

## Eija-Liisa Ahtila

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How does the spatialisation of narrative alter the cinematic address of the viewer? The narrative of Eija-Liisa Ahtila's latest moving image installation *Where is Where?*, 2008, is dispersed across four central screens which form the 'walls' of the piece, with a further two screens being located at the entrance and exit of this enclosure. The latter two screens show an animated film and digitised archival footage of the Algerian War and act almost like a trailer and a coda to the main event of the four-screen 53-minute film. Although there is nothing to stop viewers from ambulating distractedly through the darkened space, the sevenminute gap between hourly screenings sets up an estranged cinematic experience in which, given that there is no position from which to see all screens at once, expectation is combined with the frustration of where to position oneself to get the best possible viewpoint. This spatial dislocation uncannily echoes the narrative of the film itself, which meditates on the complexity of positioning oneself, especially as an artist, in relation to horrific events – such as war and genocide – whose contagious effects seep across time and place in a globalised world. The installation stages this dilemma both temporally and spatially, as two diegetic worlds unfold simultaneously and disjunctively across the four screens. One diegesis focuses on a contemporary poet 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 where two young teenage Algerians murdered their European playmate. Ahtila's own research for the film partly centres on Franz Fanon's account of this incident in his 1961 book *The Wretched of the Earth*, where it surfaces as a traumatic counterpoint to his calls for revolutionary insurrection. Ahtila aligns Fanon's case study with Arthur Rimbaud's poem 'L'Enfance', which connects childhood and death, and links to the filmic poet's search for words to understand the incident. The poet is visited in her home by Death, a character who looks as if he just stepped out of an Ingmar Bergman film, who mediates between the present and the past and the worlds of here and there, ie Europe and Algeria.

The other diegesis follows a re-enactment of the boys' act of violence, their revenge 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, including the theatrical, the documentary, docu-drama and science-fiction. It is hard to keep pace with the speed of the editing and difficult to join the fragments together, especially in what can only be a partial view anyway, given that some images will always be to one's back or out of one's field of vision. While these breaks in continuity are frustrating on one level, they are also the means by which this story physically affects the viewer. Ahtila effectively uses the tropes of Bertholt Brecht's epic theatre where the 'text' leaves gaps and spaces for the spectator to enter and piece the work together, but rather than this being heavy-handed and humourless, Ahtila adopts Brecht's approach to combining disjunction with 'lightness and ease, quickness and wit' (as Sylvia Harvey described it) to ensure the work's popular appeal. Added to the narrational gaps and the humour in *Where is Where?* – which includes a levitating

priest as well as a funnily animated handshake from Death – the physical gaps between the corners of the screens also increase the reality effect of the installation. Unlike cinema, the off-screen is not another image but space itself, the cut of montage transformed into an asynchronous sequence of edits, the apparatus of spectacle used to produce real effects that impinge on and implicate the viewer in their unfolding. Echoing the horrific narrative content of the contagion of colonial violence, the two diegetic spaces begin to contaminate one another at one point: soldiers run between screens and places, disconcertingly appearing in the poet's house to re-enact the massacre. Archival footage also disrupts our sense of temporality, especially when the poet comes to stand in front of these archival images which appear on screens within the screen, thereby linking the documented past with the space in the gallery. One of the few times where all four screens are in some kind of synchrony is towards the end of the film when a team of psychiatrists are questioning the boys. Our location as viewers, surrounded by their questioning gazes, means that we too become witnesses compelled to understand the event and the boys' matter-of-factness about their crime. In a non-didactic way, the film is showing us that we are all responsible and found guilty. Ahtila has spoken of how multi-screen installation prevents the viewer from taking sides as it becomes difficult to identify with any one character. It will be curious to see whether this ethical register is maintained in relation to the single-screen version of *Where is Where?* that will be premiered at the Prince Charles Cinema in April. The other multi-screen installation in the exhibition, *The Hour of Prayer*, 2005, pales in comparison. The narrative, which centres on an artist who goes on a residency in Africa to deal or critique. In the present case, there is no suggestion of an alternative reading of Swedenborg than the official one of enlightened mystic as opposed to, for example, a sufferer from schizophrenia, an illness known to produce the kind of visions Swedenborg described. Nothing encourages a sceptical re-evaluation of Swedenborg's 'genius' or presents him as a deeply misguided man. The ideologically naturalised link between art and spirituality is thus further compounded, the parameters of the relationship, as ever, an unproductive blur.

Tracking down the individual works takes one through most of the house, a beautiful neoclassical wood-panelled building which arguably requires no further additions or 'interventions'. While the staging of an art show on the property means that non-Swedenborgians may be lured in, an absurd by-product of this temporary transformation is that the very material that has justified public access too often distracts from the house's inherent qualities. Chell's super-lacquered handrails with hidden Braille may recall minimalist sculpture, but perhaps their most pertinent feature is that, had one not been textually directed to them, one might have entirely missed them. The use of Braille at least implies a certain checking of perception. Some of the same considerations apply to Wilson's low-key arrangement of 50 or 60 aged Society membership cards placed within a glass case in the building's bookshop. The cards are essentially presented in line with the established conventions of displaying ephemera in museums and libraries, and as such become an instructive rather than 'artistic' insertion, showing the viewer discreet fragments of the past rather than foregrounding the clever-clogs conceptualism of the artist. If you cannot open up the host space to in-depth examination, a literal unpacking of the institution's buried past may be the next best thing to do.

Despite Sinclair's reputation as a once-marginal writer who has now risen to his rightful place as heroic defender of the proletarian underdog, his work is often puddled with platitudes that boil down to stating the glaringly obvious in a rather stylistically hyped-up prose. The pudding is often, and progressively, overegged. Discussing an old mechanical typewriter he has unearthed from the with her grief at the death of her dog, is played out across four screens that face the viewer in a zig-zag linear arrangement. While the film repeats themes of death and spatial dislocation, the connections and disjunctions between the shots of beautiful Finnish landscapes, in the first part of the woman's story, and the documentary-style shots of Africa seemed like uncritical ethnographic tourism. The same was true of the single-screen documentary footage of the third film in the exhibition, *Fishermen/ Études No. 1*, 2007, a five-minute study of fishermen in Benin as they struggle against the elements. Ahtila has said that this image connects to world problems, but the uncritical framing of the piece in this exhibition makes allusions to questions of globalisation and immigration seem gratuitous and easily dismissed. *Where is Where?* by contrast gets under the skin.

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