Eija-Liisa Ahtila, *Where is Where? – Missä on Missä?* (2008), six-channel projected high definition installation with eight-channel sound, 53:43 min. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery. Copyright Crystal Eye, 2008.

The poetic reactivation of historical time: Eija-Liisa Ahtila's *Where is Where?*

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I argue that Eija-Liisa Ahtila's techniques of narration in her six-screen film installation Where is Where? *(2008) generate an affective, lived relation to historical time that counters its reduction in contemporary news media to a series of easily consumed and forgotten instants. Ahtila's multi-screen film, based in part on Frantz Fanon's account of the murder by two Algerian boys of their European playmate as revenge for the massacre of Meftah in 1956 during the Algerian War, conjures a different kind of remembering and embodying of historical events. To elaborate this claim, I perform a rereading of Guy Debord's concept of historical time and argue that Ahtila's work orchestrates an image of historical time transformed into 'use' rather than collected in the archive. This form of time, which incorporates historical agency and cyclical temporalities, connects with Julia Kristeva's concept of 'women's time' as well as Irish poet Eavan Boland's writing on history and the past in relation to oppression, colonialism and violence. Film examples looked at include Alain Resnais'* Hiroshima, Mon Amour *(1959) and I consider Maya Deren's notion of the poetic in film. Through an evocation of the 'vertical register' of the latter,* Where is Where? *shows us the incommensurability of war crime and trauma as well as the necessity to forge a relation to this incommensurability.*

KEYWORDS
film installation
historical time
narrative
poetic film
cyclical time
reactivation

The Finnish artist Eija-Liisa Ahtila is one of the best-known artists engaged in what Jean-Christophe Royoux refers to as 'the cinema of exhibition' (1999: 21). This 'cinema' takes place in gallery spaces that encourage a distracted ambulatory spectatorship

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1.   See Peter Osborne, (2004), 'Distracted reception: Time, art and technology', in Jessica Morgan and Gregor Muir (eds), *Time Zones: Recent Film and Video*, Tate Modern: London, pp. 66–75.

2.   Ahtila releases many of her film installations as single-screen editions. Screened at the Prince Charles Cinema, London, in April 2010, the single-screen edition of *Where is Where?*, in which the screen is gridded into four sections, lacks the immersive effect of the spatial narration that occurs in the installation.

3.   Fanon had been asked to assess the two boy's mental states. He briefly recounts the interview dialogue between his team and the boys in *The Wretched of the Earth*.

4.   Ahtila admits to being interested in Hans-Thies Lehmann's ideas about post-dramatic theatre (Ahtila in Essling, 2012: 26). As opposed to drama, in post-dramatic theatre (Lehmann's book of the same name was published in 1999), actors are no longer representing characters and their actions but assume the role of 'text bearer'. Spectators have to circumnavigate the presentation of linguistic and gestural material rather than follow an organized plotline. This is reminiscent of Brechtian theatre, which Ahtila has referred to in earlier interviews (Ahtila in Iles 2003: 62).

and is often comprised of multiple screens, which distribute images simultaneously in space rather than purely by means of the successive temporality of traditional cinema. Both these aspects have been considered as freeing the viewer from the dictates of the hypnotic cinema screen, but, equally, this kind of peripatetic spectatorship can be seen as encouraging the distracted inattention that characterizes contemporary forms of televisual media.[1] Rather than celebrating or promulgating this kind of spectatorship, some artists create conditions of reception to engage viewers in forms of narrative that not only counter distraction and inattentiveness, but also deal with philosophical themes of life, death and history on a cinematic scale. Many of Ahtila's installations combine multiple screens with duration and demand the concentration we expect to give the feature film. This is especially the case in the work that is the focus of this article, *Where is Where?* (2008), a 53-minute-43-second-long six-screen installation featuring comfortable seating and screenings timed on the hour so as to encourage immersive and committed, rather than ambulatory, viewing. In what follows, I will explore how Ahtila's techniques of narration in *Where is Where?*, which are dependent on but not reducible to her use of multiple screens,[2] generate an affective, lived relation to history that counters its reduction in contemporary news media to a series of easily consumed and forgotten instants. I suggest that Ahtila's multi-screen work conjures a different kind of remembering and embodying of historical events, in other words, a different relation to temporality.

The main narrative events of *Where is Where?* are dispersed across four central screens arranged in an open square format, the two other screens being located at the entrance and exit of this central enclosure. The entrance screen shows an animated film reminiscent of two-tone shadow theatre, which displays some of the motifs – a bird, a desert, a setting sun – that feature in a poem recited at the beginning of the film by the main protagonist. She is a contemporary poet, who first appears standing in a stage-like black space against a background of two sets side-by-side, both representing places of worship, one Islamic, the other a Catholic church. The screen at the exit shows still images of dead people lying where they fell; digitized archival documentary footage of, we assume, the Algerian War. These screens function almost like a trailer and a coda to the 53-minute film, in which two narrative threads are enfolded into each another.

One diegesis focuses on the contemporary poet (played by Kati Outinen) in her suburban house in Helsinki (although this could be any European city), as she is researching an event that happened in the 1950s during the Algerian War in which two young teenage Algerians murdered their European playmate. Ahtila's research for this film partly centres on Frantz Fanon's account of this incident in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963) where it appears as one of the case studies on the effects of war trauma that form a bleak counterpoint to his calls for revolutionary insurrection in the rest of the book.[3] Ahtila's research for her film aligns Fanon's case study with Arthur Rimbaud's lyric poem 'Enfance' (1873–1875), in which he connects childhood and death as a passage from wondrous self-absorption to bitter disillusionment. The poet is visited in her home by Death (Tommi Korpela) – a character familiar in Nordic cinema from films such as Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* (1959) – who mediates between the present and the past worlds in the film, between Europe today and Algeria at the time of the murder. As well as accompanying the poet to theatrical staged enactments of the aftermath of the massacre, Death escorts the teenage boys on a boat journey to the poet's summer house.

The second diegesis follows a re-enactment of the boys' act of violence, their revenge, so they claim, for the massacre at Meftah of 40 Algerian men dragged from their beds and executed in 1956. The contagion of violence, which turns children into murderers and friends into sacrificial scapegoats, is staged in the installation using a variety of genres – documentary, docu-drama, and post-dramatic theatre[4] – to mediate between the here and there of Europe and Algeria and the here and now of screen and

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installation space. These spaces contaminate each other creating multi-dimensional temporalities: a group of French soldiers enacting the massacre suddenly appear in the poet's house outside Helsinki, which is simultaneously shown from different angles on all four screens. It is as if the past event of the massacre is taking place again, not only in the mind's eye of the poet but in actual synchrony with her present location in time and space, the viewer being incorporated into this spatio-temporal dislocation due to the immersive scale of the installation. At another point in the film, the Algerian boys, Adel and Ismael, appear in a small rowing boat in the poet's swimming pool. On the one hand, they could be said to have emerged from her subconscious dreamworld, but, on the other hand, because of the way the montage disrupts and conjoins the various locations and temporalities across the four central screens, it is as if the boys are suspended in a future anterior point from which they, along with the Poet and the viewer, can observe their past actions. In bringing together two parallel stories from different dimensions of time, the installation prevents the spectator from taking up an omniscient viewpoint on either story. In this, it subjects us to the partiality of knowledge as it is derived from lived experience, before being consolidated in totalizing frameworks, such as official historical accounts of events. The installation materializes the historical event in what Guiliana Bruno identifies as a 'terrain of shifting positions – the product of multiple, incorporated, and mobile viewpoints' (2002: 178). As well as the spatialization of aberrant montage that assembles and dislocates the various temporalities and sites of the film, the 'terrain of shifting positions' in *Where is Where?* is accentuated by a tension between narrative, and its reliance on linear and/or progressive forms of storytelling, and poetry, which conveys feelings and sensations in temporally suspended images. In creating a spatial dynamism between literary narrative and the poetry of images, I claim that *Where is Where?* gives us the opportunity to connect on an affective level with historical events. Rather than situating them as ordered narratives of the past, their unfinished nature as experience is reactivated, mediated as it is by the Poet.

Where is Where? differs slightly from Ahtila's previous work in its foregrounding of history. As Régis Durand says about this work, it is 'an eruption of history (the real one, here that of French colonisation of Algeria) in an oeuvre in which it has up until now been conspicuously absent' (2008: 181). The closest treatment of history in Ahtila's previous work is her incursion into family history in installations such as *Today* (1996), which explores the relationship between a father and a daughter, showing the story of the grandfather's death and the emotional turmoil that circulates between the protagonists in their distinct yet interconnected psycho-temporalities in relation to this event. Distributed on three screens, which form three 'walls' of the square format of the installation, the fast-paced editing and the relay of the characters' voice-overs confuse sequential relations between events and how they are recounted. The female protagonist in *Today* is a teenager, but it is also implied that she is the elderly woman, Vera, who appears in the next sequence. We deduce this because she announces that she is 66 years of age before the image cuts to Vera's apartment and especially because of the way that the colour red is used in the film as a poetic imaging device to associate the younger and the older woman. The camera focuses in on the former's red shirt during her monologue in the first part of the film, while, in the second part, the older woman's apartment is shot through a red filter that makes visual links across the temporal and spatial zones of the film without explicitly confirming their interconnection.[5] The emphasis on intense blocks of colour and the subsequent intercutting of shots of nature that seem unrelated to the 'narrative' interrupt its logic and lead us to identify more with the affective force of emotion than with the characters per se. For example, the sound of the father's howling, which is not 'explained' by the car accident that knocks down the grandfather, exceeds the framework of the scene in which the teenage girl objectively describes their relationship direct to camera. It is as if the protagonists occupied two different spatial and temporal zones.

5. Taru Elving (2003) makes a similar argument in 'Seeing Red', *Parkett*, 68, pp. 74–83.

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Where is Where? extends this experiential network of discrete moments, incorporating different geopolitical locations as well as temporal disjunctions between events that seem to be happening in the present, events from the past that are overtly staged in the present, and archival footage of the past. In its exploration of 'the plasticity of space–time through synchronic *and* diachronic organization' (Butler 2005: 7), *Where is Where?* can be aligned to the global reach of historical time in the contemporary world. It constitutes an assemblage of different but coexisting temporalities and locations.[6] This context is challenging for any artist, but especially for artists working with the moving image, because dominant global televisual forms tend to eradicate the heterogeneity of localized situational and temporal experience. Butler cites Marc Augé's summary of this situation:

> The world that surrounds the artist and the period in which he lives reach him only as mediatised forms that are themselves effects, aspects and driving forces of the global system. That system serves as its own ideology; it functions like a set of instructions for use; it quite literally *screens* the reality for which it is substituting itself or rather whose place it is taking. The unease and disarray of artists confronted with this situation are also our own, and they tend to exacerbate those problems, and we may well wonder what we have to learn from them. (Augé in Butler 2010: 89)

Augé's reference to the screening of reality harks back to Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* ([1967] 1983), whose discussion of historical and cyclical time I want to bring into a constellation with Ahtila's *Where is Where?* Much of the writing on Ahtila's work situates her attempt to deal with mediatization in terms of how she experiments with time, ordering it into non-chronological fragments, which is read in terms of Gilles Deleuze's notion of the time – image and the interstice as a cut between one image and the next that delinks the image from any logical order.[7] However, I want to consider her work on time more in terms of a re-narrativizing of historical experience akin to the reclaiming of historical time called for by Debord. He calls for a society that would construct a lived relation to history in all its complexity rather than the relegation of it to the archive, which is ultimately a way of pacifying that which threatens linear time, i.e. repetition and the unfinished nature of experience. I want to suggest that, via the poet as an intercessor, Ahtila's reactivation of a past event for the present works through this aporia in a context of global migration and resurgent nationalism, in which the threat to western narratives of progress is projected onto the (non-western) 'other'. This makes Ahtila's choice of Fanon and Rimbaud prescient in that the former's anti-colonialism, as Butler says, retraces 'the journey, between the colonial system and a poetic phenomenology of subalternity',[8] while the latter's poetry operates 'between the micro-geography of embodied experience and the global scale of new world systems, the other' (2012: 183).

In order to claim that Ahtila reactivates the abstraction of historical time to engender new temporal relations to 'the other', it is firstly necessary to examine the stakes involved in Debord's concept of historical time. On the one hand, Debord states that the irreversible historical time of modernity, i.e. the perspective outside of events that sees them as teleologically progressive, is to be welcomed because it liberates us from the eternal stasis of cyclical time, the time of myth. Irreversible historical time, he says, is to be valued as it makes us aware of our mortality, whereas pre-modern cyclical time 'was the time of immobile illusion', a time akin to the temporality of childhood (Debord [1967] 1983 n.p.). (Needless to say, western civilization still sees other cultures as occupying the time of myth outside the linear time of history and politics.) However, the irony is that the potential of historical time to liberate us from what Debord considers the immobile present of cyclical time has been co-opted by capitalist structures of production and devolved

6. In *The Evolution of Film: Rethinking Film Studies*, Janet Harbord uses the term 'assemblage' to refer to the editing in mainstream cinema films by Alejandro González Iñárritu, e.g. *Babel* (2006) in which different geo-temporal locations are conjoined. This approach to global narratives also appears in Michael Haneke's *Hidden* (2005). Ahtila's editing shares this 'assemblage' principle with the proviso that in multi-screen installation different locations are presented simultaneously.

7. Alison Butler's 'Feminist film in the gallery: "If 6 was 9"' (2005: 1–31), is the main reference here, but Andrew Conio in 'Eija-Liisa Ahtila: The Palpable Event', *Cinema Journal of Philosophy and the Moving Image* also applies Deleuzian conceptions of time to Ahtila's work.

8. In postcolonial theories, Subaltern identity is variously used to describe oppressed peoples who have limited or no access to cultural imperial power (Spivak 1988) or whose occupying of marginal spaces of difference allows them to subvert hegemonic power (Bhabha 1996).

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into an abstract relation to time that betrays this potential. In western civilization, we now live in another form of immobility, that of spectacular time which maintains an *illusion* (emphasis added) of change and progress, which it uses to hide the continuance of an underlying eternal stasis much worse than mythic time. 'While the earlier cyclical time had supported a growing part of historical time lived by individuals and groups, the domination of the irreversible time of production tends, socially, to eliminate this lived time' (Debord [1967] 1983 n.p.). Irreversible historical time has become so completely bound up with the economic time of production that its connection to lived experience has been severed. Appropriated by those in power to keep the rest of society in a pseudo-cyclical time in which repetition is hidden under the guise of progress, history is made unavailable for collective revision. As a resistance to this, Debord calls for a playful model of irreversible time, 'a model in which *independent federated times* are simultaneously present' and jostle with one another ([1967] 1983: n.p., original emphasis). The material-ization of such 'independent federated times' would counter the universalized time we see in globalization, which is ordered by the interests of capital. The telling, or retelling, of stories is key to this materialization. This is where Ahtila's film comes into my argument: as a visual retelling of the past that might allow for an experiential approach to history. She reactivates the traumatic temporality of events that are unfinished as opposed to stabilizing them in the historical archive, which, in its official form, merely preserves 'the memory of the administration of society' (Debord [1967] 1983: n.p.).

If linear narrative is on the side of official history, which, to follow Debord, is kept from collective use by the vested interests of those in power, then clearly, it is necessary to work on narrative forms to release their potential for a more experiential collec-tive memory. This ethos has characterized certain strands of avant-garde cinematic practice since the 1960s and 1970s, especially the work of Jean-Luc Godard, whose use of disjunctive montage and other strategies to make the mechanisms of illusion explicit within film narrative had an impact on Ahtila (see Iles 2003: 58–64). However, in relation to Ahtila's use of an associational dynamic between images, we might also think of Alain Resnais's use of disjunctive montage in *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* (1959), which moved between the different geopolitical landscapes of Nevers and Hiroshima to show the impossibility, yet necessity, of representing the trauma of war experience in which one encounters senseless death. Resnais's use of montage in this film has been considered to be predominantly operating on the associative mode of metaphor akin to poetry, a vertical axis of meaning in which two things enter into a relation to speak of an absent referent. For example, a close-up shot of the Japanese lover's hand segues into a shot of another hand (the German lover's) in another location and then moves to the face of the dying man, the connection between these different locales signify-ing that touch is always bound up with the pain of loss (Williams 1976). However, the film also operates on the horizontal axis of meaning in which one version of events is being displaced by another. Further, the disjunctive assembly of the different temporal locations in the film brings Nevers and Hiroshima, the here and there, the German lover and the Japanese lover, the then and now, into a conjunction that confuses the chronology of Nevers as the past and Hiroshima as the present (see Williams 1976: 34–39). A similar tension between the horizontal and the vertical axes of meaning in film is explored in the writings of modernist avant-garde film-maker Maya Deren, who orchestrated this kind of syncopation in her single-screen film-making where the multiple screens of Ahtila make both registers apparent simultaneously.[9] In a famous 1953 symposium, Deren, while developing an equivalence between poetry and the poetic film, introduces a concept of 'verticality', an exploration at right angles to the 'horizontal' development of the narrative. She says, referring to Shakespeare,

> you have the drama moving forward on a 'horizontal' plane of development, of one circumstance – one action – leading to another, and this delineates

9.   Catherine Fowler refers to Deren's notion of 'vertical time' in relation to Ahtila's film *Consolation Service* (1999) in 'Room to experiment: Gallery films and vertical time from Maya Deren to Eija-Liisa Ahtila' (2004), *Screen*, 45: 4, Winter, pp. 324–43.

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Eija-Liisa Ahtila, *Where is Where? – Missä on Missä?* (2008), six-channel projected high definition installation with eight-channel sound, 53:43 min. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery. Copyright Crystal Eye, 2008.

the character. Every once in a while, however, he arrives at a point of action where he wants to illuminate the meaning of this moment of drama, and, at that moment, he builds a pyramid or investigates it 'vertically'. (Deren in Sitney 1970: 174)[10]

For Deren,

the short films, to my mind, (and they are short because it is difficult to maintain such intensity for a long period of time), are comparable to lyric poems, and they are completely a 'vertical', or what I would call a poetic construct, and they are complete as such. (Deren in Sitney 1970: 174)

This mode of working allows for unconscious layers of association or submerged temporalities to come to the fore and override the rational logic of linear progression. In Ahtila's exploration of the diametric trajectories of poetry and narrative, their psycho-physiological impact is heightened by being extended into the actuality of real time and space. While, on the one hand, there is narrative progression in *Where is Where?*, on the other hand, images of nature, fragments of bodies and the repetition of primary colours, especially red, are used to build vertical registers that appear in simultaneity with this progression. In the installation, these vertical registers are almost sculpted in space as opposed to being built in the virtual paradigm of the single-screen film. In *Where is Where?*, shots of body fragments – a mouth, an eye – or shots of water in different locations are suspended in space rather than time to create 'vertical' continuums dissociated from the narrative denouement of the film. They suggest orders of time that coalesce in a chaotic present as frenzied as the dizzying movement of the sufi dancers, who are shown spinning in a sequence of shots, which intercut the two diegetic spaces near the mid-point of the film.

Prior to these shots of sufi dancers, the poet visits a Priest, and in her office another example of a 'vertical' image occurs. As the Priest rises up from her chair and flies out the door, she knocks a vase of flowers to the floor. The broken fragments are then recomposed on another screen, as if time is running backwards. Logically, time is running forwards towards the final denouement of the narrative, i.e. the interrogation of the boys by psychiatrists, but the image of the vase in a state of being shattered and recomposed remains suspended on the pivot of what Ahtila's poet refers to as 'time's both directions'. The work proposes, on the one hand, narrative as the progressive time of history, and, on the other hand, poetry as the repetition of cyclical time that returns us to the force of the past in the present. As she says in the film: 'How do you know this is not that unexpected moment in time, when timelessless and time meet. A pause, a fit of absent-mindedness, a lapse into recollection. How can you know, when you step out of the door that you are stepping into your own garden? Not into Meftah or Maroua?' (Ahtila in de Weck 2010: 58).

For Ahtila, 'the Poet's work is a metaphor for what we all somehow need to do in the present world. The name *Where is Where?* refers to how near or far things really take place – is it in our yard or thousands of kilometres away and how do we measure the distance?' (Ahtila in Bonnefoy and Bonnevie 2008: 177). Some of the most distant footage in the film is the archival grainy black and white documentary footage of the war that occasionally erupts onto the four main screens. This footage initially shows people walking through the streets in Algiers, but becomes progressively more violent, showing bombers, explosions and wounded individuals. It acts as evidence of the spectacle of war, but, paradoxically, it is harder to relate to this footage than to the artifice of the re-enactments of the massacre in the main body of the installation. Archival footage is supposedly closer to the truth of the event. Its black and white documentary graininess signifying authenticity, but, at the same time, it presents the

10. Extracts from the symposium were originally published in P. Adams Sitney (1970: 171–86), in a chapter entitled 'Poetry and film: A symposium with Maya Deren, Arthur Miller, Dylan Thomas, Parker Tyler, Chairman Willard Maas, organized by Amos Vogel'.

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distance of a document that recedes into the past. The poet's work is to reactivate this disappearance, to give testament to the subjective disordering of experience wrought by the forces of war and killing. She stands on a stage in front of the archival footage, which continues in the background. Overwhelmed by the complexity of the crimes that she witnesses and her feelings of guilt and of being implicated in the events, the poet becomes like a seer in Deleuze's conception of time–image cinema.[11] The seer, suspended between perception and action, has the capacity to feel and be affected by temporalities other than the linear one of progression.

In Ahtila's meditation on the reactivation of an event from the past, it is noteworthy that the poet is a woman. For Julia Kristeva, in her 1979 essay *Women's Time*, the linear time of history is bound up with the sacrificial regulatory orders of law and production, which she identifies with Man, whereas cyclical time acknowledges intuition, repetition and reproduction, which she sees as particularly female embodiments of time. While Kristeva, like Debord, insists on the necessity of historical time to release us from the stasis of cyclical time, she also understands the importance of acknowledging the underlying temporalities of the cyclical so that they are not simply repressed and banished. Rather than reverting to an essentialist position, her point is that it is now necessary for women to 'give a language to the intrasubjective and corporeal experiences left mute by culture', which for Kristeva involves rejoining the 'archaic (mythical) memory' and 'the cyclical or monumental temporality of marginal movements' with history ([1979] 1986: 187–213, 194–95). Writing in 1979, this seems no less relevant to Ahtila's approach to her subject-matter in *Where is Where?* The poet's visionary seeing releases the submerged cyclical temporalities of traumatic experience, which is characterized by repetition, in order to turn the past into a living loss that forms a counter-identity to the supposed coherence of nationalist identities enshrined in the dust of the official archive.[12] In this light too, it is interesting to consider artist Shirin Neshat's film *Women without Men* (2009), which also makes a connection between a visionary woman and the tropes of cyclical time as a means of interrogating the official narrative of history. (Neshat's film, based on Shahrnush Parsipur's 1989 novel of the same name, uses the voice-over of a deceased woman, Munis, who flies through space and travels through watery landscapes to tell the repressed stories of women in relation to the 1953 coup in Iran.) The role of the poet as an intercessor, who, in contrast to the official narrative of history, excavates the past as an experiential force that continues into the present, is further theorized by Irish poet Eavan Boland. While Ireland's history of nationalism is different from Algeria's, some of what she says about the artist's role in forging an experiential relation to the past and revitalizing our sense of historical time is apropos here. For Boland,

> no artist can really represent a past. They can only represent their own view of it. […] When you look closely at something like that, you realise that not only is there a difference between the past and history, but in certain circumstances a version of history can actually suppress what is really happening. (2007: 137)

Asked in an interview if she sees part of the poet's work to write about things that happen outside of recorded culture, she says that it is

> on the margins, at the edges that a poet can make one kind of eco-system. […] The idea of a poetry, which can fathom silences, follow the outsider's trail – that draws me in. In a country like Ireland it was possible to see the difference between the past and history – how one was official and articulate and the other was silent and fugitive. I suppose I was drawn to the past, rather than to history […] History is the official version. It tells the story of the survivors. It is the mouthpiece of those who survive the outcome. But the past is fugitive, often

11. For Deleuze characters become seers in time–image cinema when they are overwhelmed by the perceptual phenomena they encounter, mostly in relation to the ruinous and deserted spaces left in the aftermath of World War II. See Gilles Deleuze (1989), *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (trans.), London: Athlone, p. 2.

12. My discussion of Kristeva here is influenced by my reading of Sara Beardsworth's *Julia Kristeva: Psychoanalysis and Modernity* (2004), New York: State University of New York; see especially pp. 250–57.

silent, filled with shadows. […] The [Irish] past is the far more interesting space to me – of whispers and shadows. (Boland 2007: 131–32, 136)

That place of whispers and shadows is the submerged cyclical temporalities that need to be acknowledged in order to militate against the relegation of the past to official ordering narratives. As Kristeva suggests, the woman poet leaps into a cyclical time that underlies official history, a time that is characterized as 'extra-subjective', cosmic, and 'susceptible to vertiginous visions' (Beardsworth 2004: 257). Ahtila's poet moves in the shadow world of dream. She submerges herself in the misty waters of this underworld space, her emergence from the water symbolic of excavating the layers of geo-temporal time, which links her house and workroom to a room in a flat in Algeria and to the rugged sandy industrial landscape where the boys commit the murder. The poet's aforementioned words intercede between the past of their story and her present sense of guilt and helplessness in the face of world atrocity. However, rather than making an emotional appeal to the viewer, Ahtila uses tropes of 'post-dramatic theatre' in which characters are text bearers rather than conveyors of interior consciousness. One might expect this to be alienating, but this jolt out of empathetic projection with a character means that we can instead register the more affective forces of the film's poetic images as they unfold in the space of the installation. Addressing us direct-to-camera in a dark, minimal stage setting both at the beginning of the film in her recitation of a poem loosely based on 'Enfance', and near the end, as she recites a hymn relating to the events, the understated emotional impact of the Poet's deadpan 'acting' can be usefully associated with Brechtian principles of defamiliarization and distanciation. Contrary to common understanding, these do not rule out emotional force.[13] For Brecht,

> the contradiction between acting (demonstration) and experience (empathy) often leads the uninstructed to suppose that only one or the other can be manifest in the work of the actor […] In reality it is a matter of two mutually hostile processes, which fuse in the actor's work […] his particular effectiveness comes from the tussle and tension of the two opposites and also from their depth. (1974: 277–78)

To great effect, Ahtila uses the tropes of Brecht's epic theatre in which the 'text' leaves gaps and spaces for the spectator to enter and piece the work together, as I am doing here. While the poet continues her ambiguous meditation on time and atrocity, the camera pans over empty chairs, which repeat across the screens. We entertain the possibility that these chairs stand as on-screen surrogates for us the off-screen audience and that we are thereby being invited to pass judgment on, or offer forgiveness to the boys for their crimes and to humanity as a whole.

This invitation to the viewer is made more explicit in the final concentration of the narrative on the Fanon story, re-enacted by two boys and a group of three psychiatrists. The poet shifts to the background, her excavation complete, 'and what the boys say and the inevitability of what they did – with its cause and consequences – take centre stage' (Ahtila 2008: 186). This is one of the few times where all four screens are in synchrony, as if having gone through the concatenation of marginal moments and poetic events, the centrality of the narrative returns centre stage. Our location as viewers, surrounded by their questioning gazes, entails that we too become witnesses, compelled to understand the event yet failing to penetrate the boys' matter-of-factness about their crime. The final words of the narrative are uttered by one of the boys, Adel: 'Anyhow, I killed him. Now, you do what you have to do', changing the ending of Fanon's 'Well, there you are […]' but keeping the matter-of-fact approach to their act as an inevitable consequence of war. The boys seem to occupy a zone of the living dead, which is a common outcome of war trauma. As spectators, we do not know how to respond to this exposure

13. In Brecht's appendices to 'A short organum for the theatre', he claims that while the text may have given rise to the misunderstanding that he was advocating a total avoidance of identification with the character by adopting a presentational mode of delivery, he was actually aiming at 'truly rending contradiction between experience and portrayal, empathy and demonstration, justification and criticism' (Brecht 1974: 277).

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of the limit of life, but perhaps Ahtila gives us an image in which we can linger in the gap between knowledge and understanding, the gap between what we can put into the order of a coherent narrative, and what we can intuit of the unspoken, submerged aspects of experiences such as oppression and war trauma. This is not going to change the world or resolve the incomprehensible nature of trauma, and the ensuing damage it wreaks. However, as Boland states in relation to the purpose of poetry in the world: 'there's no doubt that when a poem records a life, or a detail, or an experience, it also dignifies it through that continuing conversation with memory and comprehension. […] Poems humanize people' (2007: 135). Rather than a stabilizing of the past in the coherent narrative form of linear historical discourse, Ahtila, through film images that operate on the horizontal and vertical planes of 'the cinema of exhibition', excavates submerged temporalities. The work enables us to forge an embodied, affective relation to history, one in which the repetitions of cyclical time are not denied and repressed but are remembered as an active legacy in the present. In bringing here and there into a constellation, *Where is Where?* remembers the killing of children.

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