present, as opposed to ones that separate the two, and in a verb, discourse forms in the first and second person between which speech emerges, rather than in the third person which refers to someone that is being spoken about. The viewer is thus drawn into the work. As the second person who is being addressed, the viewer, in turn, following the example of Mimoune and his family, must take on the exchangeable role of first person. But in order to do this, one must suspend disbelief in the cut's capacity to link rather than sever. This is how fiction becomes a reality-shaping tool.[6]

In different ways, the artists whose works are discussed here all deploy multitemporality to draw viewers into a heterochronic experience that prepares them for an understanding of, and engagement with the migratory culture that surrounds them, and in which, unwittingly or not, they take part. With foreshortened time specifically, this also happens between the viewer's present and the past, both of which are held so precariously in the work. Thus, through the video medium, the artist can effectuate the visualisation 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 which is invoked and of their relationship to the viewer. This time-specificity raises a question that is crucial to video installations and complements the centrality of circularity through looping: that of the meaning and performativity of actuality.

If heterochrony disrupts the traditional linear narratives onto which routine responses and images are grafted, it also offers temporal shelter to *memories*. And memories are themselves heterogeneous, multisensate, and multitemporal. The most important and perhaps counter-intuitive aspect of memory is that it takes place in the present. Memory is not passive recollection, 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 livable present. Without a position in the present, one cannot "have" – or better, "perform" – memories. In times of political and social hardship in the present, acts of memory become both indispensable for psychic survival and attractive for their comforting allure, suggestive 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.

Video can serve as a tool for bridging the gap between the illusion of privacy and the need for public recognition 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. The heterochronous variability of the video works discussed here contributes to an awareness of that lack and points to a way of remedying it. The artists make these video works fill actuality's voids, stretching their space to make time for a remembrance of a past that is now lost, irrupting when it is least desired.

Temporalising the present

The present – that is, the time of the viewing – is a time that thinks itself as overwhelmed by migratoriness, forgetting the entire century that came before it under the sign of migration. Ultimately, it is in, and for, the migratory culture lived in now, including the heteropathic memories of its past, that these artists can deploy multitemporal experiments in their video artworks, for in migratory culture, heterochrony is the standard way of life. The vector of connection, then, is the act of viewing, an act that is itself heterochronic.

I understand the video works under discussion not within an art-historical movement – within the story of video's evolution – but as a moment, a slow-down, of visual politics in and for the present. This is a profoundly political issue. The term "political" as I use it here and elsewhere (see, for example, Bal 2010) is understandable only in distinction from "politics". Although both belong to the domain where social life is structured and to which it is subjected, these two terms are each other's opposite. Belgian political theorist Chantal Mouffe (2005:9) defines the two terms as follows:

> by "the political" I mean the dimension of antagonism which I take to be constitutive of human societies, while by "politics" I mean the set of practices and institutions through which an order is created, organizing human coexistence in the context of conflictuality provided by the political.

'The dimension of antagonism': at first, it does not sound very appealing. In this distinction, politics is the organisation that settles conflict; the political is where conflict happens.

Yet, it is by virtue of the political that social life is possible. It can thrive, be alive, and also be dangerous. No wonder, then, that avoidance of conflict is usually sought by means of consensus. Politics comes in to avert the potential of danger. Politics, which responds to conflict constantly, attempts to dampen the political. This positive view of conflict might sound counter-intuitive, since most people love to hate politics, seeing it as domineering and menacing. They tend to attribute the negativity of conflict to politics rather than to its counterpart, yearning to be reassured by political leaders that conflict can be eradicated. And true enough; in social environments there is a tendency to eschew conflict.

Yet, as Mouffe (2005) cogently argues, the culture of consensus resulting from politics does not eliminate conflict; rather, it suppresses it, leaving it to its own, underground and hence potentially volcanic devices. Politics is, in fact, highly exclusivist, and lives by 'the negation of the ineradicable character of antagonism' (Mouffe 2005:10). It is also in blatant contradiction to lived social reality in which conflict is generally present.

French philosopher Jacques Rancière (1999), whose work is the current hype in cultural studies, makes a similar distinction but his terms are different. Mouffe's 'politics' becomes Rancière's 'police', and what Mouffe (2005) calls 'the political' corresponds to 'politics' in Rancière's work. Both thinkers argue in favour of the conflictual nature of social life and the need to disagree. Rancière (1999) uses the term *mésentente* to describe this conflictual element of social reality. This is an untranslatable word that combines misunderstanding

with not getting along. Unfortunately, it is unilaterally translated as 'disagreement' (Rancière 1999). The misunderstanding part is, however, just as crucial. For practical reasons I use Mouffe's terminology, whilst simultaneously keeping the dual resonance of Rancière's *mésentente* in mind.[7]

In the context of my analysis of video and migratory culture as intertwined and mutually illuminating, the word "political" is meant to indicate the affect the videos facilitate: the solicitations of the performance of heterochrony. Politics argues against the admission of numbers; the political offers a space where liminality can be performed in the negotiations between people that their encounters make possible. Heterochrony questions the ontological distinctions that define fiction as distinct from political reality. The latter term should be understood in that other sense: of "politics" that maintains that distinction. This is why Ballester's erasures and foregrounding of the temporal gaps of epistolary traffic is a way of making fiction, based on a profoundly political reality.

The political of memory

Comparing memory with video, the gap is that of the edit, the montage that opens the conjunction of two clips for the viewer's imagination. This is a negative limen. In that gap, meaning is made, memory is constructed, and the present is acted upon. The event flares up for those same but belated hours in the present that the event had occupied in the past and the memory – in the culture whose memory it was – could only effectively inscribe itself 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 that the artists effectuate in these works. Thus, video is used to intimate that the here and now of viewing is the present here, where political agency, activist or simply at work in social living, takes shape and is performed.

This brings me back to Theuws's work, exemplary in its fourfold deployment of abstraction. Using abstraction, the artist makes possible the emergence of forms or shapes within which the images of the past can be encapsulated. Past images are hosted in now-form. Slow-down, in art, has political ambitions in itself. Beyond the everyday bombardment of fleeting images, art seems a suitable place to stop and to invest events from the past that resonate with the epistolary reminiscing of Hatoum's mother with cultural duration. According to my interpretation of temporal foreshortening, in her work, Theuws 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*. The deployment of the videographic imagination works towards the intersection of form and time as the construction site of a politically effective affect. The interval that separates the viewer from the past is the moment, or the sub-moment, of actuality that is foreshortened. The sub-moment is not quite frozen but slowed down below perceptible time – thus making liminal now-time "sticky". As a result, there is no possibility of being ensconced in the ethical indifference of aesthetic contemplation, for that moment "touches" one now. It leaves a remainder – if only it will be heard.[8]

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 an experiential, and, if the videos are effective, corporeal time. The heteropathic memories, traces, and fictions that constitute the texture of the migratory culture people share are needed

in order to live in an actuality saved from its dreariness. That actuality, now-time, is the threshold; liminality.

Notes

1 In this dynamic conception of boundaries I am inspired by the late Inge E Boer's (2006) writing about the subject. Boer's vision has the brilliance of the almost-obvious that few have seen and that once seen, cannot be ignored.

2 I have devoted my video artwork to this topic. See Mieke Bal [s.a.]. The exhibition *2MOVE*, which I co-curated with Miguel Á Hernández-Navarro, was also devoted to this. See Bal & Hernández-Navarro (2008, 2011).

3 On the artist's website, her works are presented in random order. It therefore seems to be Theuws' conscious decision to demonstrate a heterochrony of artmaking as an ongoing, circular, non-linear process. Since all her works concern heterochrony, it is worth looking at her website (Roos Theuws [s.a.]) in its entirety.

4 The exhibition *2MOVE* was shown in four European countries in 2007-2008. It was a combined artistic and academic project, accompanied by two workshops. A book with a selection of the papers is forthcoming (see note 2).

5 This view is based on ideas developed by the French philosopher Henri Bergson (see 1960; 1991).

6 Benveniste's distinction can be analysed linguistically through the concept of deixis. See Levinson (2005).

7 Although his analysis is deeper and more profound than Mouffe's, I find Rancière's terminology confusing and even slightly manipulative, since the term "police" has a clear, established meaning that turns the broader use of it into a somewhat paranoid suggestion about what Louis Althusser (1971) calls 'Ideological State Apparatuses'. Alain Badiou (2006:107-123) discusses Rancière's (1999) concepts and distinctions, commenting that Rancière 'has the tendency to pit phantom masses against an unnamed State' (Badiou 2006:121). Badiou (2006:122) considers the political militant to be the 'central subjective figure of politics' and thereby demonstrates that the distinction does not matter to him.

8 The term "remainder" comes from translation theory. Lawrence Venuti (1996), one of that field's most outstanding practitioners, argues that a remainder of the source language's use of a word is politically crucial, lest the text be domesticated in the target language. Theuws' work is entirely devoted to heterochrony. For example, her work *Convultion Kernel I* (2007) and *II* (2008) shows the falling of a drop of water in the slowed-down duration of approximately twenty minutes.

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