

The past is present. Something has happened and the echoes are still resonating in my head. They are not becoming more difficult to discern; in fact the echoes are becoming increasingly loud and impossible to escape. The past lingers on, yesterday reverberates in today. An example: a teenage girl with short blond hair is throwing a ball against a wall. A man is sobbing heavily in a bedroom nearby; suddenly he screams out in agony. A girl's voice explains: 'Today my dad is crying. Late last night a car drove over his dad who died instantly.' These ominous opening words set the tone in Eija-Liisa Ahtila's *Today* (1996/97), a three-part work that presents the same violent incident seen through the eyes of three different characters: a young girl, a grown-up man and an elderly woman. Their fragmented, strangely poetic reports touch upon the accident, but simultaneously weave a dense web of questions concerning family relationships, personal identity, sexuality and death.

The past is present. Something has happened: an accident, a catastrophe, a tragic event. The work unfolds as a process of assessing and working through – a process of grieving that consists of fragments of narration incapable of presenting an overarching and coherent account. This is true of *Today* and *Consolation Service* (2000), and in one way or another of all of Ahtila's mature works. 'It's a story about an ending', says the neighbour-narrator in *Consolation Service*. There is no therapy, no catharsis, no Hegelian *Aufhebung*. It all starts with an ending, and then it ends again. This is Ahtila's grim idea of consolation.

It is true that the narrative does not proceed according to 'simple causality', but what then has taken its place? There is a recurring temporal structure in Ahtila's films and installations which all seem to depend on the notion of the secret that lingers in the past. As viewers we are plunged into a situation that is incomprehensible if we do not take the echoes of the past into account. Something of great magnitude – a rupture, a catastrophe, an unbearable moment of truth – has happened, and it appears to be our task to come to terms with this traumatic thing. The work is a kind of interpretative or even cathartic ritual which might lead to the past being exorcised. Perhaps the ceremony can even serve as the starting point for the reconstruction of a full and self-identical subject? Ahtila's works suggest such a possibility, but the full reconstruction is deferred and remains a promise that cannot be fully kept. The wounds and the mystifying fractures in the past remain more strongly felt than any sense of a harmonious self-identity.

Nabokov writes: 'Perhaps if the future existed, concretely and individually, as

something that could be discerned by a better brain, the past would not be so seductive: its demands would be balanced by those of the future.¹ This would hinder us from constantly sinking into the history of things. He adds, 'But the future has no such reality (as the pictured past and the perceived present possess); the future is but a figment of speech, a spectre of thought.' The seductiveness of the past has led many philosophers, among them Husserl and Bergson, to treat the past and the future in an asymmetrical fashion, paying a great deal more attention to that which has been and to our capacity to retain it. Ahtila is an artist who, in a comparable way, seems to care primarily about the past. It is a past that is alive and which creates considerable turbulence in the present. A typical feature of Ahtila's work which is quite salient in *Today* is the speed and nervousness with which the protagonists deliver their lines. There is something hectic and impatient about these voices. What is it that creates this sense of urgency? Maybe it's the strife against the ruthless power of oblivion. Her stories can be seen as a fight against forgetting, and this is perhaps what creates the feeling of urgency in her work. We obviously have no time to lose. How can we characterize the result of Ahtila's creative effort? Obviously, the past that we are trying to come to terms with is constantly slipping further away, and no final secret is ever revealed. Hers is an analytic of finitude that lets a retreating origin return according to rules that have already been set in such a way that no overarching narrative appears to give coherence to fragments of a scattered life. Only in brief moments does transformation seem possible, and the change does not concern the past itself but rather our relationship to alterity in all its forms: the past, our own and that of others, and the otherness that exists within ourselves. What is the act of consciousness in question – reminiscence, self-analysis, a process of grieving or a paradoxical celebration of that which has been?

The dead old man appears in the recollections of the young man in pain. He emerges out of the darkness, walking on a road that runs through a forest. The trees cast shadows across the road, producing a geometrical pattern of light and darkness. The man comes closer; he looks directly at us, the viewers. Then he turns away and lies down on the road in such a fashion that the body disappears into one of the shadows, with only the arms visible. Then he pulls them closer to his body, and he is gone entirely. We understand what will happen, or rather, what has already happened: 'We drove for a swim through the forest – where the road is striped with black shadows of the trees. Suddenly one of those shadows stood up ...' That image of a man lying down to die, pulling in his arms and vanishing into darkness: an image in which time seems to crystallize. It's a kind of memory, yet he is very much there, preparing himself for a future of no return. Past, present, future in the blink of an eye, Ahtila's works are full of dense and temporally complex images. In his book on the 'time-image', Deleuze analyses

exactly these kinds of condensed cinematic moments that seem to capture the very movement of temporality in a crystallized formation:

What constitutes the crystal-image is the most fundamental operation of time: since the past is constituted not after the present that it was but at the same time, time has to split itself in two at each moment as present and past, which differ from each other in nature, or, what amounts to the same thing, it has to split the present in two heterogeneous directions, one of which is launched towards the future while the other falls into the past. Time has to split at the same time as it sets itself out or unrolls itself: it splits in two dissymmetrical jets, one of which makes all the present pass on, while the other preserves all the past. Time consists of this split, and it is this, it is time, that we see in the crystal.²

Deleuze conceives of temporality in Bergson's terms, and to a certain extent his entire study of the cinema is as much a philosophy of time and movement as it is an interpretation of certain artworks using moving images. What is Bergson's philosophy of time all about? Deleuze presents the most basic ideas: 'Bergson's major theses on time are as follows: the past coexists with the present that it has been; the past is preserved in itself, as past in general (non-chronological); at each moment time splits itself into present and past, present that passes and past which is preserved.'³ Time flows and each present fades, but it doesn't disappear. It is preserved as past and consciousness has direct access to this past. The time-images of cinematic imagination that succeed in making this temporal structure evident in forcing themselves upon the viewer are the points of crystallization: 'The crystal-image was not time, but we see time in the crystal. We see in the crystal the perpetual foundation of time.'⁴ Deleuze's philosophical starting point is Bergson rather than Husserl, who, in my view, developed an even richer approach to the problems of time-consciousness. Like Bergson, Husserl considers temporality to be the most basic level of subjectivity. And like Bergson, he distinguishes between different kinds of past time and the different capacities the subject has of relating to it: the recent past which is still given in immediate proximity to the ongoing perceptual flow, and the past which has already faded into oblivion and, therefore, needs a special act of recollection to become present again. The first kind of memory, of the most recent past, Husserl calls retention; the second form he calls recollection. In our conscious life, Husserl would say, we are continuously split between several 'tracks' of awareness: we live in the perceptual presence – which is built up by impression, retention and protention (expectation) – as well as in the recollected past. In addition to this, other forms of awareness, such as empathy and imagination, make the machinery of consciousness even

more complex. The mind is a multi-channel apparatus, and several programmes are active and viewed at the same time. When a contemporary artist such as Stan Douglas talks of 'temporal polyphony' in relation to his split-screen installations, and more specifically *Der Sandmann* (1995), it may sound like a very advanced form of consciousness:

Being able simultaneously to produce distinct voices has always been something I've been trying to achieve, not always having this idea of a single, static identity but one which is always challenged from the outside, and is able to think of 'the Other' simultaneously. Polyphony is a technique for doing that. That is the feeling of *The Sandman*, where you're seeing two temporal moments at the same time, and you're hopefully able to think of those moments at the same time, just as one is able to look at the present and understand how the past lived the way it did.⁵

In fact, such 'temporal polyphony' is the mental state in which we all live continuously, and there are more complicated forms of synchronicity than the mere interplay of perception and recollection. As Husserlian phenomenology makes clear, the nested structure of subjectivity allows for many flows of awareness: while looking out of the train window seeing the landscape pass by, I may fantasize about a memory of a strange dream-image or I may remember an old daydream. The subject – what Husserl calls the ego – is what keeps all the levels of such a multidimensional structure together: 'I am always in the present and still in the past, and already in the future. I'm always here and also elsewhere. I as ego come in between these two modes. I am only in this doubling, and I emerge in this displacement.'⁶

What happens if the unifying function of the ego is no longer active and the multiplicity of flows live their own autonomous lives? Phenomenological philosophy has taken great pain in analysing the various illusions produced if one kind of consciousness is mistaken for another, if, for instance, a memory or fantasy is taken for a kind of perception. If, on the other hand, the structuring function of the ego is removed entirely, and each 'track' runs independently of the others, it is clearly a question of a severe breakdown of the mental apparatus as a whole. This is madness. Ahtila has characterized her three-screen video installation *The House* (2002) as an account of psychosis. And concerning her work *Anne, Aki and God* (1998), she writes:

Aki V resigned from his work in computer application support with Nokia Virtuels, became ill with schizophrenia and isolated himself in his one room flat. His mind started to produce a reality of its own in sounds and visions. Little by little this fiction became flesh and blood, the line between reality and imagination became

blurred. Fantasized persons and events stepped out of Aki V's head and became parallel with the reality around him.⁷

This installation, consisting of five monitors and two screens, differs from the works for split-screen installations such as *Today* and *Consolation Service* in that the multi-dimensionality clearly transcends what the viewer can apprehend. Through their speed and complexity, all of Ahtila's works explore the limits of perception, but *Anne, Aki and God* pushes things further and clearly represents a kind of mental disintegration. The work is an intricate mix of insane imagination and documentary footage. The story, according to Ahtila, is 'based on real events about a man who, being in a state of psychosis, created a woman for himself'. On the one hand, Aki appears as a confusing multiplicity of faces and voices that deliver the same lines about an ideal woman: 'In the daytime, Anne is an aerobics instructor. She is very affectionate by nature, yet firm when necessary.' On the other hand, documentary footage is presented showing real interviews with a large number of young Finnish women applying to play the role of Aki's imaginary girlfriend. Thus, everyday reality is presented side by side with fictional, hallucinatory imagery. A third component, present on an additional screen, is an image of God, played by two actors, one female, the other male. Together these elements produce a multilayered and mazelike narrative, or rather a maze of narratives, that transgresses the mental capacities not only of so-called normality but more radically, keeping the presence of a God in mind, of finite subjectivity. The heterogeneous crystallization of time that takes place here is no longer that of ordinary human experience but that of a shattered consciousness opening up to infinity.

The combination of documentary and fictional narrative *Anne, Aki and God* is, to a certain extent, reminiscent of the earlier work *If 6 was 9* (1995), a split-screen installation about the sexual world of young females in Helsinki. The story and the dialogue in this strangely melodious work are fictional, but research and interviews with real people preceded the realization of the work. Ahtila explains the structure of the installation:

If 6 was 9 is split into three adjacent images, forming a synchronized triple-screen narrative. The narrative unfolds in parallel movements across the screens, with images contrasting and reacting to each other. Occasionally, the three images appear to create a simultaneous event, e.g. when a sequence in which girls address monologues to the camera in different shots is edited to give a feel of dialogue. Each screen shows a different perspective on a given place, and the three shots sometimes converge to form a single picture plane.

If the work about the psychotic telecommunication engineer Aki represents the breakdown of normal time-consciousness, then what this portrait of a group of young females conveys instead is a fluid kind of temporality. The three screens display the sexual fantasies, everyday actions and dreams of the adolescent girls. Even if the work is ultimately a piece of complex fiction, the straightforwardness of the girls creates a strong documentary feel. The intricate interweaving of different kinds of consciousness – memories, fantasies, perceptions – produces not a sense of dissonance, but rather a sense of harmonious flow. The tender lyricism of daydreams and soft piano music clashes with the straightforwardness of their accounts. However, the directness of their stories does not exclude a sense of wonder and mystery: 'It was equally amazing to see in a porno magazine that men have no hole behind the testicles. I thought that it had not always been like this.'

If cinema could produce what Deleuze calls crystal-images capturing the structure of time itself, then the temporal possibilities of the 'other cinema', to use Raymond Bellour's concept, i.e. the multi-screen installations of today's artists exploring new forms of narration and synchronicity, are even richer. The simultaneity of several flows of moving imagery grants the possibility not only of crystal-images, but also of more intricate constellations and juxtapositions. Is it the phenomenology of the experiencing subject that interests Ahtila, or is this experiential multi-dimensionality only a means to an end that must be described in quite different terms? Clearly there are recurring themes – such as death, dogs, sex and violent desire – that create the strange atmospheres and specific poetry in Ahtila's work, from the early works for monitor to *The Hour of Prayer* (2005), a piece about the death of her dog. But it seems that the phenomenological issues are also of great importance to her. In a recent interview, she talks about her investigations into the functioning of memory and perception:

One morning while I was brushing my teeth, I went from the bathroom to the window and I saw a dog running on the ground. I returned to the bathroom and thought about the dog, and I realized I did not picture it in my head as I saw it just a couple of seconds ago from high above, but as if I was standing beside it in the park. I saw it as a medium shot from the side, taken from my eye level or even below – in other words, how I had seen dogs before. That was how I recognized it. This relates to what I try to do in my films, to break up the space, to create a space that doesn't exist at a conscious level.⁸

The richness of temporal experience and the complexity of the experiencing subject is certainly one of the issues explored in Ahtila's mature installations. But already in her three 90-second works for monitor, *Me/We*, *Okay* and *Grey* (1993), she staged incredibly subtle situations involving fluid and destabilized forms of

subjectivity. In these compact and enigmatic works, the natural link between human subject and human voice has been loosened – or entirely eliminated. Here, many voices speak through the same mouth, or the same voice through many mouths. The persons appearing to us in these dense works are alienated not only from the people surrounding them – family, partners, etc. – but even more dramatically from themselves. Alterity, in various forms, seems to rule completely; no harmonious whole or fixed self-identity is in view. There is always a fracture, a split or a dissonance that divides and estranges the speaking subject from itself. Having the actor step out of character and address the audience directly is one of the devices that Ahtila uses to create this alterity effect, but even more subtle is the constant manipulation of the relation between subject and voice. In the humorous *Me/We*, all the members of the family move their lips, but strangely enough it's the self-absorbed father who analyses the deteriorating family. In *Okay*, a woman walks back and forth in her room, like a nervous animal in a cage, spitting out information about a violent sexual relationship: 'If I could, I would transform myself into a dog, and I would bark and bite everything that moves. Woof, woof!' The story is told in the first person, but many voices – male as well as female – are forced upon us. All this happens with such speed and ease that it is impossible to reconstruct the alterations and shifts after viewing the work even a few times. In *Grey* – yet another account of a catastrophe – three women ride in an industrial elevator. They deliver a deeply disturbing report about an imminent environmental disaster. Or maybe it has already happened. They speak with incredible speed about chemicals and radiation, creating a weird poetry: 'Lead protects us from gamma-rays, sand stuffs the holes and absorbs the products of fission. All the sounds of comfort are insufficient. One hundred rads equal one grey.' The subject emerges in these compact pieces as a preliminary configuration rather than as a substance or essence given once and for all. The subject here is a fluid arrangement of positions that can be redefined and restructured. In Ahtila's works, the subject not only seems to live in time but also to be time. Time itself – a zone of radical difference – can crystallize in many ways but it will never rest in stable self-identity.

1 [footnote 23 in source] Vladimir Nabokov, *Transparent Things* (New York: Vintage, 1972) 1.

2 [24] Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time Image* (1985) (London: Athlone Press, 1989) 81.

3 [25] Ibid., 82.

4 [26] Ibid., 81.

5 [27] Cited in Robert Storr, 'Stan Douglas: l'aliénation et la proximité', *art press*, no. 262 (2000).

6 [28] Robert Sokolowski, 'Displacement and Identity in Husserl's Phenomenology', in *Husserl-Ausgabe und Husserl-Forschung*, ed. S. Ijsseling (Dordrecht/Boston/London: Kluwer, 1990) 180.

7 [29] Eija-Liisa Ahtila, 'Anne, Aki and God', in *Eija-Liisa Ahtila: If 6 was 9* (Kassel: Fridericianum,

1998). All Ahtila quotations are from this publication unless otherwise indicated.

- 8 [30] Magdalena Malm, 'The Idea of Linearity Bothers Me: An Interview with Eija Liisa Ahtila', in *Black Box Illuminated*, ed. Sara Arrhenius, Magdalena Malm, Cristina Ricupero (Lund: Propexus, 2003) 69.

Daniel Birnbaum, 'Crystals', *Chronology* (New York and Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2005); second edition (2007) 83–96.