

**THINKING ALOUD**  
**ON THE ADDRESS OF THE VIEWER**

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I DECLARE THAT THE WORK PRESENTED IN THIS THESIS IS MY OWN.

London, 15<sup>th</sup> July 2009

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Taru Elfving'. The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large, sweeping flourish at the end.

Taru Elfving

## ABSTRACT

The thesis examines the viewer's position in relation to contemporary moving image installations, particularly the work of the artist and filmmaker Eija-Liisa Ahtila (b. 1959, Finland). It maps out a shift in research from the analysis, occupation and rethinking of subject positions to the mobilisation and inhabitation of encounters, where the positions are in constant becoming. In dialogue with Luce Irigaray's philosophical thought and related theoretical discourse, it traces a shift from the disruption of dualism with strategic mimesis to the critical inhabitation of a space of mediation opened up by resemblance. In terms of methodologies in the field of visual culture this implies a move from the problematics of representation, and from deconstructive and re-signifying practices, to questions of the viewer's and researcher's implication.

The argument is structured around two parts, firstly on the Girl as an unmarked figure that unsettles definitions of centred, identity-based subjectivities and their gendered attributes. The figure emerges here not as a representation but as an event, while the focus is drawn from interiority as the core of a subject to surfaces as sites of contacts. This leads to the second part of the argument, on the notion of the address, which initiates a further shift of attention onto the modes by which the works and the characters in them allow and call for the viewer's involvement. The thesis examines these moves with the use of the concepts of staining, haunting, thinking aloud and witnessing, which all emphasise outward and forward orientation. They focus on boundaries as sites of disruption and production of positions of viewing, thinking and speaking, instead of as their markers. Through close reading of Ahtila's works the thesis argues for active viewership that demands constant critical situatedness in terms of affiliations arising from communication.

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## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

STILLS FROM EIJA-LIISA AHTILA'S WORKS ON THE FOLLOWING PAGES:

*ME/WE* (1993) – 19

*OKAY* (1993) – 19

*GRAY* (1993) – 149, 153

*IF 6 WAS 9* (1995-6) – 15, 25, 114, 169, 198, 239

*TODAY* (1996-7) – 17, 45, 46, 71, 77, 84, 102, 107, 141, 158, 184

*CONSOLATION SERVICE* (1999) – 125, 132, 155, 163, 170, 187, 207

*THE PRESENT (THE BRIDGE)* (2001) – 92, 116

*THE HOUSE* (2002) – 20, 32, 81, 101, 109, 137, 177, 223

*THE WIND* (2002) – 56, 70, 88, 119, 228

*THE HOUR OF PRAYER* (2005) – 192

*WHERE IS WHERE?* (2008) – 8, 41, 218, 219, 222, 230, 231, 241

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

## 1A. THINKING FOR

A poet encounters the incomprehensibility of war and death in the latest moving image installation by Eija-Liisa Ahtila, *Where is Where?* (2008). In this layered narrative time folds on itself and spatial coordinates entangle together. The past and the elsewhere is suddenly here and now. While she writes, the poet's home and her lived moment entwine inseparably with historical events, the murder of a young French boy carried out by her Algerian friends in the midst of war.



EIJA-LIISA AHTILA *WHERE IS WHERE?* (2008)<sup>1</sup>

The introduction to the thesis sets out here to map the research journey, the process of working with the moving image installations of Eija-Liisa Ahtila (b. 1959, Finland) over a period of nearly a decade. In contrast to the abovementioned case of the poet in Ahtila's work, my journey has involved no encounters with historical documentations of war (except a few glimpses in *Where is Where?*), only with fictional narratives of tragedies concerning a

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<sup>1</sup> All images in the thesis are stills taken from preview DVDs of the works unless otherwise stated.

few individuals and their relationships. I have not witnessed evidence of atrocities, merely small stories focused on strategies of survival in the everyday. Despite this, my position as a viewer and a writer has been thoroughly shaken by questions regarding my implication and responsibility. Yet, are these concerns that dissimilar to those arising from the work briefly discussed here, from the story of a poet's research into a historical tragedy? Does the encounter with art works and fictional narratives necessarily differ from the engagement with any other media imagery and modes of narration, when it comes down to questions about the viewer's active involvement? Furthermore, can the viewer's role be something beyond the alternatives of reception or reading, immersion or interpretation?

The work *Where is Where?* is returned to at the end of the thesis but in order to get there a number of corners have to be turned. The whole thesis can be, actually, described as a story of a journey with Ahtila's works. It leads from concerns around representation to questions about the address – of the works and of the viewer. Or, more specifically, it traces a route from the investigation of the limits and the disruptive potential of representations of femininity in moving image art works towards an inhabitation of a space opened up between the works and the viewers. This has demanded a shift of focus away from the content of the works, what they tell about, and the narrative strategies they employ. It has also implied a move aside from the examination of how the narrative possibilities of moving image installation are appropriated and experimented with, and how the limitations of representation are challenged in the works. Similarly, I have had to abandon the position of an interpreter of the critical issues raised or strategies used in the works, and of the various novel yet-unmarked figures that may arise from them.

The shifts outlined above are a result of intense critical engagement with Ahtila's works as well as with Luce Irigaray's philosophical thought and a wide field of related post-structuralist and feminist theory. This is not to be taken as a linear development but more like a series of ruptures caused by encounters with art and theory that have disallowed the comfort of mastered

critical approaches. This orientation tangible in my work can be argued to parallel moves traceable in both the art practice and the theory I have engaged with. My journey has taken place in tandem with not only shifts in Irigaray's work, which are tracked here shortly, but also in the field of visual culture at large. Those are centred loosely around a shared frustration with the discourse on representation that has manifested itself in a multifaceted search for alternative critical approaches in the name of, amongst others, relationality, performativity, criticality, affectivity, and participation.<sup>2</sup> Simon O'Sullivan sums this up as he brings contemporary art practices into an encounter with Gilles Deleuze's and Félix Guattari's thought. In his persuasive claim for a step beyond textual reading strategies, and for the very potential of a beyond, he stresses that the critique of representation remains within the field of representation, yet:

“there are possibilities for art and thought beyond representation, and indeed beyond the latter's critique and crisis (those deconstructive strategies which almost despite themselves can stymie thought)”.<sup>3</sup>

The aim of this thesis, however, is not to make claims for cultural shifts on a wider scale, but to trace how the close dialogue with both art and theory has deeply troubled my position as a viewer, thinker and writer. Furthermore, the move away from familiar tools of deconstructive analysis as well as representational operations in writing is not a swift and smooth one, as is demonstrated here. Yet, I argue that the challenge posed by the potential move beyond representation has a sense of urgency in the field of visual

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<sup>2</sup> See e.g. Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Paris: Les Presses du Réel 2002); Gavin Butt, ed., *After Criticism* (London: Blackwell 2005); Taru Elfving & Katvekaia Kontturi, ed., *With Art: Steps Towards Participatory Research* (Helsinki: The Society for Art History in Finland 2005); Simon O'Sullivan, *Art Encounters Deleuze and Guattari: Thought Beyond Representation* (London: Palgrave Macmillan 2006). The recent discussion on the so-called “documentary turn” in visual culture, which is claimed to follow and challenge “linguistic turn” that stressed textuality and the problematics of representation, is also relevant here. It has many connections with my project, yet falls outside the scope of this thesis. See e.g. Maria Lind & Hito Steyerl, ed., *The Greenroom: Reconsidering the Documentary and Contemporary Art #1* (New York: Sternberg & CCS Bard, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> O'Sullivan 2006, 5. See also O'Sullivan 2006, 15-16. O'Sullivan argues that the crisis of representation is also, fundamentally, a crisis in the prevailing notions of subjectivity. This parallels closely my investigation, yet I shift focus from the problematics of subjectivity or, more accurately, from modes of subjectivity to the processes of encounter where subjects, amongst others, are in formation.

culture and weaves intimate links from there to other areas of culture, politics and ethics.

The thesis performs the role of a result, an end of a journey, while it does not really aim at closure. In the beginning of Ahtila's work *Consolation Service* (1999) the voice-over narrator explains that the story concerns ending: "The first section describes how to do it, in the second it happens. The third section is a kind of a consolation service." The story unfolding in this thesis borrows the narrative structure of the quoted work with slight modifications: the introduction presents in two parts why and how the journey has taken place, in the following chapters it happens, and the conclusion could be described as an ending – yet this aims to serve, simultaneously, as another beginning, or an opening outward and forward.

The journey told here entwines, moreover, with the structure of my argument, both in the introduction and in the thesis as a whole. The subsections of the second part of the introduction track the entangled paths I have taken with Ahtila's works and Irigaray's thought. This maps out also the two main parts of the thesis: the Girl and the address. It is followed by theoretical grounding and positioning of the key concern of the argument, the address of the viewer. Finally I lay down the concepts that have carried the argument forward and around which the chapters are organised: staining, haunting, thinking aloud and witnessing. But, first of all, why has the journey taken place, and why should it be told?

#### THOUGHT IN ACTION

This is a story of a search for action, or for modes of possible action. An urge to act, following encounters with various forms of visual culture, has driven both the research and the process of writing that has given shape to this thesis. On the one hand, this has been fed by a growing frustration as a witness to the wealth of media reportage and documentary forms of narration faced with on a daily basis. The available forms of spectatorship, from

consumption to deconstruction, as well as the implied modes of knowledge production and distribution have failed somehow to account for the experience of these encounters. Even more acutely, they have not offered me ways to respond – not only to understand but also to act out these engagements as truly productive, future-oriented.

On the other hand, Ahtila's works have challenged my adopted position as a critical reader of visual culture and the associated refined methods of interpretation. The works refused to give representation to, for example, the notion of excess I was investigating, as will be discussed shortly. Neither did the existing models of critical focus on either the cinematic apparatus or narration appear sufficient for the investigation into the modes of operations of the works. The works defied capture in terms of comparisons of conventions such as those of avant-garde film and classic narrative cinema, or video installation art and cinema. The enquiry into how they troubled these distinctions or appropriated and reworked the possibilities of these practices appeared to yield no satisfactory responses to, not to mention explanations of, the lure of the works.

Close reading is the method that emerged in the process of research and writing. It is prevalent throughout the thesis and the journey mapped out here. The wealth of audiovisual and textual details drew my attention closer and closer until my readings no longer interpreted aspects of the works or wove connections between them. The attempts at assigning signification led to myriad dialogues between the work and a number of recent critical concerns in philosophical thought. The works did not provide illustrations for the concepts and questions in my writing. Nor did I aim to translate the audiovisual language of Ahtila's works to another conceptual language, or to claim there was such a referential relationship between them. Rather, I argue that Ahtila's practice has allowed me to bring together a wide-ranging set of questions that have urgency for me as well as appear central to the current debates in the fields of visual culture and critical thought. The close reading of the works facilitates in the thesis further dialogue between the works and the critical concerns. It mediates as well between the various theoretical

approaches linked here through the art works and my descriptive accounts of the minutiae in them. Furthermore, as argued in more detail at the end of the thesis, the work has also offered a starting point for enquiries into questions that cannot be contained by the works themselves or by my dialogue with them. Ahtila's work has, thus, had a unique impact on my approach and thought. Yet, I claim this may be likewise at the heart of the interest and presence it has gained over the past decade in the field of international contemporary art, where it persists unfitting to the recognisable trends in moving image, such as the so-called documentary turn.

The close readings do not explain what the work communicates or how it operates as such. However, my method gestures towards an understanding of the work as highly conceptual thought in its own right. As such it could be connected to a lineage of conceptual art instead of, or alongside, the traditions of figurative and narrative practices. Yet, the positioning of the work in relation to an art historical genealogy or the making of claims about contemporary art practices in a wider scale do not constitute the focus of my research here. Rather, the field of visual culture and the shifts aside from the problematics of representation have encouraged me to adopt another approach: I engage with Ahtila's work as a mode of thinking aloud or, in other words, as thought in action. This notion of thought (examined in depth in the chapter 3a: *Thinking Aloud*) emphasises the simultaneity of thought and action. Action does not follow thought, or vice versa, but thought acts in the world. This is also what allows for its connections with other thoughts.

My writing recognises and aims to put into further action this operation of the works. Thinking aloud myself, I do not simply discuss the work as thought in action or present its web of links with(in) other thought. I do not write about the work or certain critical discourses, but with them. This mode of writing with is closely connected to the move aside from textual reading strategies and the problematics of representation in the field of visual culture. It has allowed my thought to move. The practice of writing with art works rather than about them implies a break away from the hierarchical question concerning who determines the work's meaning, as Irit Rogoff has argued.

She describes this as a process where the thoughts and images found in the works drive critical investigations on, while the theoretical discussion locates the art works within cultural debates they are not usually placed in dialogue with.<sup>4</sup> I would underline, furthermore, that this approach shifts attention from the determination of meaning altogether as well as undoes the writer's position as an interpreter of an object of study. The writer becomes instead entangled in the production of a myriad of novel connections, where various modes of thought co-exist and feed each other. This has many affinities with the method described above as close reading. It also resonates powerfully with the critical concern at the heart of this thesis, that of the address and the space opened up by it, where distance or a mediation persists defying attempts at fusion as well as capture.

I argue that Ahtila's work, the philosophical discussions visited here, as well as my work are all concerned with how to achieve this kind of space necessary for transformative encounters and how to inhabit it. Furthermore, the aim here is to allow these differing views and their productive interactions to act in this text and to make space for further dialogue, call for further action. This is what my thought, and writing, is for. Thus, the method of close reading cannot be detached from the key question driving my work: How to act when addressed, as a viewer?

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<sup>4</sup> Irit Rogoff, "Studying Visual Culture", in Nicholas Mirzoeff, ed. *The Visual Culture Reader*, (London & New York: Routledge, 1998), 26. My approach here is largely indebted in particular to Rogoff's thought. See also Elfving & Kontturi 2005.

## 2B. THINKING WITH

### WITH THE ART WORKS

The initial focus of the research was on the works of Eija-Liisa Ahtila and other contemporary Finnish female artists, whose photographs and moving image installations presented a series of female characters that appeared to disrupt conventional representations of women and femininity.<sup>5</sup> Drawn to the appropriation of certain near-stereotypical gendered tropes, I set out to explore what kinds of alternative modes of picturing and understanding femininity may be emerging in the works. What kind of a promise held, for example, the female protagonists seemingly in the midst of internal turmoil yet defiantly holding onto a sense of agency? Or, those who appear to confuse the boundary between the innocence associated with girlhood and the embodied sexual desire of mature women?



EIJA-LIISA AHTILA *If 6 Was 9* (1995-6)

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<sup>5</sup> The artists, whose practice I initially also focused on, include Elina Brotherus and Salla Tykkä, both of a younger generation than Ahtila yet established in the international art world. This raises questions about the representation of a marginal culture, which would have led me to assumptions of a shared cultural identity of some kind and to an investigation of influences etc, i.e. to trace a common (art historical) genealogy. Instead, the aspect of cultural specificity that remains of relevance to my current research, yet will be beyond the scope of this thesis, relates to (Finnish) language used in Ahtila's work and how this affects the address of the works and the viewer's engagement with it in the international scene. Notably, the other artists previously focused on do not, generally, use spoken or written language in their works.

My first encounter with Ahtila's work, the installation *If 6 Was 9* (1995-6), coincides with my absorption into Luce Irigaray's writings and the problematics of the excessive feminine.<sup>6</sup> This was followed by a critical attempt to bring together in my research theoretical and visual investigations of the disruptive force of the feminine, matter and fluidity etc, as radical challenges to the binary logic. Ahtila's work, significantly, refused to give visual form to this notion of excess according to my expectations. It ruptured my project and, eventually, demanded another approach.<sup>7</sup>

Elements associated with female embodiment, sexuality and subjectivity, appeared to be, nevertheless, repeatedly employed in Ahtila's works: for example, details such as red colour and spatial openings, or themes such as the breaking down of a unified subject position. Her work also troubles habitual spatial and temporal coordinates in its appropriation of the language(s) of cinematic narration. Therefore, I stuck to my tools of exploration. They were primarily offered by Irigaray's thought and, in particular, her critique of the "logic of the same", where sexual difference is locked in a binary relation and femininity is only recognizable as the (inferior and negative) opposite of the masculine norm.<sup>8</sup> Irigaray's notion of mimesis, the playful repetition shortly discussed in more detail, provided me with means to examine how the art works in question ruptured the operations of

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<sup>6</sup> I saw Ahtila's work in the exhibition *NowHere* in 1996 at Louisiana Museum of Art in Denmark. This coincides with my discovery of Pipilotti Rist's practice, which played a central role in my research until I returned to Ahtila.

<sup>7</sup> On discussions of the excessive feminine and art, with an emphasis on touch, materiality, transience etc, see e.g. Rosemary Betterton, *An Intimate Distance. Women, Artists and the Body* (London: Routledge 1996); M. Catherine de Zegher ed., *Inside the Visible: An Elliptical Traverse of 20th Century Art*. (Cambridge Massachusetts: MIT Press 1996); Hilary Robinson, *Reading Art, Reading Irigaray: The Politics of Art by Women* (London & New York: I.B.Tauris 2006). The connection of excess to notions of boundary and limit, i.e. how rethinking of excess demands a rethinking of the limit, weaves a link from this earlier research to my current enquiry. Excess will be also discussed in this thesis in relation to the notion of exposure and it connects with the problematics of sustainability that my argument touches on towards the end. See Rosi Braidotti's association of sustainability with the critique of excess, which demands a rethinking of the (feminine) excess in terms of rupture, away from transgression of boundaries. Rosi Braidotti, *Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics*. (Cambridge: Polity Press 2006a).

<sup>8</sup> "The logic of the same" or "the law of the same" refers in Irigaray's writing to dualistic logic, or the "phallogocentric order", where difference is always defined as an opposite, a mirror or a negation, of the familiar and the same, i.e. the norm. This binary logic can therefore accommodate or recognise neither difference that deviates from that which is already known nor change, i.e. openings in the enclosed circle formed by the opposites. See e.g. Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1985a), 25–34.

this dualism and pointed towards that which cannot be accommodated within it. As a strategy of jamming the languages of dominant discourses it seemed relevant in the conceptualisation of the operations of Ahtila's works.



EIJA-LIISA AHTILA *TODAY* (1996-7)

Writing about the work, I also aimed at my description of it to produce the effects of strategic repetition, i.e. to allow for something unexpected to emerge. Finally, from between the lines of detailed analysis, a figure arose. It was a girl in a red shirt, in the work *Today* (1996-7), who appeared to linger on the thresholds of the narrative realm as if its narrator. This one and the same figure focused my attention on a speaking subject that stands out visually yet seems to have no clear position of her own and, simultaneously, on a mode of speech that seems to be directed at the viewer. It led to the two stages of my research, which became the two main parts of this thesis: one focused on the figure of the Girl and the other on the address.

First of all (Part 2: *The Girl*), I set out to examine this found figure following Irigaray's claim that the Girl is no-thing in the logic of the same, positioned before any markers of female sexuality.<sup>9</sup> This was also supported by the

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<sup>9</sup> Irigaray 1985a, 48.

argument of Deleuze and Guattari that the Girl's body is the first one stolen in the fabrication of opposing organisms.<sup>10</sup> Her position as the foundational site of erasure allows, thus, for the disruption of the binaries in a different way than the excessive feminine does. The Girl encouraged rethinking of excess not as fluidity and materiality, but in terms of surface with nothing to hide.

A key question driving my research was, how could something that is unmarked by the languages of representation be articulated without reducing her back to the same dualism or locking her into yet another discursive frame. Writing about the various female characters veiled in red in Ahtila's works I caught glimpses of a figure that may only unveil itself in its mobilising effects on others and its surroundings. The research was led towards a notion of a decentred subjectivity, which is in constant process in relation to others and to the spaces inhabited, etc. The rethinking of female morphology in non-unitary terms of interdependence instead of feminine unbound fluidity or maternal fusion, suggested a model of subjectivity not based on essence or identity. Therefore, it also appeared no longer necessarily gender specific.<sup>11</sup> Yet, the works refused to give a representation to this. The Girl as

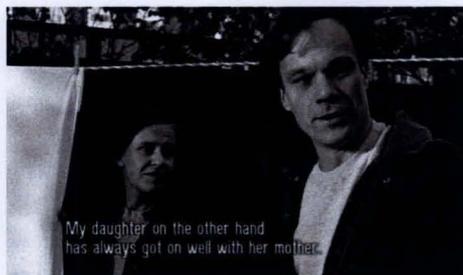
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<sup>10</sup> Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: The Athlone Press 1988), 276.

<sup>11</sup> See Irigaray's rethinking of feminine morphology with concepts, such as the lips and the viscous, and other feminist theories on the maternal that trouble clear distinctions of one and two, or one and the other. E.g. Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One* (Ithaca New York: Cornell University Press 1985b), 23-33; Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger, "The With-In-Visible Screen", in M.Catherine de Zegher, ed. *Inside the Visible: An Elliptical Traverse of 20th Century Art*, (Cambridge Massachusetts: MIT Press 1996). This has resonated in my mind with Jean-Luc Nancy's notion of singular plural. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural* (Stanford California: Stanford University Press 2000). Emphasis on the process of interconnections drew me also towards Deleuze and Guattari's notion of becoming, and particularly the work of feminist theorists such as Rosi Braidotti and Elizabeth Grosz, who have brought the thought of Deleuze and Guattari into dialogue with Irigaray's thinking. They notably persist on the continuing relevance of sexual difference while sketching out trajectories of thought, ethics and politics beyond it. See e.g. Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994a); Rosi Braidotti, "Of Bugs and Women: Irigaray and Deleuze on the Becoming-Woman", in Carolyn Burke, Naomi Schor, Margaret Whitford, ed. *Engaging with Irigaray* (New York: Columbia University Press 1994b), 111–137; Braidotti 2006a; Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press 1994); Elizabeth Grosz, *Space, Time, and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies* (London & New York: Routledge 1995). See also Tamsin Lorraine, *Irigaray and Deleuze: Experiments in Visceral Philosophy* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press 1999); Dorothea Olkowski, "Body, Knowledge and Becoming-Woman: Morpho-logic in Deleuze and Irigaray", in Ian Buchanan & Claire Colebrook, ed. *Deleuze and Feminist Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000).

a figure did not figure, but appeared as an event. It triggered a shift of focus from possible modes of embodied subjectivity this figure may suggest to concerns about its formation in singular contacts. Moreover, it initiated a move crucial for my argument from unveiling that, which has remained unmarked, to surfaces that do not hide anything as such. This meant a shift in my approach from interpretation and re-signification to critical encounters.

The focus of my research returned to the ways that Ahtila's characters speak (Part 3: *The Address*). They address the camera as if talking to the viewer, and at times as if to themselves, but hardly ever directly to each other within the narrative. First of all, I turned again to mimesis in the examination of how some of the works seem to mimic stereotypical modes of speech that reflect oppositional values and ideas associated with masculinity and femininity: An authoritative father in *Me/We* (1993) is incapable of having a dialogue with his family and, instead, attempts to speak for them all. A woman in *Okay* (of the same three-part installation, 1993) appears to be, then again, open for the inhabitation by other voices and unable to hold onto the boundaries that distinguish her from others. Instead of reinforcing these readings the works can be said, however, to reveal both positions to be untenable. They appear symptomatic of impossible cultural ideals attached to the boundaries of gendered subjects. The works drew my attention to how speech functions on these very borders, simultaneously reflecting and producing relations.



EIJA-LIISA AHTILA *ME/WE* (1993)



EIJA-LIISA AHTILA *OKAY* (1993)

The characters' modes of speech can also be, at times, associated with mimetic femininity in their apparently citational nature. Often the characters seem to be as if reading out a script or borrowing someone else's words.

Another repetitive mode of speech is found in descriptive narration, such as in *The House* (2002), where the female protagonist describes her house as if mapping its coordinates and her position within it. Yet, instead of securing the boundaries of herself and of the house the description leads to their increasing confusion. Description is pushed beyond its representative function and may allow for something yet-indescribable to emerge. These modes of speech undermine the transparency of the message in various ways. They draw attention from what is said to how the characters speak. The performative nature of speech is, thus, emphasised: use of language is always repetition of certain conventions and codes, but it is also an event in itself.<sup>12</sup> Citationality is what gives us a sense of responsibility for the ways we repeat certain kind of speech, as Judith Butler has argued.<sup>13</sup> Yet it also brings with it potential for re-signification and re-contextualisation. According to Butler speech can, therefore, operate on the borders of the unsayable and open the boundaries of legitimacy in speech for new emergent modes of speaking.<sup>14</sup> Hence, not only does repetition promise openness to novel significations, but also to different ways of communicating.



EIJA-LIISA AHTILA *THE HOUSE* (2002)

In my research the modes of speech in Ahtila's works have not so much pointed towards what is unsayable, but to how speech operates beyond or aside from signification. The works guided me to another key concern of my argument: the orientation of speech. This outward reach is neither reducible back to who speaks nor to where the speech originates from or where it is

<sup>12</sup> On performativity, see J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words* (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press 1962); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York & London: Routledge 1990). Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York & London: Routledge 1993).

<sup>13</sup> Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York & London: Routledge 1997), 27.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

directed to. The distinction of the problematics of the address (discussed here shortly) from modes of speech will make this clear. The question is no longer simply about how the works address me, a viewer, but how I am implicated in this address.

#### WITH (IN/OUT) MIMESIS

The relationship between art and theory entwines closely with the key moves that have marked my research journey. My work can be characterised as a steady move away from the problematics of repetition. What is at stake here is, in particular, a step aside from the application of theory to the interpretation of art. This means not only a shift from approaching the works as deconstructive of representations of femininity but also from the definition of my own readings as strategic repetitions. First this led me to map the intersubjective space between the works and the viewer, then on to the rethinking of communication, and finally to a reworking of my position as a viewer, a critical thinker and a writer.

Reiteration has been a way of thinking with the works in my writing. Instead of making sense of what I see, however, the descriptive accounts of various aspects of the works have been doing the same as the observations in *The House*: making things gradually more complex and incomprehensible. The descriptions have ceaselessly unsettled my analysis and points of view. Here the retelling of my research journey also allows for a move beyond making sense, beyond interpretation and representation. This implies a shift of focus from what takes place in the works to what happens in an encounter with them.

This I claim to be one possible way of moving beyond mimesis. Irigaray introduces mimesis, a deliberate assumption of the feminine role, as an initial strategy in the undoing and questioning of the “tight-woven systematicity” of the logic of the same:

“To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it. It means to resubmit herself – inasmuch as she is on the side of the “perceptible”, of “matter” – to “ideas”, in particular to ideas about herself, that are elaborated in/by a masculine logic, but so as to make “visible”, by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible: the cover-up of a possible operation of the feminine in language. It also means “to unveil” the fact that, if women are such good mimics, it is because they are not simply resorbed in this function. *They also remain elsewhere*”.<sup>15</sup>

With mimesis Irigaray reveals that in the continuous reproduction of the logic of the same both matter and the feminine, as well as difference, are excluded from the oppositions that supposedly define them. As a condition of the binary logic this repression offers, as a kind of a blind spot, possibilities for imagining other modes of signification. This elsewhere where women remain is not outside or before discourse, but within it. Mimesis mobilises meanings and values attached to sexual difference without, however, laying foundations for another logic as such:

“the issue is not one of elaborating a new theory of which woman would be the *subject* or the *object*, but of jamming the theoretical machinery itself, of suspending its pretension to the production of a truth and of a meaning that are excessively univocal.”<sup>16</sup>

The deliberate assumption of the feminine role as a mirror can cause it to no longer simply reflect the prioritized masculine but to unsettle this opposition. It opens a space of resemblance. As Judith Butler argues, with mimesis Irigaray refutes the equation of resemblance with copy.<sup>17</sup> Appropriating the very role allocated to femininity as a mirror, i.e. inauthentic and secondary, mimesis aims to unsettle the very foundations of dualism based on the oppositions of original and copy, depth and surface, solid and transient, etc.

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<sup>15</sup> Irigaray 1985b, 76.

<sup>16</sup> Irigaray 1985b, 78.

<sup>17</sup> Butler 1993, 45.

Representation is defined in these same terms with its persistent reference to an underlying essence. Mimesis should, thus, trouble it as well. Furthermore, if mimesis opens towards something beyond the binary logic, I claim it must also lead beyond the problematics of representation. Its initial operation may well be the unveiling of what is reproduced in representations and how this is done. It may also tease out silences and contradictions, i.e. possible openings, within the operations of representation. Yet, it must reach further.<sup>18</sup> If the feminine, as it appears in Irigaray's thought, is approached as a "movement of destabilization of identity" following Rosi Braidotti, it is a project of making space for that which is impossible within the binary structures of, for example, knowledge and representation.<sup>19</sup> What else could this imply than the establishment of another logic or production of alternative models of subjectivity?

This research attempts to answer the question with a shift of attention onto communication, while remaining in close dialogue with Irigaray's thought. In addition to mimicry, resemblance and the feminine itself, Irigaray has reconsidered a series of other notions associated with femininity, such as touch and proximity.<sup>20</sup> In her work these notions emphasise indeterminate and intermediate spaces as well as the dynamic of ceaseless change and openness. They trouble the closed circuit of oppositions, such as one and the other. Within feminist philosophy and art theory these notions arising from Irigaray's thought have been both appropriated and critiqued, in particular as alternative definitions of femininity – at times as essentialist, at others as strategic re-evaluations that challenge the masculine norms.<sup>21</sup> Irigaray's work can be, however, read as playful repetition in itself. These notions can be, then, considered beyond the problematics of sexual difference. They do not merely deconstruct the prevailing order, but open a path out of these frames.

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<sup>18</sup> Irigaray states that mimesis is a possible strategy in "an initial phase". Assuming the feminine role deliberately "means to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus to begin to thwart it". Irigaray 1985b, 76.

<sup>19</sup> Braidotti 2006a, 87 & 183.

<sup>20</sup> See e.g. Irigaray 1985b, 23-33, 79; Luce Irigaray, *I Love to You: Sketch of a Possible Felicity in History* (New York & London: Routledge 1996), 121-128; Luce Irigaray, *The Way of Love* (London & New York: Continuum 2002), 15-53.

<sup>21</sup> See e.g. Carolyn Burke, Naomi Schor, Margaret Whitford, ed. *Engaging with Irigaray* (New York: Columbia University Press 1994); Robinson 2006.

Central here is, in my view, an orientation in Irigaray's work through the rethinking of the ethics of sexual difference towards an increasing emphasis on the questions of communication. Touch, for example, no longer appears in the recent texts as a challenge of the feminine to the masculine prioritisation of vision. Instead, it is associated with the encounter that takes place in communication. As Irigaray writes, "it is essential that the other touch us, particularly through words".<sup>22</sup>

Touch implies proximity. A difference always remains in it, like in resemblance, never allowing for the reduction of the other to what is already known. Touch neither threatens with nor promises fusion that is associated with the maternal and the material. Instead, it draws attention to the space between subjects, from the subjects to their edges, to the surfaces of contact. This no longer calls for a repositioning of the subjects. They happen together in the space of communication that is opened up by the outward and toward reach of speaking and listening, which Irigaray stresses over the exchange of messages.<sup>23</sup> Her thought has, thus, remained integral to this research and its shift of focus on to the address.

#### ON THE ADDRESS

With Ahtila's works I have been drawn to focus on the mode(s) of address instead of who or what addresses me. The inexpressive, citational mode of speech, together with the address of the camera, disrupts the coherence of the illusionary fictional realm. Its otherwise unnoticeable boundaries turn into thresholds. The fragmented positions of the characters are, then again, reflected within the structure of the multi-screen installations and the perspectives allowed for the viewer. The characters appear insecurely situated, not quite recognized as speaking subjects by themselves, or by others within their world, or by me, a viewer. Their address seems to have no

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<sup>22</sup> Irigaray 2002, 18.

<sup>23</sup> E.g. Irigaray 1996, 109-119; Irigaray 2002, 15-53.

fixed direction, or address, either.<sup>24</sup> It does not, therefore, offer me the privilege of any more clearly recognised position than the characters themselves have.



EIJA-LIISA AHTILA *IF 6 WAS 9* (1995-6)

In order to lay the foundations for the argument developed in this thesis, my understanding of the notion of the address is mapped out here in relation to some theoretical discussions of it. In particular Vivian Sobchack's introduction of the concept into the discourse on spectatorship of cinema has been central to my thought. The following discussion crafts out a path from the questions of where and who to the investigation of how address operates and what it does. The address has got built into it a reference both to a place and to a movement. According to Sobchack,

“*address*, as noun and verb, both denotes a location where one resides and the activity of transcending the body's location, originating from it to exceed beyond it as a projection bent on spanning the worldly space between one body-subject and another.”<sup>25</sup>

Furthermore, Sobchack claims that a subject is affirmed both at and as an address.<sup>26</sup> The notion of address refers both to situatedness and outreach. It is oriented toward the others as well as connects the present situation with the past and the future yet, nevertheless, remains immanently located in all

<sup>24</sup> Compare with Louis Althusser's claim that “practical telecommunication of hailings is such that they hardly ever miss their man”. Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes towards an Investigation”, in *Lenin and Philosophy: and other essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press 2001), 118.

<sup>25</sup> Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1992), 25.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

its possible becomings opened up.<sup>27</sup> This understanding of the address is at the heart of my investigation.

Address is something both the film and the spectator, as well as the filmmaker, possess, Sobchack argues. The engagement between the spectator and the film appears as intersubjective and gives rise to what I call the space of address.<sup>28</sup> In Sobchack's discussion this space troubles the distinction between what is shared and what is individual: she writes, for example, of the possibility to reside imaginatively in each other while remaining "discretely embodied and uniquely situated".<sup>29</sup> This calls for a rethinking of spectatorship, identification, and related concerns, such as empathy, away from fusion and immediacy, towards communication based on the recognition of irreducibility.

According to Sobchack the address, as a projection toward the other(s), has to find a hospitable host in order for communication to be possible. The viewer is, therefore, not a passive receiver, but takes actively part in the encounter by way of, amongst others, comparison of experiences and viewpoints.<sup>30</sup> This makes possible both dialogue and ruptures, i.e. divergences, which give the viewer heightened awareness of the differences between her/his and the film's embodiment and situation.<sup>31</sup> This is also what allows for convergence and rapture which, Sobchack stresses, means "identification of the other's "path" or intentional trajectory with (not as) my own".<sup>32</sup> It is a matter of similarity, not sameness, which is precisely what makes non-predetermined becoming possible in the encounter between the viewer and the film. Moreover, the emphasis lies here not on the recognition

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<sup>27</sup> See Sobchack's emphasis that address "is able to reflectively connect that body both with its own future and past situations and with the bodily situations of others". *Ibid.*, 261.

<sup>28</sup> Sobchack defines intersubjectivity as "the emergence and distinction of myself from other selves", and refers to an intersubjective space that exceeds individual situations. *Ibid.*, 55. She calls this "a third, transcendent space". *Ibid.*, 25. This relates to her distinction of transcendent from transcendental vision, whose confusion is, according to her, at the heart of the theories of cinematic identification. *Ibid.*, 268-9.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 261.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 262, 171-2. This also relates to the questions of silence and attentiveness, which I will return to later.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 286.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 274.

of the other but on the other's orientation and movement as comparable to mine. The space of address allows for one to journey with the other. This relates closely to the notion of witnessing, which I focus on in the rethinking of active viewership instead of the figure of the host proposed by Sobchack.

My research concentrates on the address in cinematic installations and differs, thus, from Sobchack's phenomenological argument that focuses on the intersubjective engagements between the spectator and the film as embodied beings.<sup>33</sup> I focus on the visual gestures and modes of speech that trouble the separation of the fictional realm from the space of the viewer and, simultaneously, unsettle the viewer's position. Therefore, my argument does follow Sobchack's move away from the understanding of the film either as a mirror, a canvas or a window mediating illusions.<sup>34</sup> Theorisation of the spectators' relationship with cinema has focused to a considerable extent on questions of identification and ideology, Sobchack argues. She distinguishes two theoretical positions that characterised particularly the discussions of 1970's and 1980's: Marxist theory investigated cinema as an ideological apparatus that interpellates the viewer and speaks the culture, while psychoanalytic theory drew attention to the confusion of the spectator's and camera's vision in false identification. She distances, thus, her argument from the theory of suture, which brought the two strands of thought initially together, as well as from the Marxist and psychoanalytic discourses that developed critically from it. Cinematic experience appears in these theories monologic, Sobchack claims and proceeds to develop an argument for a dialogic understanding of cinema around a notion of the address.<sup>35</sup>

Many cinematic installations problematise the views of film discourse as outlined above, while opening up for the viewer other possible modes of

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<sup>33</sup> For Sobchack this lays the primary foundations for the secondary, though simultaneous, structures (ideological, rhetoric etc) and codes (that communicate the subjectivities of the characters etc). *Ibid.*, 8, 12, 278.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 285.

<sup>35</sup> Sobchack 1992, 18. On suture see e.g. Robert Stam, *Film Theory: An Introduction* (Malden: Blackwell, 2000), 136-139. On critical discourses following from the theories on suture, see e.g. Christian Metz, "The Imaginary Signifier", in *Screen*, Summer 1975 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 14-76; Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", in *Screen*, 16, no. 3. Autumn 1975 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 6-18.

engagement with film.<sup>36</sup> However, it is not so much my focus on a specific form of visual culture, such as installation works, but examination of relational engagements and communication in these encounters that detaches my argument from both the frame of film theory and the phenomenological approach guiding Sobchack's thought. In my argument emergence is what is at stake, in the address of the viewer, not the subject positions or their production or reinforcement.

This allows, amongst others, for a return to Louis Althusser's discussion of interpellation, as another important theoretical account of the address. Althusser claimed that ideology acts by hailing individuals as subjects and that ideology, in fact, is this very hailing.<sup>37</sup> Interpellation draws attention to how subjects are called into being by an address and, specifically, recognition and misrecognition of themselves as the addressed. This is a reoccurring event that, according to Althusser, takes place in everyday rituals that guarantee the subject's sense of concreteness and irreplaceability.<sup>38</sup> (Further discussion of interpellation and the address in the chapter 3a: *Thinking Aloud*.)

Therefore, while their singularity is reinforced, the subjects actually appear as ceaseless processes, products of their intersubjective encounters with others, dependent on the recognition of themselves and of each other. These interactions take always place within the frame of certain ideologies or discourses<sup>39</sup>, which are produced simultaneously with the subject(s). The promise of change built into the address is underlined in the discussion of interpellation by Donna Haraway, who emphasizes that subjects who mis/recognize themselves in a discourse "can and do refigure its terms,

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<sup>36</sup> Moreover, I suggest that cinematic installations can problematise further the distinctions between e.g. presentation and representation, or primary and secondary structures and codes, which Sobchack refers back to yet emphasizes as non-oppositional. Notably she associates them both with mediation, which is of central importance for my understanding of the space of address. Sobchack 1992, 11-13.

<sup>37</sup> Althusser 2001, 117-8.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>39</sup> In the shift from the notion of ideology to that of discourse I follow here Donna Haraway, see e.g. Donna Haraway, *Modest\_Witness@Second\_Millennium.FemaleMan@\_Meets\_OncoMouse*<sup>TM</sup> (New York & London: Routledge 1997), 49-50.

content, and reach".<sup>40</sup> How I can and do mis/recognize myself tells about the limits of discourse and of my own subject position as well as may hint at possibilities beyond them. This echoes Sobchack's thought that the possibility of rapture and rupture, and of similarity and difference, in the relation between the viewer and the film allows for recognition of other modes of being, or of becoming other.<sup>41</sup>

Furthermore, interpellation means interruption amongst other things, as Haraway stresses.<sup>42</sup> Hailing is an event that never simply reinforces but momentarily exposes all the parties for reconsideration and change.<sup>43</sup> This allows for a step aside from recognition. Moreover, it facilitates a shift from the oppositions of identification and interpretation, immersion and detachment that haunt the investigations of both the address and spectatorship. As an interruption the address gestures towards that, which takes place between, the intermediate. The space between the addressee and the addressed is not simply that of a specular relation, but an opening within and beyond that, which was thus ruptured – such as an established relation. The mapping of this space of address aims to make explicit that the address is not simply to be found in the work, nor is it produced by whoever speaks or produces speech. What happens, when I respond to the work as a call, as an address? How do I, in turn, address the work?

If both the work and the viewer possess an address, as a location and an orientation outward, the space of address under my focus is potentially a site of sharing. Sobchack suggests that address to the world may intersubjectively converge while address in the world is never the same.<sup>44</sup> This immanent address is, however, not unaffected by change as it opens outward, I argue. Yet, in its very irreducibility it denies closure of the space of address opened up. Address could be, therefore, seen as mutual.

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<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>41</sup> Sobchack 1992, 286.

<sup>42</sup> Haraway 1997, 49–50. She refers here to the interruption of both the subject and the body politic.

<sup>43</sup> See further focus on exposure throughout the thesis in terms of a rupturing encounter.

<sup>44</sup> Sobchack 1992, 286.

Sobchack's notion of mutuality as experienced by the spectator with the film problematises the definition of identification as either reduction of or absorption into the other.<sup>45</sup> According to Irit Rogoff, then again, mutuality is not based on shared background or language, but a shared understanding of the nature of saying and hearing.<sup>46</sup> This suggests that mutuality does not imply a shared location but a shared sense of each other's singularity and a shared ability to address, to reach out towards the others.

### ON THE VIEWER

The rethinking of the viewer's implication in the address stems here from the examination of the space between cinematic installations and the viewers. In order to locate the key concerns and the specific focus of my research I reflect them now briefly against some recent critical discussions of spectatorship and of practices closely related to Ahtila's, namely video and installation art. The emphasis on an intersubjective relationship between the viewer and the work appears central to the discussions of installation and video art. Moreover, decentred subjectivity and activation of the spectator's position have been key concerns there in close dialogue with film theory.<sup>47</sup> The so-called Cartesian subject, centred and unified by the renaissance perspective and much of visual culture, is destabilised in contemporary art practices, it has been claimed.<sup>48</sup> Two strands can be identified in this critique and its theorisations: One focuses on the viewer's embodied position, denying a single detached viewpoint from which to contemplate the work. The other, then again, draws attention to the fragmentation of the subject (re)presented and unveils gendered, racial, class and other hierarchical

<sup>45</sup> See e.g. Sobchack's discussion of the "mutual absorption in the world" that takes place in the space opened up by address. *Ibid.*, 273.

<sup>46</sup> See e.g. Irit Rogoff, "We: Mutualities, Collectivities, Participations", in *I Promise It's Political* (Cologne: Museum Ludwig, 2002). This resonates with Sobchack's thought that intersubjective engagement is grounded in a knowledge of what seeing is as well as what it is to be a seeing subject and a visible object. Sobchack 1992, 52-55.

<sup>47</sup> See e.g. Claire Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History* (London: Tate Publishing, 2005); Erika Suderburg, ed. *Space, Site, Intervention: Situating Installation Art*. (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

<sup>48</sup> See e.g. Amelia Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1998), 37; Bishop 2005, 11.

structures and ideological exclusions. The latter's concerns with visibility, legibility, representation and interpretation do overlap with questions of spectatorship, as Amelia Jones' argument discussed below exemplifies. Yet, my aim is to further overcome, or perhaps sidestep, this distinction.

The shift of focus from the apparatus, formal and narrative structures, and content to the intersubjective relation between the work and its viewers is linked with changes in theoretical methodology, particularly from Marxist and psychoanalytic theories to phenomenology and post-structuralist theories.<sup>49</sup> For example, Amelia Jones' critical examination of what she terms body art, from the 1960's and 1970's performance to the multimedia installations of 1990's, focuses on intersubjectivity from a feminist phenomenological position similar to that of Sobchack's. She also recognizes the artwork as both a site and a subject in complex intersubjective exchanges.<sup>50</sup> Jones stresses her own particular embodied positioning as the viewer of the works. Yet her main emphasis is on the various possible modes of subjectivity performed and articulated in the works.

Jones's investigation of body art focuses on the critical strategies of the works that are not unlike the playful repetition, or mimesis, proposed by Irigaray.<sup>51</sup> The modes of embodied subjectivity emerging from the works in her readings are intersubjective, fragmented and in process. They challenge the so-called Cartesian subject and the related hierarchical dichotomies of mind and body, subject and object, masculine and feminine etc.<sup>52</sup> Jones claims this to have deep resonances in the relationship between the artwork and its interpreters. According to her argument the viewer's implication is encouraged by the dispersal and particularization of embodied subjects in the works together with the opening of the art making and viewing processes

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<sup>49</sup> Phenomenological investigation into the relationship between the work and its viewers has been closely associated with installation art and its predecessor Minimalism from early on, but in relation to video and film phenomenological approach has more recently come to the fore. See e.g. Bishop 2005, 48-81; Jones 1998, 30; Sobchack 1992.

<sup>50</sup> See e.g. Jones' discussion of Vito Acconci's work, Jones 1998, 111.

<sup>51</sup> Jones writes e.g. about the strategic adoption of structures of femininity that "work through iteration to unhinge them", discussing this in terms of Judith Butler's theories of performativity. Jones 1998, 179.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

to intersubjective desires and identifications.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, she claims that body art practices “solicit rather than distance the spectator”.<sup>54</sup> Yet, she emphasizes that this is not due to some immediate presence of the embodied subjects/objects, but rather their interdependence and performative nature. This troubles also the viewers’ attempts to gain or sustain coherent and stable positions in relation to the works.<sup>55</sup>

Jones draws attention to the potential that lies in the denial of distance, which she associates with disinterested interpretive position.<sup>56</sup> This I investigate further, but with a focus on the space between the work and the viewer as the site where their encounter takes place. My argument moves here away from the very notion of exchange that is underlined by Jones.<sup>57</sup> It explores instead in depth what proximity, identification and, indeed, intersubjective engagement might imply if the embodied subjects are no longer fixed unities but in process and entwined with(in) the world – if they are mediated, multiply identified and particularized, as Jones claims in her discussion of 1990’s art practices and specifically new media installations.<sup>58</sup>



EIJA-LIISA AHTILA *THE HOUSE* (2002) (INSTALLATION VIEW)

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 107 & 160.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 181-2.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 30-31. My move implies, for example, a shift from thinking about the work as a site of exchange between the viewer and the artist.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 199.

The decentring of the characters' positions in Ahtila's works affects the viewer, I argue. This is achieved with various means that subtly rupture the conventions of cinematic narration and appropriate the possibilities offered by the installation format. The same means can be said to operate as distancing devices, simultaneously unsettling the viewer's centred perspective and denying immersion into cinematic illusion. My argument, nevertheless, does not build on an analysis of these different strategies. Moreover, I do not aim to place Ahtila's practice and the questions of spectatorship it raises in the context of specific artistic traditions or discourses around particular media or methods. What matters here is the challenge her work poses for the viewer, and for my thought, and what this allows for.

Problematization of the opposition of detachment and immersion, which haunts discussions of spectatorship, is of central importance here. The complexities of this distinction are present, for example, in the discourse around installation art. It has largely been framed by the claim that installations decentre and activate the viewer, while this argument has relied heavily on notions that emphasise immersion and immediacy, multi-sensory experience and participation, as well as heightened awareness, as Claire Bishop argues in her critical history of installation art.<sup>59</sup> What emerges here is simultaneity of active agency and disorientation, or a position both centred and decentred. This invites critical consideration beyond the reinstatement of the contradiction as characteristic of the viewing of installations. Closer examination unveils ambiguities troubling the above binaries. The distinction of psychological absorption and physical immersion, for example, points towards similar problematic assumptions of immediacy and fusion in the so-called cinematic illusion and the first hand experience of installations.<sup>60</sup> The

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<sup>59</sup> Bishop 2005.

<sup>60</sup> See the critique of the immediacy and presence by e.g. Dan Graham, which Bishop links with the critique of cinema by e.g. Christian Metz. Bishop 2005, 72-6; Dan Graham, *Two-Way Mirror Power: Selected Writings by Dan Graham on His Art* (Cambridge, Mass. & London: MIT Press, 1999); Metz 1975. See also, amongst others, feminist critique of the interpellation of subjects through identification in cinema, whereby certain norms and ideals are reinforced, Mulvey 1975. Spectator's position can also be seen to be determined through identification with the camera (and certain characters) as centred, in comparison to the decentred viewer in e.g. installations. Yet, both present modes of immersion, where the

association of active agency with a distanced and centred position calls for further examination of the entangled relation between the cinematic image, the installation and the viewing situation, as well as of the viewer's implication. The focus on the address allows for this as it draws out a space of encounter that promises neither detachment nor immersion as much as spacing, proximity and similarity.

The notion of the address as a process that entwines with the production of subjectivity may overcome also problems with decentring that assumes a subject already centred and, therefore, privileged and exclusive.<sup>61</sup> Furthermore, it facilitates a move away from the notion of intersubjectivity, which similarly implies certain pre-existing positions as well as the phenomenological reversibility between subject and object, self and other. I shift focus from subjects to what happens in their mutual engagements: What kinds of possible understandings of communication and being in common, of proximity and resemblance, this may allow for?

#### THE VEHICLES OF MY JOURNEY

Staining, haunting, thinking aloud, witnessing – the key concepts that carry my argument forward through this thesis have all emerged from my engagement with the works. Once they had taken shape they took up a mediating role between the works, the theory referred to and my thought. Initially I approached aspects of the works with these concepts as my analytical tools. Yet, instead of capturing the works and their operations in a conceptual frame, they ended up opening a space of proximity. The speech

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boundary between the work and the viewer disappears in different ways. Moreover, the opposed notions of identification and detached observation can both be seen to suggest loss of awareness of one's embodied position in relation to the work encountered, albeit the other is understood as passive and the other active.

<sup>61</sup> See feminist critique of post-structuralists, e.g. Rosi Braidotti, *Patterns of Dissonance: a Study of Women in Contemporary Philosophy* (Oxford: Polity, 1991), 1-15. Jones points out that the decentred subject has been identified as "a description of the fragmentation of the *male* subject in late capitalism". Jones 1998, 44. This relates to questions of participation and the critique of e.g. Nicolas Bourriaud's "relational aesthetics" for focusing on practices that address and reinforce a ready-made community. See Bishop 2005, 119.

of the characters, for example, resembled thinking aloud while they were positioned as if witnesses. Resemblance created between the concepts and the works an interval, where I was situated.

The concepts persisted on a slightly uneasy relationship with the works but this is what allowed for them to facilitate encounters. Concepts can be understood as not only tools of analysis but also of intersubjectivity, Mieke Bal argues.<sup>62</sup> Instead of offering a common language as a ground for dialogue, as Bal claims, I prefer to think of them here, however, as opening a space where we strive towards communication. Like the address, they do not reside or originate in the works, in the theory sources or in my thought. They are in the middle, yet not reducible back to any fixed positions or relationships. The address as a notion has, actually, grown out of and taken shape alongside the concepts of staining, haunting, thinking aloud and witnessing. It allows for the movement of the argument from one conceptual vehicle to another as well as knots them together in complex ways, here and through the chapters organised around them.

Furthermore, like the figure of the Girl, these concepts do not operate in representational terms. They do not have any set points of reference. They can be, nevertheless, also distinguished from the non-figurative figures that appear as markers of constant situatedness. The concepts suggest, instead, acts whereby this emergence can happen. They have also triggered the shifts of focus outlined here as well as the related ceaseless changes in my position as a viewer, thinker, writer. Staining drew me to the surfaces of the figures engaged with, yet only through haunting I became stained myself, entwined in the encounters, on my bounds. I began to realise that not only the characters but I was also thinking aloud, with the works. Witnessing this allowed for an acute awareness of the stake and the potential I held as a viewer.

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<sup>62</sup> Mieke Bal, *A Mieke Bal Reader* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), xxii.

The notion of the stain emerged, first of all, as I focused on the dynamics between the bright red shirt worn by the girl in *Today* and the room of an elderly woman bathed in red glow later on in the same work. It is informed by a strategic move away from the problematics of leakages and fluidity, and their intricate associations with femininity. It questions the assumption of an interior that is revealed by leaks and the implicit reference to an excess that troubles boundaries. Focus on the red shirt as a red stain referred me to the problematics of the surface as well as to the notion of the limit, no longer as a boundary to be transgressed or a dividing line, but as a threshold, a spacing and a site of contact (chapter 2b: *Staining*).

Stain as a concept encapsulates what may be called culturally coded varnish that makes embodied subjects together with their surroundings readable (see Elizabeth Grosz and Kaja Silverman).<sup>63</sup> Yet, it also refers to spots that may in their material thickness disrupt at any point this smooth surface of representation. I claim that both aspects of the stain are events on the surface, but can no longer be defined as purely representational as opposed to some assumed depth or matter. The stain appears as mediation, both as a shared ground that allows for reading and recognition, and as its disruption. In its opacity as a rupture it defies attempts at understanding and interpretation. Yet, simultaneously, it makes space for another kind of contact on our bounds. Like the shared cultural codes also the disruptiveness of, for example, the red shirt does not simply lie in the images but happens in the encounter with them. Stain refers, thus, not to evidence or a mark, but to an operation. What really is at stake here is constant staining that is not simply a matter of ceaseless re-signification or positioning of embodied subjects in the field of visibility.

In terms of both staining and haunting the argument steps aside from questions concerning the positioning of embodied subjects. They both call for a rethinking of boundaries as surfaces, as sites of contact to be inhabited.

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<sup>63</sup> Grosz 1994 & 1995; Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World* (London & New York: Routledge 1996); Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* (New York & London: W.W.Norton&Co, 1981).

They question what it is to be situated. With haunting the investigation moves from the problematics of the female body as a vessel to be occupied and fought over to a reconsideration of what the openness of bounds may imply (chapter 2c: *Haunting*). The ghost defies unity and fixity. Yet, what it figures are its social relations and not, for example, an alternative model of subjectivity, I argue following the theorisation of haunting by Avery Gordon.<sup>64</sup> It is located by complex entwinements within the world, yet these do not secure it a place as such, but haunt. Haunting is, then again, always an address, a demand to be reckoned with. The ghost signals beyond itself, but not necessarily or merely to a repression to be dealt with. Like the stain, haunting does not simply provide evidence. Thus, I approach the Girl as a ghostly figure that haunts, but not as a sign of something silenced or forgotten, to be unveiled, given voice or visibility to. If it resembles the ghost, the mobilising effects of the Girl lie in its outward orientation, not in what it may reveal of itself or of the structures it disrupts. It is haunted by its ever-evolving relations, while it haunts as an address.

The notion of thinking aloud allows me to consider responses to haunting, to the sense of urgency awakened by it (chapter 3a: *Thinking Aloud*). It has guided me to the problematics of address, shifting steadily attention from how the works speak to me, a viewer, to how my thought and writing may be an address in itself. Instead of defining a mode of speech it has gestured towards a space opened up by it. Not unlike stain and haunting, thinking aloud troubles the oppositions of interior and exterior or subjective and shared. It unsettles, thus, the distinction of thought and speech. It locates both on the thresholds, where the subject entwines with and encounters the world. Both thought and speech address, driven by and calling for dialogue. This demands reconsideration of communication as taking place in a space of mediation crafted out by the reach of speech, thought and, for example,

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<sup>64</sup> Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters. Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

listening (see Luce Irigaray and Jean-Luc Nancy).<sup>65</sup> This spacing is not determined by what is spoken, by and to whom. It defies attempts at bridging it with understanding based on capture and closure. Thought is not simply aimed at knowledge, nor is speech merely geared towards exchange of messages. When outward and forward orientation is emphasised, they allow for yet-undetermined contacts and connections with/in the world. Thought, speech and writing appear, then, both as modes of address in themselves and as acts that respond to a call.

The notion of witnessing arose, similarly to thinking aloud, from the attempts to figure out how the characters address the viewer (chapter 3b: *Witnessing*). The positions of the characters, as if both witnesses and narrators, create a sense of mediation between them and their personal narratives. The speech reminding of confession refers here, thus, neither to a truth, to a past, nor to an interior reality of a subject. Instead, closely connected to the discussion of thinking aloud, with witnessing I focus on what happens in the space opened up by speech. Witness accounts both address and require an address, i.e. someone who responds to them. Emphasis on the address suggests that witnessing operates beyond or aside from the problematics of representation, beyond documenting, making visible or producing truth claims. Testimonies, in their address, also point beyond the witness. They do not simply convey singular experiences, nor merely refer back to, confirm or give rise to subject positions (see Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub).<sup>66</sup>

Witnessing may allow for a rethinking of spectatorship in terms of active involvement, I argue indebted to the thought of Donna Haraway and Rosi Braidotti.<sup>67</sup> Witnessing appears as a critical practice of situated viewing that is driven by the urgency of communication and gives rise to an urge to act.

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<sup>65</sup> Irigaray 1996 & 2002; Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Gravity of Thought* (Amherst New York: Humanity Books, 1997); Jean-Luc Nancy, *A Finite Thinking* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

<sup>66</sup> Shoshana Felman & Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York & London: Routledge, 1992).

<sup>67</sup> Haraway 1997; Braidotti 2006a; Rosi Braidotti, "Posthuman, All Too Human: Towards a New Process Ontology" in *Theory, Culture & Society*, Vol. 23 (7-8) (London: SAGE Publications 2006b), 197-208.

Not unlike thinking, it is to be touched, moved to the edges of myself, of what I know, and of knowing itself. Witnessing, like thought and speech as well as the stain, has to do with exposure, yet not in terms of revelation or unveiling but encounter and emergence. The association of witnessing with silence is central here. Silence, like haunting, is no longer necessarily a sign of repression or something to be overcome. It addresses and needs to be listened to, yet it is also a space offered by the listener or the viewer-witness to the speaker. It refers to making space as well as paying attention to that which is not or cannot be articulated within modes of communication geared towards understanding. Both haunting and silence gesture towards another mode of knowledge that is not based on capture but rupture.

Staining, haunting, thinking aloud and witnessing are all characterised here by an orientation outward and towards. Due to its reach, witnessing can be argued to be always for something while this does not imply speaking on behalf, giving voice or visibility. An address involves the viewer-witness as much as, for example, the one giving testimony or the producer of an image. Similarly, the stain addresses and this address does not only originate in the one who appears as a stain. Or, in other words, when I am touched by a haunting, and called to reckon with it, I am already implicated. I am also “haunted by wordly contacts”, following Gordon’s words.<sup>68</sup> Viewing, thinking, and writing – like witnessing – are modes of response and of taking responsibility for one’s encounters as a viewer.

#### RUPTURES OUTWARD, TOWARDS, FORWARD

As suggested in the beginning, this research journey with Ahtila’s works has been carried forward by ruptures. The critical approach that has grown out of this process can also be discussed in terms of disruption. Initially related to the interference of binary logic and the representations of sexual difference, the notion of rupture has now become associated in my work with the

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<sup>68</sup> Gordon 1997, 55.

address and, for example, with encounter and compassion.<sup>69</sup> Rupture carries, thus, a sense of urgency. What to do when called for, and forth? What to do when interrupted into compassion, to be with and to be for? How to listen to or see the unrepresented, the repressed? What can this do apart from giving yet another voice or representation to them? I do not want to refute the value of the work that aims to give visibility to those un(der)represented, drawing attention to their plight and the cultural structures oppressing them. Neither do I claim to have exhausted the possibilities of deconstructing, for example, images of femininity. My argument does not move in a linear progression beyond representation and representational critique, but as a step aside, or as an interruption.<sup>70</sup>

For example, the figure of the Girl did not end up offering me any more precise coordinates, never mind a representation, of a relational subject. What emerged is a figure that no longer figures. With it I have not given voice to a subject previously unrepresented. Neither has my research striven towards knowledge of how the figure of the Girl is produced as a no-thing, or how this entangles with the experiences of historically and culturally specific beings. Instead, I aim to mobilise this impossible position and emphasise how it unsettles all others entwined with it. My research is, therefore, powered by a shift from what to how: from what haunts to haunting as a call to act, or, from what is witnessed and the position of the witness to the act of witnessing. This act is approached as an address, at an address that is constantly situated in the ever-changing web of connections with/in the world. These contacts are, furthermore, also what haunt us and give rise to the urge and the possibility to act. In a way, the emphasis on the how turns both the what and the where also into events.

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<sup>69</sup> On compassion see Nancy 2000; On Deleuzian thought on the encounter and becoming as rupture, see e.g. O'Sullivan 2006. This also relates to the notions of touch, proximity (or intimacy) and similarity (or affinity), all troubling the oppositions of meaning-matter, distance-fusion, different-same.

<sup>70</sup> More on the move "beyond" representation as well as its critique and crisis, which means neither a focus on content nor form, nor artist's intention nor textuality etc, see e.g. Butt 2005; O'Sullivan 2005. Note also my emphasis on figurative work and its non-representational aspects and/or address and affects. This connects as well as distinguishes my argument from the discussions on participation in art, experiential and non-figurative art forms, collective and activist practices, yet the positioning of my research in relation to this varied field of art theory is not relevant to my thesis.

EIJÄ-LIISA AHTILA *WHERE IS WHERE?* (2008)

Whether encountering evidence of tragedies or simple personal narratives, the distinction is sidestepped as my argument is no longer geared to veracity nor privileges the message. In the work *Where is Where?* (2008) the documentary material of the Algerian war calls for a witness but Ahtila's fictive narrative addresses the viewer as well. The implied opposition of mimesis and diegesis, or description and event, is problematised in this thesis in a multitude of ways (see chapter 3a: *Thinking Aloud*). For example, the synopses of Ahtila's works perform as re-enactments of first encounters and problematise, thus, assumptions of immediacy. The space of resemblance, initially activated by Irigaray's strategic mimesis, undoes also this binary. It allows for, amongst others, witnessing to be thought away from mere reinforcement or reception of something shown or revealed.

Therefore, I do not want to undermine the importance of the issues at stake but, on the contrary, to stress the urgency of the viewers' implication. This enquiry arises from a deeply felt frustration when called for as a witness. It is fuelled by a hope to open ways towards action beyond and alongside knowledge production and distribution. The knowledge provided by, for example, the media, or the understanding of the complex reasons behind things witnessed, does not seem enough. I write for a further sense of how

this all touches me. This may gesture towards potential ways of turning awareness to action. Implication does not then, primarily, refer to a responsibility that arises from an understanding of one's involvement. It promises empowerment, ability to do something. As a viewer and researcher of visual culture, what can my role be aside from interpreting or underlining the message? Or, alternatively, unearthing how the message was conceived and, for example, what prejudices or unspoken agendas it is driven by? What can be done beyond translating the message and allowing it to speak in different ways, in new contexts and alliances? How can and do I respond to the address of Ahtila's works or, for example, media imagery and news reportage, avoiding the reduction of it all to what is already known? This demands that the space of address remains an unbridgeable rupture, where proximity and similarity are attainable and aimed for instead of recognition, immediacy or detachment.

My argument is characterized by a move to the edges, from interiorities to extremities. This does not reverse a hierarchical order but aims to sidestep it by focusing on the thresholds. The concepts discussed above do not, in the end, make sense of the address of or in the works, but suggest possible modes of response. Staining, haunting, thinking aloud, witnessing – they drew me to a space of resemblance. There not only the concepts had proximity with aspects of the works but I also became aware of the potential likeness of my own acts with the operations I found intriguing in them. Yet, I no longer mime the figures found in the works. My response is entangled with how I, in turn, address the works and beyond: how I actively allow for novel connections and complex mutualities that neither depend on predetermined identities nor require representations.

If I have been a witness to Ahtila's works, my witness account is not simply a reiteration of what has happened. The story of my research journey here, in this introductory chapter, continues the event and calls for witnesses. If my writing is a mode of thinking aloud, as suggested in the title of the thesis, it is characterised by an outward and forward orientation. This text is a space

where thought acts, responds to a call and makes its own appeal for further encounters, further ruptures.

## **2. THE GIRL**

## EIJA-LIISA AHTILA *TODAY* (1996-7)

The story unfolds in three parts on screens that form three walls of a square. It begins on the left-hand screen with a view across a chaotic yard of a small residential house. The image focuses first on a teenage girl throwing a ball on her own in the sun. She enters a dimly lit bedroom, where her father sobs uncontrollably on a bed. She tells that he has been crying all day following the accidental death of his father.

The next screen introduces an elderly woman. While emptying a dishwasher she talks about the society, the fear of maturity and the commodification of pleasure. The space darkens and a panning image gives a glimpse of a naked figure lying on a bed next door, while the woman's voice refers to her father and to the outside world.

The last part shows the father in a cottage by a lake talking about his father, avoidance of physical touch, a sense of failure, and his own fatherhood. His daughter lingers quietly by. The image moves onto a dark road where an old man lies down and disappears into the shadows of pine trees, while the father drives along the road. The man jumps up suddenly in front of a car.



## 2A. NO-THING LEAKING

### FIRST: NO-THING

*Today* (1996-7) begins with an image of a grinning mask, somewhere in a garden full of junk. A girl stands in front of a yellow metal wall. The bright sun highlights the colours of the girl's red shirt and blue skirt. "Today my father is crying", she begins. She is the narrator in her father's and grandfather's tragedy, which has just ended in the latter's death. Her sequence in the three-part narrative is introduced with the title *Today*. In contrast to the following parts called *Vera* and *Dad*, hers is not named at all. She is simply presented as the present, in the present, inhabiting a messy yard, a border zone or a grey area between the privacy of the home and the public space, the interior and the exterior realms.



EIJA-LIISA AHTILA *TODAY* (1996-7)

The girl in a red shirt focused my attention on the figure of the Girl that circulates actively, in a variety of guises, in visual culture. Unnamed, without a clear place of her own. I searched for her in theory and found her, yet again in numerous cloaks. She appeared as not-yet, no-longer, not-quite, not a woman or anything else. That is, nothing, as Luce Irigaray suggests in *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1985). Her reading of Freud shows how, according to his logic, Girl never was nor will be:

“what has become apparent to him about it, female sexuality can be graphed along the axes of visibility of (so-called) masculine sexuality. For such a demonstration to hold up, the little girl must immediately become a little boy. In the beginning ... the little girl was (only) a little boy.”<sup>71</sup>

Therefore, the Girl can only be imag(in)ed in relation to the boy and the form given to his body and sexuality. In this comparison she lacks, hasn't got big enough, has nothing to be seen, is invisible, Irigaray claims: “*Nothing to be seen is equivalent to having no thing. No being and no truth.*”<sup>72</sup> As Irigaray argues elsewhere the “idea that a “nothing to be seen,” a something not subject to the rule of visibility or of specula(riza)tion, might yet have some reality” is deeply threatening to the logic of the same.<sup>73</sup> The Girl as a no-thing can be approached as something other than an opposite or a negative, as something that defies the representational logic based on solid entities and sameness. This calls for a critical rethinking of her relationship to femininity, female body and their attributes.

As Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari argue in their discussion of becoming in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1988), it is the Girl's body that is stolen first “in order to fabricate opposable organisms and to impose a history, or prehistory, upon her.”<sup>74</sup> Her being is emptied of all materiality and, furthermore, meaning that could be rooted in the body. She appears as a virgin surface prior to any

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<sup>71</sup> Irigaray 1985a, 48.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Irigaray 1985b, 50.

<sup>74</sup> Deleuze & Guattari 1988, 276.

recognisable form or function, and without depth or essence. This allows for further erasure of all matter and difference that cannot be reduced to dichotomies. The Girl and her disembodied being seem to be the condition for the significations and forms given to the subject positions and sexualities of boy, man, and also woman, Deleuze and Guattari suggest. Yet, her sexuality and subjectivity can be seen, therefore, also as a historically and culturally specific weak hinge in the oppositional order and the determined lines of progress. How can anything be based on a negation or reflection of no-thing? Or, how can a no-thing become something, a woman?

If this is the first repression of the body and embodied specificity, her position as the foundational site of erasure allows for the deconstruction of the binaries in slightly different ways than the excessive feminine does, as will be discussed in detail shortly. The Girl as no-thing is positioned before any markers of female sexuality. When focusing intensely on this blank spot, what can be revealed? Maybe something that only unveils itself in its mobilising effects on others and its surroundings.

The no-thingness of the Girl keeps jamming the machines of representation and creating openings within it. She is a “fugitive being”<sup>75</sup>, as Deleuze and Guattari argue,

“an abstract line, or a line of flight. Thus girls do not belong to an age group, sex, order or kingdom: they slip in everywhere, between orders, acts, ages, sexes.”<sup>76</sup>

In an attempt to avoid abstraction that here threatens, again, to erase the unspecifiable specificity of the Girl, I focus on the openings created. This does not imply, however, search for a potential mode of subjectivity that may be waiting within the changing frames of representation and visibility. Instead, I examine what takes place on the surfaces that the Girl in her disembodiment draws attention to. She may unsettle everything and

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 271.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 277.

everyone else too in her flight from set positions and representations. Instead of a potential or yet-to-be-understood mode of being the Girl may (dis)embody dynamics of becoming. This has to be, however, thought away from linear development. The Girl is intricately linked with the notion of becoming-woman in the thought of Deleuze and Guattari. According to Irigaray, then again, the Girl spins playfully creating space for herself in relation to the mother, the same yet other, disrupting both linearity and the logic of the same. Rather than as not-yet I focus on the Girl as not-quite, following here Irigaray in particular. This relates becoming to resemblance, to the openness and the spacing implied in it. It also problematises predetermined line of development without, however, having to do away with the mother.<sup>77</sup>

I argue that the Girl poses a threat and is, therefore, given form by protective prohibitions that draw boundaries around her supposedly vulnerable being – which is not, cannot, should not – covering over her indeterminacy. Thus, the figure of the Girl circulates in contemporary visual culture as a site of constant negotiation and fascination, veiling and unveiling.<sup>78</sup> I do not examine, however, the numerous culturally and historically specific veils and bounds wrapped around her, nor what may be unveiled, but focus on particular figures veiled in red in Ahtila's works. Instead of trying to represent

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<sup>77</sup> Deleuze & Guattari 1988; Irigaray 1985a. See also the argument of Cixous and Catherine Clément, where the Girl appears as a base for the radical potential in the feminine that is not captured in the oppositional logic: she is the one without a place in the family, nowhere yet walled-in, and from this childhood (be)come women, flying/stealing. Hélène Cixous & Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman* (Minneapolis & London: Minnesota University Press, 1986), 54 & 69. For the discussion of the complex differences and affinities between feminist concerns, and particularly Irigaray's thought, and the thought of Deleuze and Guattari see e.g. Ian Buchanan & Claire Colebrook, ed. *Deleuze and Feminist Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000); Rosi Braidotti, *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002); Dorothea Olkowski, *Gilles Deleuze and the Ruin of Representation*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999. The problematic associations and critical dissociations of the Girl and the mother could be considered in relation to those famous figures of girls who appear in literature and visual culture without references to or the presence of mothers, such as Pippi Longstocking and Heidi. See e.g. Astrid Lindgren, *Pippi Longstocking* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971); Johanna Spyri, *Heidi* (London: Dent, 1974). In Ahtila's works the girls appear also notably without their mothers. This investigation, however, remains beyond the scope of this thesis.

<sup>78</sup> See e.g. the exhibition *Girl's Night Out* and my article in the exhibition catalogue: Taru Elfving, "The Girl, Unmarked", in Elizabeth Armstrong, ed. *Girls' Night Out* (California: Orange County Museum of Art, 2003a).

the unrepresentable, my argument focuses on the ruptures the Girl creates and inhabits in the field of visibility.

How can something that is unmarked by the languages of representation (verbal and visual) be approached without locking her into yet another discursive model or frame. Can I think and write about the Girl without losing sight of her specificity, but still avoid the reduction of these problematics to sexual difference? Following Elizabeth Cowie's distinction between woman as sign (referred to in the following as the Woman) and representations of women, I focus on the Girl as comparable to woman as sign, i.e. not referring as a signifier directly to a signified, or implying as a representative figure some "real" beings.<sup>79</sup> This sign is produced and it operates in various discourses, from film and photography to psychoanalytical and philosophical traditions. At the core of my project here is the belief that it consists of considerable fractures and contradictions. The relation between the Girl and girls is interwoven in complex ways in the process of their cultural production, and can only be touched on in my mobilisation of various figures that in different ways draw attention to these sites of rupture. Furthermore, in the discussion of the Girl I prefer the term figure over that of the sign. This allows for a complex interlacing of the figures encountered in Ahtila's works and the figure of the Girl, as well as distinguishes these all from representations. The notion of the figure also navigates the opposition of meaning and matter, which I claim the Girl problematises.

My aim is not to map out the relationship between the Girl and girls. Nor do I strive towards a corrective redefinition of the figure of the Girl. Instead, my argument concentrates here on three strands that entwine yet do not define each other: the figure of the Girl and the concepts of the stain and haunting. A space of mediation, of proximity yet not fusion, opens not only between the figure of the Girl and the concepts but also between the Girl and the figures

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<sup>79</sup> Elizabeth Cowie, "Woman as Sign" in Parveen Adams & Elizabeth Cowie, ed. *The Woman in Question: m/f*. (London: Verso, 1990). The Girl in my project can be also understood in terms of Teresa de Lauretis' distinction between the historical beings called women and woman, the latter being a construct of various dominant discourses, functioning as both their "vanishing point" and "specific condition of existence". Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't*:

in visual culture. This space I aim to inhabit in my writing. It allows me to stray from a focus limited to girls, as defined by age, to a discussion of and with figures that can be related to the Girl in their operations and effects in Ahtila's works. The model of determined development between the Girl and the Woman can be, thus, further troubled. Moreover, I do not focus on the relationship between the Girl and the figures encountered and discussed, but explore what happens when they are associated with the notions of the stain and haunting as mediators. The figures are, therefore, not to be taken as representations or events of the Girl, or as illustrations or figurations of a concept.

Writing with Ahtila's works, trying to articulate their complex dynamics, have led to notions that may allow me to trace the ruptures caused by the Girl, yet leave her still undefined, unfixed. With them the Girl is thought away from linear development and the determinism of becoming a woman, the necessity of her no-thingness becoming marked with tropes of femininity, female sexuality and reproductive function. These notions do not directly refer to the Girl, but function in my project as mediators bringing different figures from visual culture, i.e. particularly Ahtila's works here, and from theory together into a dialogue. They allow her to be thought as that, which stands out for the gaze yet slips from its grasp, does not respect oppositions, solid boundaries and stable positions. She poses, thus, also a challenge to my place as a viewer, thinker, writer. The key concepts are the above-mentioned, the stain and haunting, which the following two chapters are organised around.

The concept of the stain has been borrowed here from Jacques Lacan (*The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, 1981), yet it initially emerged for me from the visual dynamics of coloured washes and spots in Ahtila's works and elsewhere in visual culture. Stain is explored in this thesis as a concept that, first of all, opens up possibilities for rethinking embodied subjectivity in the field of visibility. Focusing on red stains and, in particular,

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*Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (London: Macmillan, 1984), 5-6.

red shirts, I claim that the marking of female body with lipstick and blood, the locking of it in the surface-depth scenario, can be problematised. Could the Girl be actually thought of with an exclusive focus on the surface, as having no-thing to hide? The Girl may, then, allow for a reconsideration of what is excessive in the prevailing binary structures of representation and signification, not in terms of fluidity and materiality but never-ending negotiations with the smooth cultural stain that easily clots into disruptive stains. This takes place on the surface that appears, thus, to have depth and weight in itself. This poses a challenge to the notion of the feminine, as I will argue in more detail shortly, and disrupts both the economy of lack and of excess woven around femininity.

In Ahtila's works my attention is captured by red shirts, lipstick, light – stains that do not leak from any veiled interior. Rather, they draw attention to boundaries. Stain has to be here thought away from a notion of a spill-over or leakage that marks the site where the hidden depth and the surface mask collide as their separating boundary is momentarily troubled. This demands a rethinking of the body away from its paradoxical role as matter: either as corporeal superficiality in opposition to psychical depth, or as material truth against surface effects of masquerade. Instead of acting the role of surface or depth, the body may be approached as a set of forces, linkages and surfaces, that does not hide an otherwise unrepresented depth, as Elizabeth Grosz claims in her critical discussion of the gendered body in *Volatile Bodies* (1994).<sup>80</sup>

The concept of haunting, derived here from Jacques Derrida (*Specters of Marx*, 1994) and Avery Gordon (*Ghostly Matters*, 1997), allows for further examination of boundaries as surfaces.<sup>81</sup> As a haunting figure the Girl troubles the economy of visibility. It does not signify, refer as a mark or a sign to a depth or an elsewhere. As a surface effect, as I have claimed, it actually sets things in motion. This requires a refocus on the strategic distinction of

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<sup>80</sup> Grosz 1994, 120.

<sup>81</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (New York & London: Routledge, 1994); Gordon 1997.

the Girl and girls that I made in the beginning. The complex entwinement of the sign and the lived embodiment of gendered subjects and objects in their production has to be emphasised. This demands a move away from the notion of an embodied specificity as a core and an assumption of or implicit reference to beings outside of this production. As stressed earlier, with a reference to Elizabeth Cowie's argument, the sign should not be equalled with representation.<sup>82</sup> The figure of the Girl appears then as mediation, but not between matter and various significations given to it, or the real and an image, etc. Ghosts are signs signalling that a haunting is taking place, Avery Gordon writes. Haunting is mediation, she continues, a process of contacts and the possibility of becoming.<sup>83</sup> Do the figure of the Girl and the various figures in red, however, then not merely refer to a haunting but haunt themselves? They do not stand for something, an event, but happen themselves too. As ghosts they point beyond themselves yet not as representative figures, and not only at certain repressions etc, but to the multiple and ever-emerging worldly contacts that form them. I am entangled in this as a viewer – haunted, implicated.

The threshold is a notion that also demands rethinking here in relation to the Girl, the stain and haunting, as well as the trouble they cause on and for all kinds of boundaries. The threshold is not to be considered as an in-between, or a border separating two sides, or a boundary to be transgressed, but an opening as well as a site to be lingered in, from where to speak, see, think and listen. Not only is it spatial, but temporal as well as embodied. It is a now and here of an encounter, where notions of immediacy, linearity and solidity are unsettled. Threshold is not discussed here as a passage, such as teenage defined as a stage in a linear progression, where childhood turns to womanhood in a transition marked by the leaking of the body. Neither is it an in-between reducible back to its defining poles, nor a line to be crossed.

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<sup>82</sup> Cowie 1990, 133.

<sup>83</sup> Gordon 1997, 8, 19 & 142. Gordon writes also about the ghost as a symptom, representing something beyond itself, with a reference to a loss, something past. *Ibid.*, 63. Yet she emphasizes, simultaneously, throughout her argument the present and its future-orientation instead of roots in the past. My argument follows this emphasis and problematises the association of the ghost with representation.

Instead it is thought in terms of surfaces with thickness, border zones to be inhabited, points of contact and collision, mediations. The threshold allows me to negotiate the distinction of interior and exterior, as marking not only the space(s) and boundaries of an embodied subject but also as the site(s) where engagements between subjects may take place. Borders, limits and surfaces appear no longer as sites of closure punctured by points of entry or exit.

Here Luce Irigaray's discussion of the threshold in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (1993) is useful, as she reclaims the notion as part of her strategic re-evaluation of the attributes and representations of the female body. Yet, simultaneously, she weaves it into a critical rethinking of the normative (phallogocentric) model of subjectivity as well as of intersubjective relations and communication. Closely associated with this are her thoughts on the feminine, excess and the viscous, which are discussed in further detail shortly.<sup>84</sup> As will become apparent, the argument shifts emphasis gradually towards an understanding of the threshold as a site of encounter. This corresponds to the parallel move from strategies of repetition and deconstruction, i.e. from the problematics of representation as discussed in the *Introduction* in relation to Irigaray's thought. I also move away from the notion of the threshold itself with its persistent associations with the feminine and the in-between in my rethinking of the surface. The focus lies on surfaces and boundaries as thresholds, or in other words, as spacings that make encounters possible. This is where my engagements with the stain, haunting and the Girl take place.

If the Girl is to be found on the thresholds, not-yet and not-quite, I have to also locate myself there. What does this imply: Focus on silences, ambiguities, contradictions and cracks? Strategic mimesis of the operations

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<sup>84</sup> E.g. Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (London: Athlone Press, 1993a), 18, 34-55, 141-142. See also e.g. Walter Benjamin's notion of the threshold as discussed in close relation to gender by Sigrid Weigel. She draws out, for example, the role of women as guardians of the threshold, the complex relation between past and present, as well as the significance of entrances as thresholds in terms of intertwinements, not as access to interiors, in Benjamin's thought. Sigrid Weigel, *Body- and image-space. Re-reading Walter Benjamin* (New York & London: Routledge, 1996), 89-93, 123.

of the Girl? Or, insistence on the surfaces? Can I learn from the Girl how to rupture, create and inhabit openings? At first I set out to rupture the codes and persistent conventions of language, when trying to imagine and articulate different modes of be(com)ing that the Girl may suggest. But as will become apparent, my attention was drawn from the disruptive operations to the spaces opened up, from attempts at rethinking modes of embodied subjectivity to surfaces. Can rupture be thought of as integral to encounters? Can disruption be reconsidered without a reference to a specific assumed order as such or as not in opposition to some dominant model? This may be where the potential of the Girl lies – not in any specific disruptive effects on the binary (or other) order, but in the haunting challenge she presents to all demands of definition and fixity of positions. My own detached analytical position in relation to the theoretical and visual material I am engaging with is, thus, also interrupted.

The Girl has been associated with thought, as Catherine Clément argues in her reading of Søren Kierkegaard. The philosopher appears, then, as her seducer. Yet, Clément claims, the Girl poses a danger, threatens to “smash the wheel of dialectical thought” with her unpredictable leaps. She leaps unlike a man, without deliberation and direction, without a running start and a set goal.<sup>85</sup> Neither the origin nor the destination of the leap of the Girl is determinable. As thought she is not definable by what she leaps from, what she ruptures, or where she lands. The movement itself is what matters, thought in action. Moreover, this suggests that she demands another approach to thought, another mode of engagement with her than attempt at capture.

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<sup>85</sup> Catherine Clément, *Syncope: The Philosophy of Rapture* (Minneapolis & London: Minnesota University Press, 1990), 87, 92. She refers here, in particular, to Søren Kierkegaard, *The Seducer's Diary* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997). Clément's notion of leap is discussed further in relation to thought here in the chapter 3a. *Thinking Aloud*.

## LEAKS

A young woman, Susanna in Ahtila's work *Wind* (2002), throws a box-full of old lipsticks on the floor and arranges them in neat rows, upright and opened with all their redness on display. She sweeps a shelf empty, places it carefully on top of the lipsticks, and steps on it, crushing the lipsticks in a ritualistic, exhilarating act. She rejects a powerful sign of femininity, a symbol central to its mask.

EIJA-LIISA AHTILA *WIND* (2002)

The paradoxes of femininity are crystallised in lipstick. The desirable and idealised entwine in it with the forbidden unbound flesh and sexuality. With lipstick a girl becomes a woman. She enters into a tricky game, where her status is constantly negotiated on the shaky borderline between the ideal and the impure, the disembodied and the pure materiality. It is a matter of careful choices, moderation and right timing. Yet, does the red stain need to be rejected in this aggressive manner? Can it be appropriated in other ways, following the Girl who refuses to become Woman?

Of red stains lipstick and blood come to mind first. Matters of surface and depth. But can they actually be separated as such? Isn't the redness of lipstick a reminder, like a warning of what lies beneath the surface? What is it that stains here? Are there really any borders that the stains cross and simultaneously mark? The red stains inhabit the thresholds of inside and outside, depth and surface, nature and culture. They seem to point at a problem that lies exactly there, on the persistent distinction between inside and outside, which demands constant control of the differently marked gendered fluids. They refer to the interior fluidity of the body that breaks

through the veil of certain subjects, certain leaky bodies. Yet, in the following the red stains are distanced from their association with leaky bodies. The discussion here maps out the theoretical frame around the critical feminist discourse on fluidity and excessive feminine that, as claimed in the *Introduction*, Ahtila's works ruptured in my research. They refuse to give representation to excess in these terms and, thus, demand another approach to the stain. Excess itself is also thoroughly rethought later in this thesis, similarly in a different relation to the surface.

Celebration of fluidity and excess, associated with the female body, ends up easily reinforcing the binaries and norms it aims to challenge while merely reversing evaluations and priorities. Examination of the body as transgressive of the limits that frame and structure the prevailing cultural logic and its hierarchies, does not necessarily take into account what this transgressiveness in the end means: that the body always slips away from the grasp of definitions and its place as the other, the opposite and the negative. In order to think the red stains away from these rigid boundaries the body has to be addressed as a site of constant negotiation. As Elizabeth Grosz stresses:

"the body provides a point of mediation between what is perceived as purely internal and accessible only to the subject and what is external and publicly observable, a point from which to rethink the opposition between the inside and the outside, the private and the public, the self and the other, and all the other binary pairs associated with the mind/body opposition."<sup>86</sup>

Stains of lipstick and blood become one, but always layered and constantly shifting, as they meet in and on the body. These red stains mark the female body, as other, as the one on the side of matter, that has to be veiled and kept in control by the mask of femininity. Stain is not just a trace (of something) added on like lipstick, marking a site, yet coming from elsewhere, either colouring this surface with cultural signification or polluting it. But

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<sup>86</sup> Grosz 1994, 20-1.

neither is it simply a material proof,<sup>87</sup> marking a site of truth of an embodied subject and revealing its inherent lack of control. It is neither an effect of surface nor of depth, but what confuses this distinction. The problematics of borders and embodiment are central to the notion of the stain and, therefore, it tilts easily towards something abject, impure, and repressed.

Thinking about bodily substances that leave a mark, a stain, seep through and spread around, resist the border between inside and outside, I cannot ignore the concept of the abject. The abject points out how the notion of subjectivity is haunted by the repressed materiality of the body. Julia Kristeva defines the abject in *Powers of Horror* (1982) as:

"something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. (...) It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite."<sup>88</sup>

There is nothing abject as such without cultural evaluations and hierarchies that mark certain aspects of embodiment impure and polluting. Kristeva identifies two types of these polluting objects, excremental and menstrual, and emphasises that both of these are through twists of cultural logic attached to the feminine and the maternal.<sup>89</sup> The notion of abject brings together our decomposing bodies, reminder of our mortality, and reproduction. Death and birth join hands, beginning and end collide.

Could the abject be understood as a reference to materiality and (sexual) difference that refuse to be contempt with their allocated side as other, negative, and disrupt thoroughly the carefully balanced stability of the logic of the same? The abject refers always to the body, to the threat that matter

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<sup>87</sup> See e.g. Georges Didi-Huberman's critical discussion of the complex interlinking of indexical and symbolic/iconic readings of the stain on the Turin Shroud. Georges Didi-Huberman, "The Index of the Absent Wound (Monograph on a Stain)", in *October*, no 29 (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1984).

<sup>88</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 4.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

presents to hierarchical binary structures. Investigations into the realm of the abject can lead to celebrations of the body that fail to question these structures thoroughly. This reverts easily to just another set of oppositions and to reinforcement, even if re-evaluation, of the attributes of matter such as fluid, indefinable, and unbound. The radical challenge that the abject potentially presents to these distinctions is then lost.

The abject is that which forces us to face our materiality. It strikes a blow against our illusionary coherent and self-sufficient rational selves. Its close knit with the female body is just another desperate attempt to ward off the risk it presents to the supposedly gender-neutral subject. If only female bodies leaked, why would men care? The abject is materiality that has to be repressed in order to gain and sustain a subject position. It is something that belongs to me, but also always escapes from me, from my imaginary solid boundaries. As a detachable part of the body it is, nevertheless, intimately bound up with the subject.<sup>90</sup> Abject elements could be seen as marks, or stains, that subjects leave in their surroundings, spreading uncontrollably outside their borders as well as absorbing influences from elsewhere, through their porous boundaries. In addition to the subject's embodied attachment to the world, this could be thought of in terms of intersubjectivity. The abject reminds of our dependency and necessary openness to others, and to change.

Bodily fluids, whether considered abject or not, trouble the boundaries of the body reminding of its openness. Due to this threat, fluids are gendered and accordingly valued differently. Leaky body is a sign of deviation from the norm, the illusionary solid boundaries of the ideal subject. All leaky bodies – whether female, gay, sick, or child – are defined as other, and feminised.<sup>91</sup> In its relation to bodily fluids the problems in Kristeva's definition of the abject become pronounced. The conception of menstrual blood as abject, while

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<sup>90</sup> See e.g. Grosz 1994, 81.

<sup>91</sup> This threat of bodily fluids and the otherness of all leaky bodies has been pronounced in the discussion around gay male bodies after the outbreak of AIDS. See e.g. Peggy Phelan, "Survey", in H. Reckitt, ed. *Art and Feminism*. (London & New York: Phaidon, 2001a), 24.

semen is seen as non-polluting, calls for critical questioning.<sup>92</sup> As Grosz states, women have "same degree of solidity" as men, but they are persistently "represented and live themselves as seepage, liquidity".<sup>93</sup> Is this determined position as leaky, marked by the red stains added on the body, what the woman in *The Wind* rebels against?

Fluidity does not necessarily other the feminine as the opposite of everything masculine. It can also open ways to unsettle the discourse based on solid and stable oppositions, just like it threatens the subject holding onto its impenetrable boundaries. Moreover, it has been also critically rethought in discourses focused on otherness as well as on the dynamics of disruption and ceaseless change beyond the frame of sexual difference.<sup>94</sup> The argument here, however, focuses on the feminist theorisations of fluidity and excess. Luce Irigaray, amongst others, appropriates these notions in *This Sex Which is Not One* (1985) as tools for causing trouble within the rigid hierarchical oppositions. The playful repetition, i.e. mimesis discussed in the *Introduction*, reveals that "disruptive excess is possible on the feminine side".<sup>95</sup> Sketching out the potential of this excess she activates a number of attributes closely associated with femininity and the female body, e.g. tactility, simultaneity, fluidity and proximity. She emphasises these as properties that are never fixed and, therefore, never captured in the oppositions, but instead thoroughly unsettle their claim to solidity and stability.<sup>96</sup> Rethinking the significations and values attached to these terms

<sup>92</sup> See e.g. Grosz 1994. In her discussion of the paradoxes in the differentiation of gendered fluids, she notes e.g. that "seminal fluid is understood primarily as what it makes, what it achieves, a causal agent and thus a thing, a solid". Ibid., 199.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 203.

<sup>94</sup> See e.g. the critical rethinking of seepage as an active process of spreading within the structures of urban global capitalism by Raqs Media Collective and discussed further by Lawrence Liang. They apply the notion of seepage to the people and livelihoods excluded from or operating outside of the official legal frames, and claim that their operations make the structures porous from within. This troubles the distinctions of inclusion and exclusion, interior and exterior, not unlike the excessive feminine discussed here. Lawrence Liang, "Porous Legalities and Avenues of Participation", in Monica Narula et al, ed. *Bare Acts* (Delhi: The Sarai Programme, 2005).

<sup>95</sup> Irigaray 1985b, 78.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 78-9. On the challenge that Irigaray's notion of the feminine presents, see also e.g. Ellen Mortensen, "Woman's Untruth and *le féminin*: Reading Luce Irigaray with Nietzsche and Heidegger", in Carolyn Burke, Naomi Schor, Margaret Whitford, ed. *Engaging with*

Irigaray does not merely reverse them from negative to positive, but enquires what different ways they may open up for thinking of subjectivity away from unity. For example, “the mechanics of fluids” suggests a mode of being that has its formless form in constant flux, in a web of relations.<sup>97</sup> Key metaphor in this thinking of the feminine specificity is that of the two lips, which defies dichotomies as neither one nor two. The two lips act as a half-open threshold to the viscous that now appears as an element of touch instead of horror and disgust. As neither fluid nor solid, the viscous complicates further the notion of fluidity and the threat posed by it to the boundaries of a subject and the notion of an entity.<sup>98</sup>

The strategic appropriation of fluidity as a radical tool for rethinking subjectivity and difference is, however, connected problematically closely to the tropes of femininity and the form given to the female body. Yet, the accusations of essentialism seem to miss their target. As Judith Butler stresses in her interpretation of Irigaray in *Bodies That Matter* (1993), woman cannot have nor be an essence as she is excluded from the discourse. No essence can be found outside of the discourse either, because what is excluded is also implicated in the discourse, produced by this very exclusion. The excluded feminine and matter appear as disruptions within.<sup>99</sup> When discourse is set in motion and opened for change by mimesis, the notion of essence loses its position as a solid base for truth.

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*Irigaray* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

<sup>97</sup> Irigaray 1985a, 106-118.

<sup>98</sup> Mary Douglas writes also about the viscous as: “a state half-way between solid and liquid. It is like a cross-section in a process of change. It is unstable, it does not flow. It is soft, yielding and compressible. There is no gliding on its surface. Its stickiness is a trap, it clings like a leech; it attacks the boundary between myself and it.” Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Ark Paperbacks, 1984), 38. More on the viscous and the urgency Irigaray claims for it, see e.g. Irigaray 1993a, 18, 109-111. Compare to the description of female sexuality as horrifying, engulfing viscosity, by Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1984). Fluid and the viscous are often conflated, their difference in relation to oppositions not considered. See e.g. Grosz 1994, 195.

<sup>99</sup> Butler 1993, 38-9. Naomi Schor has also, amongst others, stressed that what is at stake in mimesis and the sexual difference it makes space for, is not essentialism, but “difference within difference”. Naomi Schor, “This Essentialism Which Is Not One: Coming to Grips with Irigaray” in Carolyn Burke, Naomi Schor, Margaret Whitford, ed. *Engaging with Irigaray*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 66-7.

Sexual difference and feminine specificity in Irigaray's writings do not refer back to biology, but to female morphology, Moira Gatens argues. Morphology according to her is reducible neither to anatomy nor to cultural signification of the body, but instead it functions as a mediator transgressing this opposition.<sup>100</sup> Therefore, Irigaray's metaphors can be understood as actively reworking and challenging significations attached to gendered bodies, as well as pointing beyond them. In the model suggested by the two lips, either-or becomes neither-nor or both-and. When subject appears as same yet different, neither one nor two, the notions of body and essence demand radical rethinking. This different mode of subjectivity, which does not depend on solid boundaries, has been modelled from female morphology, and specifically the maternal body, by a number of thinkers. Like the open form of female body, pregnancy blurs the distinction between one and the other. For example, the artist and theorist Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger emphasises these instances between subject and object, centre and nothingness, and the field of tangibility, where contact and separation are not opposed.<sup>101</sup> This allows us to think of a difference, which is not "based on essentialism, but on a webbing of links and relations", in Griselda Pollock's words.<sup>102</sup>

Expansive, or even excessive, possibilities are thus opened for discovering and creating new meanings. According to Pollock "the feminine is both the repressed of patriarchal culture and its excess, beyond yet inside its limits,

<sup>100</sup> Moira Gatens, *Feminism and Philosophy: Perspectives on Difference and Equality* (London: Polity, 1991), 115. See also on Irigaray and morphology, in relation to art and representation, Robinson 2006, 97-124. Detailed critical discussion of the problematics of essentialism in relation to Irigaray's work and its reception, and the risks involved in the persistent distinction between essentialism and anti-essentialism, is offered by Vicky Kirby in Vicky Kirby, *Telling Flesh: The Substance of the Corporeal* (New York & London: Routledge, 1997), 62-81. See also e.g. Christine Battersby, *The Phenomenal Woman: Towards a Feminist Aesthetics* (London: Polity, 1998); Moira Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies: Ethics, Power and Corporeality* (London & New York: Routledge, 1996); Elizabeth Grosz, *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists* (Sydney & London: Allen & Unwin, 1989); Grosz 1994.

<sup>101</sup> Lichtenberg Ettinger 1996, 105, 107.

<sup>102</sup> Griselda Pollock, "Introduction to The Within-In-Visible Screen", in M.Catherine de Zegher, ed. *Inside the Visible: An Elliptical Traverse of 20th Century Art* (Cambridge Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996b), 91-2. Symbolising the moments in late pregnancy allows us "to imagine the coexistence of the several, each unknown to the other, neither rejected nor assimilated, yet mutually affecting", Pollock argues in her discussion of Lichtenberg Ettinger's ideas. See also e.g. Battersby 1998; Michelle Boulous Walker, *Philosophy and the Maternal Body: Reading Silence* (London & New York: Routledge, 1998). Notably the critical rethinking and revaluation of the maternal body in these accounts moves away from the

that which will radically alter the system by emerging into signification.” Due to this paradoxical position, both transgressing and mediating the oppositions, the feminine heterogeneous meanings can only be recognised and treated as otherness. Pollock calls for the “reading of the inscriptions of the feminine”. Instead of inventing a new language so as to be able to recognise and articulate the feminine, we need to excavate and decipher these disruptions, the yet unarticulated and un-signified from within our culture and its languages of representation, she claims.<sup>103</sup> Interpretation of the traces of the feminine reveals how artistic practice, and critical engagement with it, can actively rework the negative position of the repressed opening it up for re-signification.

Flow of differences and ever-changing connections emerges from the gaps and silences of discursive texts, images and sentences, from within the various forms that masquerade as solid and impenetrable. How does this all relate to the Girl? Is she here merely a to-be-maternal-feminine? The girl appears, and disappears, in the discussion of the relation between mother and daughter by many of the aforementioned thinkers. Irigaray, amongst others, has emphasised the importance of thinking the specificity of this relation between the same yet other, which presents another challenge for the opposition of self and other.<sup>104</sup> But is there really no way of approaching her without the figure of the mother, the maternal origin and future, always haunting the scene? Are there no traces of the Girl to be deciphered? Or, does the Girl defy the very attempts at reading and direct me away from interpretation and re-signification?

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strict linear separation of semiotic and symbolic.

<sup>103</sup> Griselda Pollock, “Inscriptions in the Feminine”, in M.Catherine de Zegher, ed. *Inside the Visible: An Elliptical Traverse of 20th Century Art* (Cambridge Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996a), 74.

<sup>104</sup> Irigaray discusses the importance of female genealogies, starting from the mother-daughter relationship, throughout her writing, see e.g. Luce Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993b); Luce Irigaray, *Je, Tu, Nous: Toward a Culture of Difference* (New York & London: Routledge, 1993c). See also e.g. Brousselle Walker 1998.

## IMAG(IN)ING FLUIDITY

Back to the red shirts and other stains I have come across in Ahtila's works. The significations and threat of red cannot be explained away with a reference to the red fluid that leaks the truth of the female body and locks it into the oppositional structures. The stain in question here is neither the truth of matter oozing through the masks that try to hide it, nor fluidity that haunts the boundaries of subjects and genders them. Nor is it mere cultural signification added on the surface as lipstick. Red stains trouble the distinctions of surface and depth, outside and inside, mask and essence. The no-thingness of the Girl's embodied being is no longer securely captured as a to-be-woman, to-be-bloodstained, as this redness is playfully repeated until it slips from its fluid role, both in Ahtila's works and in my writing. With the Girl my argument, thus, has to step aside from the discourse on fluidity and leaks briefly laid out above. Importantly, however, it could be described as not-quite my critical focus. The aim here is to make space for another approach through resemblance, not to define it through negation. Like the no-thing, it is not a matter of opposition.

As discussed earlier, Irigaray focuses attention on the Girl as a no-thing and suggests this has deeply disruptive implications to the logic of the same that privileges vision over other senses. This potential of the no-thing corresponds also closely with Peggy Phelan's notion of the unmarked, which she introduces in her critique of "the ideology of visibility" that "erases the power of the unmarked, unspoken, and unseen" in *Unmarked* (1993).<sup>105</sup>

"The unmarked is not spatial; nor is it temporal; it is not metaphorical; nor is it literal. It is a configuration of subjectivity which exceeds, even while informing, both the gaze and language."<sup>106</sup>

Approached as unmarked the disruptive no-thingness lurking in the gaps and silences of representations is no longer as closely linked to female

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<sup>105</sup> Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*. (London & New York: Routledge, 1993), 7.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 27. As will become clear later, my argument shifts focus from subjectivity, which is

morphology, femininity and reproduction. Yet, in a similar way to Irigaray, Phelan appropriates the un-marked and with it draws attention to the contradictions haunting the oppositional structures.<sup>107</sup> The unmarked remains unmarked by all its markings, like the no-thingness of the Girl persists despite definitions as not-yet or not-quite. Furthermore, like the no-thing, the unmarked cannot be reduced back to a negation of the visible or the signifying.

It is important to avoid appropriating notions such as the feminine, the unmarked or the no-thing as merely abstract metaphors. The disruptive potential of these concepts can only be activated on the line between, where biology cannot be distinguished from cultural signification, matter from meaning. Positioning the feminine in the gaps and silences of the languages of representation becomes problematic if its complex relations to specific morphologies are not taken into account.<sup>108</sup> The same applies to the figure of the Girl. This precarious balancing act is at the heart of my encounter with the Girl.

So as not to lose the dynamics that the Girl as unmarked presents us, I try and think the stains away from determined lineage, the border crossing in all its ambivalence. As Elizabeth Grosz argues, the paradoxical position of womanhood on the border between child and adult, nature and culture, is marked by the stain:

"The idea of soiling oneself, of dirt, of the very dirt produced by the body itself, staining the subject, is a "normal" condition of infancy, but in the case of the maturing woman it is a mark or stain of her future

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at the heart of Phelan's discussion of the unmarked.

<sup>107</sup> Phelan does also refer to the paradoxical position of the female in her discussion of the unmarked: "The male is marked with value; the female is unmarked, lacking measured value and meaning. Within this psycho-philosophical frame, cultural reproduction takes she who is unmarked and re-marks her, rhetorically and imagistically, while he who is marked with value is left unremarked, in discursive paradigms and visual fields. He is the norm and therefore unremarkable; as the Other, it is she whom he marks." *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>108</sup> The complexity of the risks involved in the rethinking of the feminine is exemplified by the long romantic tradition, where the feminine appears as an attribute of a creative male hero yet has completely different significations when attached to a female. A number of post-structuralist thinkers have been also criticised for failing to address this in their use of the metaphor. See e.g. Christine Battersby, *Gender and Genius: Towards a Feminist Aesthetics*

status, the impulsion into a future of a past that she thought she had left behind."<sup>109</sup>

This suggests that the stain needs to be approached differently in order to rupture the vicious cycle, even if it already in itself questions linear development. This may be allowed from the position of the Girl that is not simply defined by future-as-past of womanhood, as pre-bloodstain. My aim is here not to privilege the Girl over the feminine as a disruptive site. The Girl, however, offers a rather unmapped territory that is curiously often sidelined in theoretical accounts while her presence in visual culture, historical and present, is notable. I try and take a place, tentatively, in this territory of the unmarked, no-thing. This may be a way to mobilise oppositional logic, yet without having to start again from fluidity and leaky bodies, the maternal and material, or the abject as discussed earlier.

With a close engagement with Ahtila's works I examine how and if the notion of the stain may reveal the impossibility of the oppositional distinctions of fluid and solid, surface and depth, external and internal, before and after. The stain cannot be considered as simply fluid then, but ambiguous, with weight and form even though unbound. The stain could be understood as something arising not from a certain kind of bodily specificity that can be named for example fluid, but from a complex web of embodied subjectivity within the field of representation. It would be no longer relevant only to certain types of bodies that leak, but to all modes of subjectivity and representation. And, as I will argue, it leads to questions about the viewer's implication as well as beyond subjectivity and representation.

The stain as a concept allows me, therefore, to move the discussion around the Girl beyond sexual difference without, however, abstracting the Girl herself. Can these questions be approached without a direct focus on specific bodies in visual culture? This does not imply a choice between the investigation into the specificities of female sex or the focus on the cultural

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(London: Women's Press, 1994); Battersby 1998; Braidotti 1991; Grosz 1994; Grosz 1995.

structures of signification and performative play with identities, associated with the feminist practices of 1970's and 1980's respectively.<sup>110</sup> Neither does it necessarily refer to the more complex investigations that appear in the 1990's artistic production, where the bodies no longer claim truth-value, and where the female body as object became linked to other, such as racialized bodies.<sup>111</sup>

Rather, a shift of attention in the examination of embodied subjectivity can be also detected away from the material presence of the body, as in Ahtila's works. Both space and time can also be seen as embodied in representation and narration.<sup>112</sup> In Ahtila's works the space and time of her narratives appear as a layered process of connections that knot in and around the characters, with uncertain or constantly shifting coordinates. This allows for the recognition of "the space that slips away, the words that fail and images that melt, when one attempts to represent embodiment", that Peggy Phelan emphasises. Ahtila's works make me aware of the haunting "still-to-be-interpreted" that Phelan calls attention to. This reminds of the incongruity yet inseparability of the body and both visual and verbal languages.<sup>113</sup>

What strategies does moving image in installation offer here? Ahtila could be said to appropriate in subtle ways the strategy of repetition, mimesis, for example of various tropes of masculinity and femininity. The viewer's attention is drawn to ambiguities played out in different levels of the narrative

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<sup>109</sup> Grosz 1994, 205.

<sup>110</sup> This description simplifies considerably the complexity of different practices and various issues at stake here in the shift that has been detected in feminist approaches across the two decades. For a more nuanced overview see e.g. de Zegher 1996; Jones 1998; Amelia Jones, "Survey", in Tracey Warr, ed. *The Artist's Body: Themes and Movements* (London & New York: Phaidon, 2000); Phelan 2001a.

<sup>111</sup> See e.g. Jones 2000, 42; Phelan 2001a, 24. See also Catherine de Zegher's discussion of the object in 90's art, a complex field of enquiry which according to her often "entails a restriction of subjectivity to sexuality, gender, and ethnicity and dismantles historical reflection", yet has also developed "a dialectic between the mnemonic dimension and politics of cultural representation, between human-made/technological reality and that imposed by nature". de Zegher 1996, 26-7.

<sup>112</sup> See e.g. Amelia Jones' argument that space appears as embodied in recent art: "The body/self is understood as a *kind of social space*". Jones 2000, 42.

<sup>113</sup> Phelan stresses the need to recognize this slippage in its complexity, which according to her has not been sufficiently noticed in the debate around essentialism, where "the relationship between verbal language and visual image played a crucial, but still often

and the imagery. Everything becomes marked by charged symbolism, or the absence of it, and seems to call for the viewer's active interpretation.<sup>114</sup>

Repetition of different tropes of gendered body and subjectivity turns into detouring as they start to appear over-coded and slightly out of place. Reading habits are disrupted and focus shifts to the annoying cracks and silences. As a viewer I cannot rely on the usual detaching devices of learned codes.

Could this, actually, suggest a shift aside from interpretation and signification of the "still-to-be-interpreted", calling for another mode of engagement?

Negotiating the field of visibility, examining its limits and mobilising its margins, Ahtila explores in her installation works the numerous possibilities cinematic narration offers beyond the conventions of mainstream cinema. Her works reveal how disturbances to the perfect smooth flow of narrative, its linear space and time where everything appears as solid entities, can allow for a complex weaving together of space and time, embodied subjects and their relations. I argue in the following that while straightforward readings are here denied the input demanded of the viewer can no longer be limited to interpretation. A kind of a fluidity that rejects clear-cut forms and fixed borders could be said to be appropriated here as a quality of the narrative, time and space, the characters and their connections, as well as of the viewer's role. It is no longer associated only with certain leaky bodies, or unbound subject positions.<sup>115</sup> This fluidity in Ahtila's works is, however, not a smooth blending of all aspects, but full of clots and ruptures. Different levels cannot be clearly distinguished – sounds, voices, images, colours blur together in a web of shifting connections. Rather than as fluid, I approach Ahtila's works with the notion of the stain, which activates thresholds of and

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unmarked, antagonistic role". Phelan 2001a, 37-8.

<sup>114</sup> This exaggeration as a strategy could be compared with Peggy Phelan's discussion of Pipilotti Rist's video works, although the two artists reference different elements and genres of moving image. According to Phelan the accenting of colours emphasise their artifice creating a visual surface, where everything needs to be interpreted, even light. Peggy Phelan, "Opening Up Spaces within Spaces: the Expansive Art of Pipilotti Rist", in *Pipilotti Rist* (London & New York: Phaidon 2001b), 35.

<sup>115</sup> This could be compared to how Elisabeth Bronfen writes about "extreme fluidity" as the overall impression in Pipilotti Rist's videos: "thematic and structural celebration of disturbances is a performance of boundary blurrings". Elisabeth Bronfen, "(Entlastungen) Pipilottis Fehler ([Absolutions] Pipilotti's Mistakes)", in *Pipilotti Rist*. (London & New York: Phaidon, 2001), 87.

within visibility as spacings that open also for me, a viewer. What is asked or allowed when focus shifts onto the mobile surfaces as sites of contact?

**EIJA-LIISA AHTILA *THE WIND* (2002)**

The narrative unfolds on three adjacent screens. It takes place mainly in a domestic interior with blue walls, interspersed with images of an exterior of an apartment block, a hallway, clouds. In the beginning there are no characters in the space yet a conversation is audible: a man tells a woman that the draft she complains about originates in her imagination. A powerful wind blows from an open window and fills the room. A young woman appears and gradually adds to the chaos by, for example, pulling bookshelves onto the floor.

The apartment is visited first by three teenage girls who never engage directly with the woman while she stands next to them and talks about their visit. A man also enters and talks for a while with the woman seated on the shelves turned into a bed in the middle of the room. He leaves abruptly as she attempts to touch him.

Addressing her words to the camera the woman speaks about her insecurities, with school and with her body image. She tells about the reoccurring rage that makes her bite her hands and moves then on to frustrations with issues such as poverty. At the end the woman claims she is, rather than feels, anger and melancholy. She climbs up the wall to a shaded corner of the room.



## 2B. STAINING

### RED SHIRT

My encounter and attempt to write with Eija-Liisa Ahtila's video installation work *Today* (1996-7) drew my attention to the first red shirt, the one worn by a teenage girl. A colleague pointed it out to me after I had in a presentation elaborately circled around the embodied presence of the girl. Then I noticed the faded redness of the older woman's, Vera's, shirt matching the red glow of her surrounding space in *Today*. The bright red shirt appeared in a more recent work of Ahtila, *The House* (2002), where Elisa, a young woman in a red shirt, inhabits her house dotted with red details. In another work, *The Present* (2001), I discovered a woman in a red polo neck crawling over a bridge on all fours. Yet, before I came across these last two shirts, I was caught unintentionally wearing one myself while giving a paper *Red Shirt*.



EIJA-LIISA AHTILA *TODAY* (1996-7)

Back to the beginning then, to the girl's red shirt in *Today*, which also evoked the notion of the stain for me in the first place. The red shirt is the first strong visual point of contact that stays with me throughout the work. It appears as a kind of a surplus of the image. The girl in her bright red shirt stands out from her surroundings. She does not seem to be becoming a woman by slowly turning from pale girly pink to the full womanhood of fleshy red, from the non-signification and disembodiment of a Girl to a wife, mother or mistress, a gendered subject and object. Her red shirt is a stain that disrupts the smooth surface of representation and signification, and places her on the threshold - of the realm of the narrative, womanhood, visibility. What does the red shirt veil or unveil? Or, should I rather ask, what does it do? Maybe this veiling, actually, unveils knots of relations and connections, where linear coordinates and binary distinctions collapse. The smooth surface of representation and signification is, thus, turned into a surface as a site of contacts. This suggests a shift from leaks and fluidity, as well as from the notion of boundaries as limits threatened by transgressions. These questions are at the heart of the following exploration.

Once the red shirt had caught my attention I was drawn to all red stains, and suddenly aware of all spots of strong colour as well as the different coloured filters that seem to wash over images. The colour schemes in the works of Ahtila, and others, gain new pertinence. Maybe unreasonably much, but this very break with reason might lead somewhere. Colours are after all heavily charged with different cultural codes and associations. In art history colour has been opposed to the rational and controlled line, placed on the side of matter and feminine, threatening in its seductiveness.<sup>116</sup> Red, in particular, is tied in complex knots to gendered materiality of the body. Therefore, the coloured stains need to be thought away from the notion of uncontrollable excess and the underlying dichotomy. How can the veiling of the body in red do anything but reinforce the clichéd associations?

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<sup>116</sup> Critical discussion of the 19th Century views on the opposition of masculine rational line and feminine colour, see e.g. Anthea Callen, *The Spectacular Body. Science, Method and Meaning in the Work of Degas* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1995).

The notion of the stain, appropriated from Jacques Lacan, allows for another approach to colour here, I argue.<sup>117</sup> In my reading of the stain I follow Kaja Silverman's interpretation of Lacan's notion of the screen in *The Threshold of The Visible World* (1996) as a culturally generated image repertoire, an effect of the gaze, which always mediates the encounter between a viewing subject and an image/object. According to her, subjects are constituted and differentiated through the screen, which functions also as a conduit for the introduction of historical and social variability.<sup>118</sup> She refers to the notion of the stain, which she claims can better than the screen grasp the complicated material relation between the body and the representations that make up the cultural inventory:

"The stain metaphor accounts for that relation in three-dimensional rather than two-dimensional terms, and it collapses the distance between the body and the image which defines it".<sup>119</sup>

Image is no longer merely a surface addition in opposition to the essence of the body. Their distinction is blurred by the stain, which infiltrates as material depth both the body and its image entwining them closely together. Neither can be approached outside of the stain. The embodied subject always negotiates one's position and sense of self in relation to it. This complex relation between the embodied subject and the field of visibility is also explored by Silverman with the concept of the pose: "Like the stain, the pose puts the subject who assumes it "in the picture"."<sup>120</sup> By posing the subject makes oneself into a picture, anticipating how one is seen. Posing is an attempt to control one's body and how one is seen through it, to mould the body to express a certain kind of subjectivity, as Roland Barthes has acknowledged in *Camera Lucida* (2000):

"once I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes: I constitute myself in the process of "posing", I instantaneously make

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<sup>117</sup> I refer here in particular to Lacan's discussion of the concept in Lacan 1981, 67-119.

<sup>118</sup> Silverman 1996, 202, 135.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 201.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 203.

another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image."<sup>121</sup>

Posing is active negotiation with the stain, the cultural screen, and expands from the body to its surroundings, as Silverman claims. The subject makes not only oneself, but also ones environment into an imaginary photograph through the representational force of the pose.<sup>122</sup> Simultaneously the subject needs to adjust the pose to fit into the surroundings, as well as to the stain, the available image repertoire and its ideological preferences etc. Has the girl in a red shirt somehow failed or chosen not to compose her pose correctly? Has she failed to create a representable, another, body for her(self)? Does one have to gain control over the body in the process of posing, so as to assume a subject position that can be acknowledged by others? The nothingness of her body may be presenting a problem here. If I follow Barthes and make another body for myself, there seems to persist some implicit other body and being, hidden behind the image. To get away from this assumption of an essence or the real veiled by the image and the pose, this negotiation with the stain has to be thought of as a complex process of interaction.

The pose draws attention to the surface instead of material depth, yet does not undo this opposition of representation and origin or appearance and core. The stain, then again, could be seen to bring material depth into the field of visibility, to thicken the surface while defying attempts to refer beyond it. It may also allow us new perspectives on the aspiration, and even necessity, of the subject to be seen by others and to become a picture, and part of a bigger picture. Instead of a still image this picture appears more like an event that unfolds in space and time. It could be thought of as something not confined to the oppositional logic that posits representation against the real, but produced in a ceaseless negotiation between subject and object positions, both within oneself and with others. The stain may challenge the prioritisation of vision, drawing attention to materiality that cannot be grasped

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<sup>121</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (London: Vintage Classics, 2000), 10-11.

<sup>122</sup> Silverman 1996, 103.

and frozen into an image. The red stain teases us promising knowledge of the body, but in the case of the red shirt ends up merely unveiling the insufficiency of the modes of knowledge on offer. It does not provide evidence of what lies beneath the surface but defies capture and, instead, turns the surface into a space of interaction. It may also call for a move away from, or for a radical rethinking of, understanding and knowledge, as argued later.

What kind of a stain is the red shirt then? As cultural image repertoire stain is like a unifying fluid filter, but Lacan also refers to the stain as a spot.<sup>123</sup> Materiality of the stain appears two-fold, both smoothing and disruptive in its effects. Stain can be understood to function at times as a material spot that draws the attention of the viewer to the image. As a stain this element in the image becomes something excessive, without a clear place in the narrative and the web of meanings woven into the image. How does this two-fold stain appear in Ahtila's works? The narratives, the roles and poses adopted by the characters, their surroundings and relations could be said to be discreetly bound into a whole by what is here called the cultural stain. This fluid varnish, or a coloured filter, resides both in the images and in my response as a viewer. It mediates the encounter. On closer inspection, however, the characters stand out as points of slight disruption. These embodied subjects absorb the stain to various degrees, never blending into the images as perfectly as expected.

The specificity of the bodies that are culturally marked can be thought in terms of etching, a technique that acknowledges the effect of the material surface in the act of inscription, according to Elizabeth Grosz.<sup>124</sup> Grosz stresses that the body is open-ended, pliable set of significations, "indeterminate and indeterminable outside its social constitution as a body of a particular type".<sup>125</sup> But the specific modes and prevailing significations of its materiality, as a page of inscription, need to be taken into account in order to

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<sup>123</sup> Lacan 1981, 97.

<sup>124</sup> Grosz 1994, 191.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

avoid the temptation to assume a neutral, universal body.<sup>126</sup> This process of inscription is not only limited from the side of the flesh, but also from the functioning of representation. The materiality of the body resists its capture by textualization, but languages of representation are also incapable of articulating everything, she stresses.<sup>127</sup> The limitations of this process of inscription are not only a matter of some essential irrationality of materiality, but also reveal a lack in the representational languages. This implies that bodies, and embodied subjects, cannot be captured within the field of representation and visibility. They are points of resistance, which more or less actively interfere in the smoothness of the image and its reception.

However, to get to grips with the particular disruptive element here, the red shirt, I need to strategically break away from the dichotomy of the body and its representation, matter and meaning. This demands a shift from both the economies of lack and of excess, which paradoxically entwine in the figure of the feminine, as argued earlier. Returning to the red shirt it can be seen as having not absorbed the unifying cultural stain in expected moderation. The red shirt, and with it the whole embodied subject of the girl in *Today*, has turned into a stain on stain. Its disruptive effect may in the end have not so much to do with the ungraspable body as such than with the challenge it presents for the languages of representation. The red shirt does not refer to some underlying veiled matter, but to the marking of this matter, the forms given to the body. The red shirt does not reclaim or rename the girl's body, either discovering its authentic form or creating it anew. It troubles precisely because it fails to do so and instead draws attention to the unmarked that is the Girl. As a stain it sets everything around her also in motion. It offers, thus, a point of entry for me, a viewer, but not only to an endless game of re-signification. Rather than being lured by a surface into either immersive identification or detached reading, I am drawn to the surface, where the Girl appears and makes contact.

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<sup>126</sup> Critique of many key thinkers of the body, such as Michel Foucault. Grosz 1994, 156.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

## VERA'S FADED REDNESS

The redness of the girl's shirt is emphasised by the shift in *Today* from her part to the next screen, to Vera's story. Vera's room is flooded with sensuous, warm red light, but her shirt does not stand out anymore in its now faded redness. The girl's presence as a disruptive stain has been replaced by an evenly spread stain. This red colouring fits Vera harmoniously into the space she occupies, turning it all into a smooth picture plane.

EIJÄ-LIISA AHTILA *TODAY* (1996-7)

The different operations of the stain are mapped out here so as to allow for further reflection on the potential of the emphasis on the surface. This is tightly woven together with the enquiry into the possibilities of engagement beyond interpretative description that the colour red may offer me, a viewer, with the works. Following my reading of the girl and the woman in *Today* as the same person, the older Vera's shirt seems to have lost most of its colour.<sup>128</sup> The redness of the young girl's shirt has now spread to her

<sup>128</sup> The girl's development seems thus to go against the expectations: instead of gaining stronger presence and attributes of female sexuality, she has lost them. But this could be

surroundings, or maybe the space has absorbed the colour from her. The boundary between Vera and her space has blurred. Has Vera followed her father's model, and his mistakes? In the third part of *Today*, titled *Dad*, the father's bedroom is bathed in blue tones, which reflect both his shirt and his sorrow, and perhaps also his challenged masculinity. The light blue tone of his T-shirt is deepened by the wet patch of tears that stain it. His embodied being seems to be marked by a battle (neither clearly internal nor external) between the signifiers of masculinity (the colour scheme as the most obvious sign) and the breaking down of this masculine subject position as the wet stain of tears and his howling cries trouble the solidity of his boundaries and deem him uncontrolled, irrational and even hysterical, i.e. feminised. His attempt to fit in with the stain, to become part of a harmonious picture as a coherent masculine subject, is shattered by these contradictions.

Vera and Dad have nearly become one with their surroundings, smothered over by the stains, red and blue. How can I think about this blending of the subject and the inhabited space? Could it be some kind of a desperate attempt to secure solid boundaries for the illusionary coherent self? I may be witnessing a confusion between a subject and his/her environment, where their borders become blurred as s/he becomes part of the space. Is it a subject formation gone wrong or just another example of the impossibility of a unified and centred subject position?

This could be approached with the notion of mimicry, as introduced by Roger Caillois in his study of the camouflage of certain insects in his article *Mimicry and Legendary Psychastenia* (1984). Instead of defence function, Caillois claims this imitation of one's environment is sometimes luxurious "exaggeration of precautions"<sup>129</sup> or a temptation by space, a disturbance in the perception of space and one's distinction from it:

"It is with represented space that the drama becomes specific, since the living creature, the organism, is no longer the origin of the

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read in terms of Vera's age as well. She has past the age of reproductivity and thus her body has lost the values attached to feminine sexuality.

coordinates, but one point among others, it is dispossessed of its privilege and literally *no longer knows where to place itself*."<sup>130</sup>

Caillois' notion of mimicry has been discussed further in terms of representation and subjectivity by, amongst others, Elizabeth Grosz and Kaja Silverman.<sup>131</sup> Silverman relates mimicry to subject's attempt to approximate a photograph, or to become part of a picture, by taking a pose. She writes about stain mimicry, referring to Caillois' notion of morphological mimicry as "a reproduction in three-dimensional space with solids and voids: sculpture-photography".<sup>132</sup> The term stain refers us here back to the cultural screen or stain that defines the limits for the representation of the self, and provides the colours and forms to choose from and to adapt to. Does the space then determine the subject's pose? As mentioned before in relation to the pose, Silverman emphasises the representational power of the pose that turns not only the body, but also the space into an image. She claims that the pose, "the positioning of a representationally inflected body in space", generates both a frame, which marks off all representation from the "real", and a *mise-en-scene*, a "conversion of that space into a "place"."<sup>133</sup>

Space becomes a place of a certain narrative, a setting for the formation of subjectivity. This could be a fitting description of the domestic spaces of both Dad and Vera. Have the spaces become like the inhabitants, or the inhabitants like their spaces? Or is the process mutual to the point where one can hardly be distinguished from the other? The place seems to be a crucial element in the constant reconstruction of the self as an entity moulded by one's specific embodied relations to one's surroundings, past, other people etc. Subject is, thus, entwined with the occupied space - constantly locating and presenting oneself as a fitting part of it, yet never totally absorbed into it. The embodied subject adapts to the limits of the inhabited space, but in its turn it also affects the representation of the space. This relation has to be a

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<sup>129</sup> Roger Caillois, "Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia", in *October*, no 31 (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. 1984), 67.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>131</sup> Grosz 1994; Grosz 1995; Silverman 1996.

<sup>132</sup> Silverman 1996, 201; Caillois 1984, 65.

constant process, where active and passive roles cannot be distinguished. It must be always open for challenge as well.

What does this inseparability of subjects and their spaces in the field of visibility mean then? According to Elizabeth Grosz, in mimicry the borders and the unity of the subject blur as s/he identifies with the space and tries to become part of it mimicking its forms and colours. She argues that coherent identity and ability to manipulate own body in space depends on our position as a "point of perspectival access to space and as object for others in space".<sup>134</sup> She links mimicry to psychosis:

"The subject is captivated and replaced by space, blurred with the positions of others. (...) both the psychotic and the insect renounce their rights to occupy a perspectival point, abandoning themselves to being spatially located by/as others."<sup>135</sup>

Space presents, thus, a lure and a threat to the unified and centred subject. Grosz points out in *Space, Time, and Perversion* (1985) that in some cases of psychosis the "meshing of self and body" fails.<sup>136</sup> This failure to recognize one's body as an integral aspect of one's subjectivity, could be seen as an extreme symptom of our culture's hierarchy of mind over matter. Even if Vera and Dad are not portrayed in *Today* as psychotic, this could be underlying the sense of repression they articulate: Vera, for example, cynically observes that in society "what's not immediately comprehended is forbidden", whereas Dad remembers bitterly how his deceased father did not want to be touched.

What happens to my perspective when faced with this merging together of the characters and their spaces? It troubles not only my readings of the representations of these embodied subjects. Instead of simple aesthetic layers these coloured washes may also affect my engagement with these characters and their spaces. Furthermore, rather than leaving my embodied position temporarily and being absorbed through identification in the

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<sup>133</sup> Silverman 1996, 203.

<sup>134</sup> Grosz 1995, 92.

<sup>135</sup> Grosz 1994, 47.

cinematic narrative, I have to negotiate my place in the installation amongst multiple screens as well as in relation to the non-centred characters and their pictured spaces. May I get lost here too, in the constantly shifting, complex spatial coordinates? As argued earlier, the unifying cultural stain resides not only in the images but in the viewer's engagement with them. The stain, as coloured filter, appears to tie the characters and the inhabited spaces together to the point of nearly blurring their distinction and, therefore, denies customary readings of their positions. My perspective as a viewer is not unsettled here simply through identification with the characters. Rather, it is only in our encounter that their positions become troubled instead of being reconfirmed. I am implicated in the stain, which mediates our engagement. Could this refer beyond signification and representation?

#### ELISA'S RED SHIRT

Psychosis takes me to another red shirt. In *The House* Elisa inhabits her house in a red shirt, surrounded by various red objects and details. Shelves in the kitchen and stripes of the curtains make her just another red spot in the interior. Meanwhile she talks about the collapsing boundaries of her house as well as of herself.



EIJA-LIISA AHTILA *THE HOUSE* (2002)

Elisa's body does not offer her a rooted point from which to map her position in relation to others, the surrounding space and its objects. Her embodied being becomes a space for the others to occupy. According to her own words, first just sounds from other places, such as her car and an unknown

<sup>136</sup> Grosz 1995, 89.

boat, but towards the end other people also take over her body. Space loses its borders and order. While physically in one place she is simultaneously in other places in her head. She is not just part of space or merged into it, but a site, where all spaces and places collapse into one.

The relation between subject and space is in this work investigated with an intense attention to collapsing boundaries, which may also give me further clues on my challenged position as a viewer of the work. Following Roger Caillois, Elizabeth Grosz relates mimicry closely to the representation of space:

"The primacy of one's own perspective is replaced by the gaze of another for whom the subject is merely a point in space, and not the focal point around which an ordered space is organized. The representation of space is thus a correlate of one's ability to locate oneself as the point of origin or reference of space."<sup>137</sup>

Elisa cannot place her embodied being in space – she cannot claim her own perspective. On the one hand, all boundaries blur, around her and in relation to her, to the extent that she becomes one with the space. On the other hand, she appears as a disrupting stain, out of sync with her space. Many red elements in the interior of Elisa's house stand out, corresponding to her presence, but she has not merged together with the interior like older Vera has. Perhaps she has not adapted to the uniform cultural stain, the mode of subjectivity given to and expected of her. She feels awkward in her own house, occupying it according to learned patterns. She has not managed to secure the borders of her space and this may be why the external world manages to seep in. She tries to interpret the world and her place in it by mapping the visual. But looking just seems to confuse matters further. The world fills her with its multiple sounds, and clear distinctions disappear.

In a series of works that partly share the same material - the 5-monitor installation *The Present*, the 3-screen installations *The House* and *The Wind*

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 90.

(2002), and the feature film *Love is a Treasure* (2002) - Ahtila focuses on psychosis exploring this loss of coherent subjectivity from various angles.<sup>138</sup> The fictional case studies refuse to function as models, hypothesis, or answers of any kind. Instead they raise questions about the blurry boundary separating normal from abnormal, balanced from disturbed. Significantly Ahtila does not give straight forward representations of the collapsing boundaries in *The House* or in the other works. Instead, as a viewer I am denied a coherent centred point of view, both in the space of the house Elisa tries to inhabit and the space of the installation *the House*. I have to negotiate a multiplicity of changing spatial and temporal perspectives. I can neither assume a distanced and empowered viewing position in relation to these spaces, nor form a fixed representation of them.

Focusing on Elisa's failing attempts to gain control through observation and description, and witnessing her inability to achieve desired coherence, I feel the same myself. Looking through her eyes in one image, at her in another, and from her side in the third, my viewpoint keeps shifting. Elisa herself escapes from my view at times, and then suddenly becomes two. At times her voice breaks free from her image. As a viewer I join Elisa in her frustrated struggle to grasp a unified, solid perspective on the surrounding space and her place in it. However, this is not simply due to identification, or the impossibility to assume her perspective. My descriptions and interpretations also fall short of achieving clarity. I cannot occupy a position of perspectival access to the space, or a point from which it is defined. The reading of the representation of Elisa and her space as disjointed can be seen as an attempt to reclaim a centred perspective, yet this fails to gain closure. Another approach is needed.

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<sup>138</sup> Ahtila's earlier work *Anne, Aki and God* (1998) also focused on psychosis, this time of a young man. The complex installation consists of a number of monitors and screens with what appear to be auditions for the roles of the main character Aki and the figure of God as well as for Aki's imaginary girl friend Anne, who is played by a young woman actually present in the gallery. The work unsettles thus, in rather different ways than the more recent works, the distinctions of the positions and the realms of fictional characters, performers and viewers. This work is not discussed any further in my thesis, but for a close reading and presentation of it, see Kaja Silverman, "How to Stage the Death of God", in Maria Hirvi, ed. *Eija-Liisa Ahtila: Fantasized Persons and Taped Conversations* (Helsinki: Crystal Eye & Kiasma, 2002).

## FAILURES RED AND BLUE

EIJÄ-LIISA AHTILA *TODAY* (1996-7)

The girl in a red shirt, Vera in her faded red shirt and room, Dad in his wet blueness and finally Elisa. I have mapped out different kinds of failures to become part of an image as a coherent subject. In this mapping I have also revealed my own disrupted attempts to fit the red shirts into theoretical models. The characters slip from the conceptual frames I keep constructing. The embodied presence of the characters resists capture by representations, both by my descriptive accounts and conceptual readings. Perhaps the above attempts to frame the figures with the notion of mimicry are similarly unconvincing. They do not succeed in capturing the operations in the works. Are these failures taking me somewhere?

What failure means here, in the context of mimicry and stain(s), needs in itself to be questioned. As outlined earlier, mimicry is approached by both Elizabeth Grosz and Kaja Silverman in relation to representation and subject formation, which are inseparably tied together here. But what the former associates with psychosis is considered by the latter as a seemingly normal, or even necessary, function for the subject. This brings us to the paradox at the heart of subjectivity. Mimicry is a process, where the subject in order to

be recognised negotiates one's position within the field of visibility in relation to the cultural stain. As will be argued here, in this process what is considered normal seems to hold hands with the abnormal, ideal being inseparable from its other.

Lacan also links stain to mimicry, stressing that the subject situates oneself in the picture as a stain.<sup>139</sup> He focuses on Caillois' discussion of mimetic activity in terms of camouflage:

"The effect of mimicry is camouflage, in the strictly technical sense. It is not a question of harmonizing with the background but, against a mottled background, of becoming mottled – exactly like the technique of camouflage practised in human warfare."<sup>140</sup>

According to this, mimicry is not a blending in with the surroundings as such, but an act of taking on and emphasising certain attributes of one's environment. In terms of human subjects and the cultural stain this could mean assuming qualities that frame a specific kind of a subject. Mimicry refers, thus, to the imitation of the subject's environment and, in my understanding, also to culture, its codes and norms. The embodied beings appear in the visual sphere as material stains that more or less successfully fit into the picture. They attempt to become part of the representation of this space without, however, being totally absorbed into it. They try and adapt themselves to the stain that creates an illusion of order, harmony, stability and transparency of reality. When this mimicry somehow fails the stain becomes a site of disruption, a material spot that ruptures the unity of the surface, a stain on stain.

On the other hand, mimicry always fails to some extent. Repetition, miming, is never perfect copying, as underlined by Irigaray's mimesis (discussed in depth in the *Introduction*). It causes inevitably some, however slight, shifts and leaves a gap or a residue. All of the cases discussed above could be seen as suitably imperfect examples of this failure. This inevitable inability to

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<sup>139</sup> Lacan 1981, 98.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

reach perfection and to create stability causes endless repetition. The smoothness of the stain demands constant layering to cover up any alarming fractures. Yet, in this process the stain can at any moment form a troubling point of thickness, making a reference to something unmarked by the picture.

Mimicry reveals, thus, that solid borders are an illusion reinforced by the attempts to fit into the cultural stain so as to gain a subject position that can be recognised by others. Therefore mimicry simultaneously undoes what it is constructing. The illusion of stability seems to be achieved only at the cost of this very solidity. Miming can be seen as a constant struggle between the two poles of the stain, the unifying filter and the disruptive clot. Merging in totally to the smooth surface of the cultural stain one risks losing oneself, one's borders and unity, and becoming part of the space, exchangeable with any other object in this plane of representation. As one resists this absorption one's presence becomes a material spot, a stain that disrupts the transparency and may slip out of the grasp of signification.

Vera, Dad and Elisa would seem to be at the other extreme in the process of mimicry from the girl in *Today*, who appears as a disruptive stain in her red shirt. But these two poles cannot be opposed quite this easily as Elisa's case, in particular, makes clear. Vera, Dad and Elisa are all caught up in this precarious and rather unbalanced equilibrium, which may, in the end, be the closest we get to any kind of stability in the representation of subjects. Are these characters all just examples of the ultimately psychotic nature of the subject positions on offer? Elisa, Vera and Dad deal with the blurring boundaries, between inside and outside, self and other, by different means. Vera and her father aim to secure the boundary between their domestic spaces and the external world, private and public. They have become one with their own spaces and the boundaries of their selves seem to have shifted to the borders of these spaces. Elisa darkens her house, closing off the visual, in order to get away from the confusing distinctions vision presents her. In the dark simultaneity is allowed and borders do not matter

anymore. She may, thus, inhabit the sphere of the unmarked, where exterior and interior cannot be strictly separated.<sup>141</sup>

Where do we draw the borderline between normality and psychosis, successful subject position and a failure, here? Have these characters all been devoured and replaced by the surrounding spaces? Or, by the cultural demands posed on gendered subjects? These may be cases of human subject's experience (in schizophrenia) of depersonalisation, which Caillois links to mimicry:

"He tries to look at *himself from* any point whatever in space. He feels himself becoming space, *dark space where things cannot be put*. He is similar, not similar to something, but just similar."<sup>142</sup>

Are Vera, Dad and Elisa yet "just similar", even if their mimicry has taken them close to blending in with their spaces? They seem to be still similar to something – the cultural stain, such as the gender roles and attributes that I can recognise. Similarity, thus, both promises a shared ground that makes the characters readable and differentiates them slightly from the cultural points of reference. They are not quite the same but similar to aspects of their surroundings, to the gendered attributes, or to the concepts I apply to them. Their similarity *to* something marks a space of resemblance, a spacing that allows for engagement, yet not for fusion. They are not fully captured and merged together with their surroundings, the positions of others, the coloured fields, or the conceptual frames proposed here. Rather than failure, this may point at a rupture, a potential opened up and kept open by similarity.

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<sup>141</sup> The threat that darkness poses for the opposition of a being and its environment, is also discussed by Caillois. In contrast to light space that is eliminated by objects, darkness touches, envelopes and even penetrates the subject, he claims.<sup>141</sup> This threat is alluded to in various ways in the cases of Vera and Elisa. Blueness seems to take over as Vera sleeps and her embodied being is literally naked, without the cover of the soothing red stain. Her voice-over refers to collapsing boundaries while the image moves out to a cityscape. Elisa in contrast chooses to retreat to darkness, to its borderlessness.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

## RESISTING RED

Susanna in *The Wind* crushes lipsticks, cuts up a red quilt, shies away from the redness that slowly takes over her otherwise blue room. She seems to resist all things red, possibly recognising their staining effect. Her relationship to both the colour red and to her space is troubled, charged with anxiety and defiance.



EIJA-LIISA AHTILA *THE WIND* (2002)

I leap away from the red shirts for a moment, focusing rather on the resistance to red. This is not only a matter of accident and pure chance, nor is it determined by a body that does not conform. The stain and its absorbing power can also be actively resisted. This carries the risk of leading to a fall out of the safety net of signification and representation.<sup>143</sup> It is a matter of a creative balancing act in order to remain within the reach of the cultural stain and its languages, but still effectively undoing and reworking them. One is also inevitably dependent on others, their willingness and capacity to rethink, when the expectations are not quite fulfilled.

Mimicry is limited to what is recognisable and readable at a given time, i.e. to the existing image repertoire and its codes. Otherwise one fails to gain ratification as a subject, as Silverman claims.<sup>144</sup> According to her, resistance of imaginary capture by images allows one to work with them, but: "active position in the field of vision entails, as well, a constant disruptive and transformative labor at the site of ideality". Awareness of our ideological baggage is crucial. Instead of denial or avoidance of this powerful imagery it

<sup>143</sup> Further focus on communication and signification in the chapters 3a. *Thinking Aloud* and 3b. *Witnessing*.

<sup>144</sup> See e.g. Silverman 1996, 204-5.

needs to be tackled, exposing our desire to fit the ideal mould(s) and, simultaneously, deconstructing this desire and its object(s).<sup>145</sup>

Like all repetition, mimicry always carries with it elements of change and potential of subversion, as argued earlier. It can be thought away from passivity as well as from the reinforcement of certain power structures etc. It also challenges the understanding of surface and surface effects such as resemblance as opposed to a core or an essence. Mimicry can, thus, be seen also as a strategy, “at once a mode of appropriation and of resistance”, as Homi Bhabha claims in *The Location of Culture* (1994). Inactive repetition turns to agency, “the disciplined to the desiring”.<sup>146</sup> Referring to Lacan he stresses that “mimicry is like camouflage, not a harmonization or repression of difference, but a form of resemblance”. Its in-built threat lies in the possible “prodigious and strategic production of conflictual, fantastic, discriminatory ‘identity effects’”, which reveal there to be no hidden essence.<sup>147</sup> Mimicry functions as constant repetition of the same yet it depends on a production of its difference, excess or slippage, Bhabha argues. He offers another spin to the critical reading of the logic of the same and unveils more weak hinges in its workings, as he argues that in colonial mimicry the other is not produced as an opposite, a mirror like the sexual other, but as a subject of difference, recognisable as not-quite-the-same.<sup>148</sup> This allows for a reconsideration of not only otherness but the production of subjectivity in terms of the repetition of the same that appears to be based on a subtle displacement. This “culture’s double bind” that Bhabha refers to haunts mimicry.<sup>149</sup> To be recognisable one must be nearly the same, so as to remain distinguishable as an individual. To become a picture, but still subtly stand out from it. Failure

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 206.

<sup>146</sup> Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London & New York: Routledge, 1994), 120.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 90. Bhabha writes about mimicry in the context of post-colonial discourse. He refers to colonial mimicry as “one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge”. He discussed mimicry thus as a strategy of power that, however, hides within it possible sites of disruption. Ibid., 85. See also the notion of seepage as considered in post-colonial discourse, e.g. Liang 2005, and leakage in the context of sexual difference as discussed here in the chapter 2a. *No-Thing Leaking*. Post-colonial and feminist rethinking of mimicry allow for potentially productive overlaps and slippages, yet a detailed comparison remains outside the scope of this thesis.

<sup>148</sup> Bhabha 1994, 86.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 137.

appears as both the norm and the exception. Instead of perfect copying and posing the unspoken ideal seems to be a perfect unnoticeable failure.<sup>150</sup> But where goes the line between a successful failure and a disruptive one?

This line may be treaded as well as crossed to the side of disruption in *The Wind*, where the young woman and her space, or her interior states and her room, blur together. Notably, this does not take place simply in terms of a coloured smooth stain. Instead of passive submission to the unsustainable expectations and models she is offered by the cultural stain, she is fighting back. The room appears to have become the externalised internal space of her subjectivity, yet more of a battle ground than a fortress. Here anarchy creates new structures, and the distinction of order and disorder is thoroughly questioned. Is this externalised internal sphere actually a challenge to the notion of subjectivity where mind and body are in an uneasy imbalance?

Susanna in *The Wind* presents us with a model of the self as a space where embodied relations to others are internalised, and these internal elements again externalised - where outside and inside, body and mind are not opposable and separable, but woven intricately into each other. Everything appears visible and to do with relations – to the surroundings and to others. Here her embodied being occupies the space of her subjectivity, which appears to us as her room. She lets the outside in, to her self/space, instead of barricading the boundary. Whether this openness is voluntary and productive remains unclear. Can a failure to keep boundaries intact be a mode of defiance in itself, or does it escalate into reactive refusal?

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<sup>150</sup> Pose can at times reveal awkwardness, a disjunction between the aspiration to become an image and the resistance presented by materiality. This appears to be appropriated by many of Ahtila's characters. They often address the camera slightly too directly, and then at times stand out, reach out to us and step on the hazy borderline that is supposed to distinguish the fictional realm and the viewer's space-time. As the Girl in *Today* speaks to the camera, standing still and addressing us, this immobility in the moving image makes strange the act of posing. It makes the girl stand out from her surroundings even more. In a way she turns her surroundings into a picture, or a stage, by not fitting into it smoothly. See also Barthes' claim that the pose is denied by the continuous series of images in cinema. Barthes 2000, 78.

Susanna's relation to her own body appears, however, polluted. The world stains her hands, in the form of newspaper ink, and she cannot put her hands in her mouth, she complains. Crushing lipsticks, making her own order out of chaos, she challenges the norms, but her resistance may be merely reactive. She cuts a red quilt into strips proclaiming triumphantly that in psychosis she really feels able to rebel against and change the reality she does not accept. In the parallel image next to her the strip appears to be folding back into the whole. Her action appears to have no lasting effect. The same redness creeps into her space and surrounds her in an intimate moment with a man, an intellectual companion, who rejects her desire to get closer to him. A corner of the room, where three teenage girls are gathered, bathes in red sensuous light in the same scene. Is she rejecting the red stain of femininity, the fate and ideals projected onto her, as well as their effect on her? In the end of *The Wind* Susanna strikes to the heart of the matter. Is she one of the many that are dirty and need to be kept in check, or even got rid off:

"Then I told him what he wanted, that what is polluted is dirty; it is worthless and even dangerous, it leaves a stain – like lots of us – and doesn't deserve respect. I mean who really are the guilty ones here? He should concentrate on that, when he's in that sort of position, how the trash is being sold to the Third World and how they manage to carry it there."

As worthless and dangerous, unclean, does she threaten borders, the order he, who is referred to here, wants to sustain? "Filth is not a quality in itself, but it applies only to what relates to a *boundary*", Kristeva writes following Mary Douglas's argument in *Purity and Danger* (1984).<sup>151</sup> If Susanna is one of the others that leave a stain, she is allocated the material side of oppositions that flows over in its irrationality and needs to be controlled. She may be miming this position until it escapes from its frame and reveals its in-built contradictions. Or, perhaps she refuses to carry this dirt appointed to her, this role of the feminine – the role that is being sold to all others.

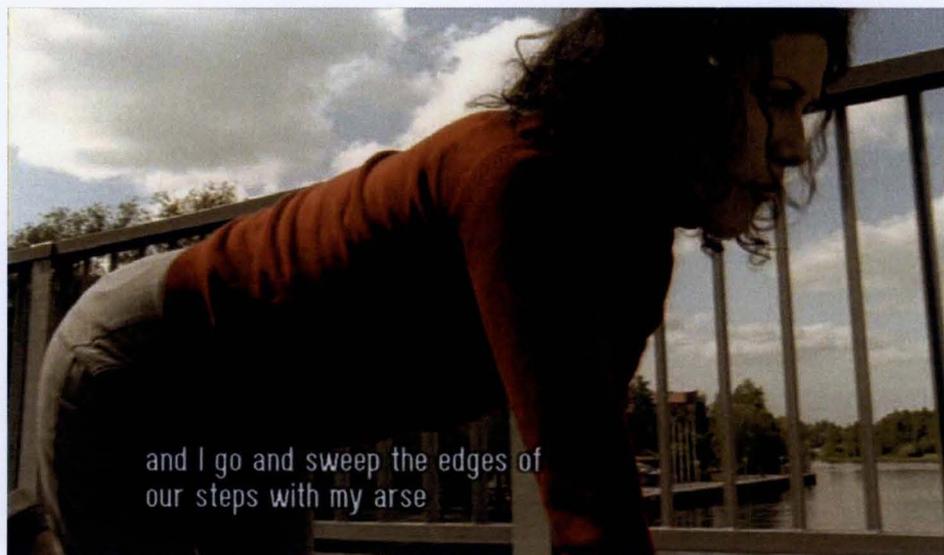
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<sup>151</sup> Kristeva 1982, 69. See also Douglas 1984.

She climbs to a dark blue corner of her room, while the space gains more intense tone of red. She refuses to be(come) a woman, to blend in with the redness. Repetition, mimicry, turns into refusal. She becomes a stain, she stains. Yet, does she set things around her in motion, as a stain on stain? Is her defiance in the end creative and productive, or merely reactive? Does she end up literally cornered, locked inside her space and within the frames of representations she resists? There must be other modes of resistance that activate the potential of resemblance in mimicry, rather than revert to negation.

#### ON THE BRIDGE IN RED

A woman, lines, crawls with determination over a bridge in a red shirt, dragging her red bag along. Having passed the water and safely above solid ground again, she stands up, straightens her clothes and walks on. Defying the judgement of others she continues to do what she feels necessary: "I realised that I looked mad. That that's where the madness is. Or is it just me? I don't know. Still, they let me do what I'm supposed to."



EIJA-LIISA AHTILA *THE PRESENT (THE BRIDGE)* (2001)

If madness is in the field of visibility, it must also be open for challenge. If the border between sanity and insanity is crossed in the visible, what remains invisible? When lines consciously chooses to act in a manner that looks mad, what do I actually see, witness? Does madness lie in the visual evidence itself? This draws attention to the boundaries of and in the visible. In *The Bridge*, a part of Ahtila's installation *Present*, lines takes me onto the borderline of visibility and sanity, defying demands to keep it intact, to either cross it or stay on one side of it. Rethinking the possibilities of resistance and mobilisation of the rigid oppositions I return to the abject (discussed earlier, in the chapter 2a. *No-Thing Leaking*). I try and think it away from horror that is persistently attached to threatened boundaries.

Whereas lines challenges this border within the visible, Elisa in *The House* leaps out of the visible altogether. Are their problems and reactions rooted somehow differently in the limits of subjectivity and the abject, unbound relation to the world? In the case of Elisa's break away from the normative model of subjectivity, she seems to become a space for the world to fill, a site where all orders collapse. But this does not have to be seen as passive victimhood. Elisa actively reconfigures an alternative way to relate to and to understand the reality she is entangled with(in) while looking seems increasingly unsatisfactory. Even if not a cause for unquestioned celebration, this reaction to the unbearable limits of the available modes of symbolization that have no means to deal with blurring boundaries, can be seen as active and creative. Elisa attempts calmly to ward off this confusion by eliminating the field of vision, as this is where the blurring boundaries cause most trouble and where they also seem to stem from. Her method suggests that the subject may not completely disintegrate together with the blurring boundaries.

Elisa and lines don't seem to have to fight against the loss of clear boundaries and keep reinforcing them anymore. A subjectivity of some kind may also be gained through other relations to the boundaries. Non-distinctiveness of boundaries and borders passable in both directions are linked to the beginning, or before, of subject formation in Kristeva's

discussion of the abject.<sup>152</sup> This mode of being one with the world is threatening as passivity, loss of clear form and even of being.<sup>153</sup> If this state of fluid boundaries is, however, thought of as something ever-present in subjects, it cannot be reached through some act of return or by stripping away all the attributes of subjectivity one has gathered around oneself. If it is always a haunting possibility, a hidden condition of the subject, how else could it be thought? According to Kristeva jouissance, that exhilarating be(com)ing one with the world, demands an abjection that cancels out identity.<sup>154</sup> Isn't this opposition again another example of the fundamental paradox the prevailing model of subjectivity is built on? Does the experience of blurring boundaries necessarily pose such a devastating risk for one's identity? Or, does it demand rethinking of subjectivity in terms of an intimate entanglement with the world rather than in terms of identity?<sup>155</sup> Failures and resistances in the negotiation with the stain could be seen as ways of constantly remapping one's borders and relation to the world, even if admitting that one cannot survive total and permanent loss of boundaries. The notion of stain allows for a shift away from both the linear model of development and the threat of unintelligible matter that haunt the abject.

The conceptual frame of the abject does not describe sufficiently the complexity of the cases of the women in red shirts. What is at stake here, I claim, is a different kind of a challenge to the limits of visibility and intelligibility. Defying the economy of visibility they may be referring to the problematics of no-thingness instead of fluidity and operating, therefore, as disruptive stains which cannot be reduced to the excessive matter and/or feminine that the abject is closely associated with.

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<sup>152</sup> E.g. Kristeva 1982, 61.

<sup>153</sup> Kristeva writes e.g. about "the temptation to return, with abjection and jouissance, to that passivity status with the symbolic function, where the subject, fluctuating between inside and outside, pleasure and pain, word and deed, would find death, along with nirvana." Ibid., 63.

<sup>154</sup> "the advent of one's own identity demands a law that mutilates, whereas jouissance demands an abjection from which identity becomes absent." Ibid., 54.

<sup>155</sup> See discussion later, in the chapters 3a. *Thinking Aloud* and 3b. *Witnessing* on e.g. Jean-Luc Nancy's notions of being-with and community, Nancy 2000.

At the level of the stain we find, according to Lacan, the tychic point, the point of encounter with the real.<sup>156</sup> The point that escapes from the structures of the symbolic order could be thought of as a space of jouissance. This implies that the stain, which separates representation from the real and mediates all of the subject's relations, carries also with it some fractures, openings out of the all-encompassing frame of representation. These openings are, however, not to be understood here in my argument as bridges to some true essence. The stain has to be thought in the never-ending process of mimicry as not merely remaining on the level of constant re-signification and re-representation. Boundaries can be considered in terms of another notion of a surface. Thinking through the paradoxes of the stain subjectivity may be approached as something flexible, with borders to be negotiated, not barricaded – or, boundaries as sites of contact to be inhabited. My bounds, as no longer those of a detached viewer or reader, are entwined in this negotiation.

All of Ahtila's characters discussed above hover on the borderlines in their own distinct ways. I have been tempted to distinguish the productive modes of resistance from reactive ones, only to discover how counterproductive this is. Ahtila's works can be said to present the many forms and processes that subjectivity goes through on these borderlines. They question in various subtle ways how normality can be distinguished from the pathological. Yet, I argue that they neither claim to define nor call for interpretations of any problematic, prevailing or possible modes of subjectivity as such. Perhaps they simply invite the viewer to inhabit the boundaries too. Is this where my encounters with the works as well as my critical thought take place?

#### MY RED SHIRT

It is time to direct the focus to my own red shirt, which was listed amongst the other red shirts in the beginning of this chapter. After presenting my paper on

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<sup>156</sup> Lacan 1981, 77.

the red shirt I was congratulated on the performative gesture, the way I had discreetly woven my own embodied being into the discussion of the Girl. I was caught in action – the red shirt I unintentionally wore revealed my failure to bridge the analytical distance between the object of my study and I. I was not writing with, but about the work of Ahtila. Or, I was unaware of actually writing with the work. The artwork and my work were secretly communicating, as if behind my back, and making their mark on me. Old habits die hard and so I did not only add this unplanned performative aspect to my presentation once, but twice. This failure to acknowledge my own part in the multifaceted process of engagement also revealed a level of success, of which I could not take all the credit for myself. There was no denying, I had been absorbed into the parade of red stains under investigation.

What is my position in relation to the stain, as a viewer and a writer? The stain is necessary for an image, or any object/subject, as it would not be comprehensible without this filter that resides not only in the object itself but also in its encounters with the viewer. Both the smooth workings of the stain and its sudden interruptions are made possible in the viewer's engagement with the image, in the exchanges that are never quite the same. The stain is to some extent a shared screen of cultural codes that makes communication possible. Yet, it may point towards sharing on another level than that of signification too, as the disruptive stains, in particular, suggest.

My relation to the red shirt cannot be considered here without a reference to Roland Barthes's notion of punctum. Barthes defines two different elements that direct his reading of photographs: studium and punctum. Studium in its references to education, knowledge and civility seems like the cultural stain or image-repertoire through which one has to negotiate one's access to subjectivity and signification, and to an illusion of mastery.<sup>157</sup> Punctum, then again, is something that breaks the studium, "rises from the scene, shoots

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<sup>157</sup> Barthes writes about the studium: "it is culturally (this connotation is present in *studium*) that I participate in the figures, the faces, the gestures, the settings, the actions." Barthes 2000, 26.

out of it like an arrow, and pierces me.”<sup>158</sup> Barthes describes it, referring to the term’s Latin roots, in rather fleshy terms as a sensitive point, a wound, or a sting, a speck, a cut, a little hole. It is not something the viewer consciously looks for or can master, but an “accident that pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)”.<sup>159</sup> In all its materiality, punctum seems to work very much like the disruptive stain. The relation between studium and punctum could also be understood in similar terms as the two aspects of the stain: It is a “matter of co-presence”, without any set rules of connection, Barthes emphasises.<sup>160</sup>

Studium is always culturally coded, but punctum is something unnameable.<sup>161</sup> It is often a detail, the preference of which reveals something about the viewer. According to Barthes there is even a risk of “giving myself up”.<sup>162</sup> There is a tendency in Barthes’ description of punctum to idealize, or even romanticise, the relation between punctum and the subject as some kind of a way out of the straight jacket of culture to a “primitive”, pure vision.<sup>163</sup> But instead of a link to a core or truth of the subject, as Barthes seems to suggest, punctum could be also understood in terms of production of the subject within an intersubjective web of connections. This reading is encouraged, for example, when Barthes describes punctum as an addition that defies the logic of linearity and collapses oppositions of absence and presence, active and passive. Punctum is something the subject adds to the image, but which nevertheless is already there.<sup>164</sup> The redness links, then, my subjective point of view into a wider sphere of cultural signification. Moreover, the idea of punctum as having a “power of expansion”<sup>165</sup>, or as a “subtle beyond”<sup>166</sup>, that directs beyond the visible, opens up new paths for

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 43. This could be also compared with the notion of exposure discussed throughout this thesis in terms of the focus on the surfaces, edges and outward orientation of communication and encounter.

<sup>163</sup> Barthes writes: “I am a primitive, a child – or a maniac; I dismiss all knowledge, all culture, I refuse to inherit anything from another eye than my own.” Ibid., 51.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 59.

thinking further this encounter with the unnameable, or the unmarked.

When something stands out for me, the viewer, the dynamics of the image shift dramatically and I cannot restore the smoothness of it anymore. Material stain disrupts and possibly alienates the spectators, but it can also call for re-significations as well as other modes of engagements. Like punctum the disruptive stain marks a site of radical singularity, irreducibility to the logic of the same and its desire for universality. It may invite re-naming, yet it may also suggest other ways of taking part in the processes of readjustment following this rupture. This encounter is crucial to the workings and potential of the stain, which in both of its functions, conforming and disrupting, depend on the others. To understand the dynamics and potential of this engagement, we need to unsettle also the opposition of individual and shared. Kaja Silverman writes about this transformative relation to the world, as world spectators, that demands openness between the perceiving subject and the perceptual object:

"To be open in this way means to renounce all claim to be the master of one's own language of desire. It means, indeed, to surrender one's signifying repository to the world, to become the space within which the world itself speaks."<sup>167</sup>

Perspective is not only a feature of the viewing subject, but also determined by the objects, she adds. The world calls for "never-ending symbolization", but this is a constant reciprocal negotiation, Silverman argues.<sup>168</sup> However, it is not only a matter of signification, I claim. Throwing myself into this process, I seem to risk my detached perspective and the comfortable unquestioned location in relation to the surrounding space and the works encountered. This is the challenge that the stain presents. It is not only a mediator between one and the other but also a common ground where they are dependent on each other.

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<sup>167</sup> Kaja Silverman, *World Spectators* (Stanford California: Stanford University Press, 2000), 144-5.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

Disruptive stain takes me somewhere unpredictable, like a cast of a dice that Barthes also refers to in his discussion of punctum.<sup>169</sup> In order to follow it I have to let go of a position of mastery. I need to give up the illusion of sovereign and detached perspective in order to get into contact with the stain in its complex appearances because, as Lacan claims, the stain "always escapes from the grasp of that form of vision that is satisfied with itself in imagining itself as consciousness."<sup>170</sup> Therefore, to ask why the disruptive stains appear, and to try and define the operations of the stain, is beside the point. I can recognise my own deep-rooted desire to catch the Girl in a complex conceptual net of stains. I have, however, failed in this. The investigation triggered off by the girl in a red shirt has not only given me more evidence of the disruptive potential that the unmarked being of the Girl presents. Instead of focusing my attention on the no-thingness of her embodied being, the red shirt mobilised all the other characters as well as myself, with or without red shirts. In the process all unquestioned assumptions and meanings attached to various visual details were opened for challenge. No-one, no-thing, seems to fit in perfectly anymore.

The red shirt in *Today*, an element not central to the narrative or culturally valorised in any particular way, has drawn my focus to it. It has disrupted both the flow of linear narrative and the culturally assigned position of the viewer as a distanced reader of the image. It makes space for a re-evaluation of the borderlines and offers different strategies for inhabiting the supposedly impenetrable solid structures and boundaries within the field of vision, yet without the necessity to rely on some notion of matter outside and/or before representation. The red shirt works as a potential point of departure, if I have the courage to explore the unmarked, and to refrain from naming it too eagerly. Maybe the red shirt has set in motion a process of becoming, in Gilles Deleuze's and Felix Guattari's terms:

"We can be thrown into a becoming by anything at all, by the most unexpected, most insignificant of things. You don't deviate from the

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<sup>169</sup> Barthes 2000, 27.

<sup>170</sup> Lacan 1981, 74.

majority unless there is a little detail that starts to swell and carries you off."<sup>171</sup>

Where is this little detail carrying me then? Red begins to stand out from more and more places. The red shirt and red stripy curtains in *The House*, the red quilt and light in *The Wind*.... Am I forcing too loaded, too far-fetched, meanings onto details that are just arbitrary and unintentional? Or, am I simply discovering aspects built into the visual works, finding the clues hidden there for me to uncover? Or, tapping into a vein of cultural unconscious that is shared to some extent by the work and I? These questions are misleading, as it does not seem to be a matter of interpretation or unveiling of what is in the work, in me, or in our common cultural ground. It is a matter of being called for and of responding to this address. It is to be haunted, as discussed in the next chapter.

Attempt at capture is not an answer to this call. The argument has developed in this chapter through close, rather descriptive, readings of Ahtila's works. These engagements with the characters have not, however, illustrated conceptual models of subject formation in the field of visibility. Nor have they caught the operations of the works in specific theoretical frames. The readings have rather kept my thought on the move thanks to the very resistance the works have presented to the reductive explanations in the proposed terms. These accounts may have, thus, opened up a space of resemblance between the art works and the theoretical concepts and questions. Something emerges there – not merely an understanding of resistance in mimicry, but resistance itself, in action. Mimicry gestures here, in my descriptive accounts, beyond the frame of representation. My implication in the stain is not only a question of signification, but involves a challenge to enter this space of resemblance and rupture – to be drawn onto my bounds, into a sudden proximity.

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<sup>171</sup> Deleuze & Guattari 1988, 292.

**EIJA-LIISA AHTILA *THE HOUSE* (2002)**

In the three-screen installation a woman drives to a house in the middle of the woods. On entering she describes the house in relation to its surroundings and to her routines in it. Her observations map a gradually increasing confusion of boundaries. First the sound of the car follows her inside the house, she claims. A dog seen outdoors through the window runs suddenly in the house, while the woman talks about the room having lost its walls.

She tells us that sounds are crossing bounds and losing their coordinates in the visual. Her voice fluctuates between a voice-over and direct address of the camera. At times she is mute in one image while speaking in another, or viewed in adjacent images from two distinct perspectives and in slightly different moments.

The woman proceeds to darken the house with black curtains. She walks around with weights strapped to her ankles after a brief flight outdoors. She continues to talk about her deepening sense of uncertainty, also of her own position, as voices from elsewhere and of other people fill her. As her last words she states: "good, really good". At the end we are left with images of a farm, a grouping of buildings.



## 2c. HAUNTING

### THE POSSESSED



EIJA-LIISA AHTILA *TODAY* (1996-7)

The figure of the Girl is often closely related to ghosts and other supernatural phenomena. The Girl as the ultimate figure of innocence is emphasised to the point of extreme clichés in horror film tradition. Uncorrupted by bodily desires and drives, still pure soul and clean spirit, she attracts all perversion and evil. Thus, she reveals her vulnerability and need of protection. She is the little poor (no)thing, the possessed, that from an innocent angel unexpectedly turns into an evil, destructive spirit become flesh (e.g. *The Exorcist*, directed by William Friedkin, 1973). She draws evil spirits to her like a magnet (e.g. *Poltergeist*, by Tobe Hooper, 1982). Sometimes she possesses telekinetic and other powers that turn her into a destructive monster in the face of repression (e.g. *Carrie*, by Brian de Palma, 1976). Or, she returns to haunt as a dispossessed soul, who cannot leave the material world for good and rest in peace until the evil done to her innocent embodied

being has been paid for (e.g. *Shining*, by Stanley Kubrick, 1980). Yet these figures of girls as ghosts and monsters in cinema, and other horror stories, often aim at exorcising the ghost that the Girl actually is. They give her form and frame her so that these figures end up reinforcing the paradoxical position of a disembodied embodiment of innocence and virginity.

So, what do girls do in horror? They smooth over any potential ruptures but, simultaneously, dwell in the threat and fascination of collapsing boundaries. These monstrous girl-ghosts haunt and are haunted. They appear as sites, where boundaries are challenged, and reinforced again with renewed vigour. They act as further proof of the necessity to guard the limits around and within the girls. Simultaneously these figures betray the worrying fragility of these borders and the order supported by them. These ghostly figures may be too perfect a match for the Girl: formless form, disembodied body, not-yet and not-anymore. Can these figures be appropriated somehow in the exploration of the disruptive potential of the Girl?

I will focus first specifically on the possession story. In the narratives of possession girls before puberty, when their sexuality has not yet been awakened and the reproductive function of their embodied being established, provide material for appropriation and inhabitation. The body of the possessed girl is an open container, a passive and easily occupied vessel, or a tool for someone else's self-expression and action. When they have reached womanhood, they serve as nursing containers in the reproduction of demons and angels alike, such as in another horror classic, *Rosemary's Baby* (by Roman Polanski, 1968). But does not the Girl offer a very different kind of a vessel than the figure of the Woman? The strong presence of the girls in horror films seems to attest to some specificity that makes them fitting for this genre, and particularly for certain roles in it, distinguishing them from women? Therefore, it is surprising to discover how very little has been written about these girls in horror films. When they do appear in the discussion their distinction from adult femininity, female body and subjectivity, is hardly under scrutiny.

In the most renowned version of the possession story in horror film genre, *The Exorcist*, a young girl's, Regan's, body is a site of violent transformations, a battle ground. I sacrifice here to some extent Regan's embodied being, the singularity of which has been sacrificed already anyhow within the conventions of horror film, and appropriate her in my own story of the Girl, where many of the introduced figures in red shirts will get to play the leading roles.

The transitional phase of teenage, and menstruation as its most charged symptom, figure often in horror films. In *The Monstrous-Feminine* (1993) Barbara Creed draws attention to the significance of Regan's age, as she is just about to turn thirteen and hovers, thus, on the threshold of puberty. According to Creed we are witnessing a representation of a struggle between subject and abject, the site of which is the girl's body, "a body in revolt".<sup>172</sup> Is there any way of thinking away from this reinforced separation of body and subject? Here the body is a trap that captures and becomes possessed. The girl herself, Regan, appears to be a subject trapped, somehow tied to yet separate from her body. Or, maybe she is merely the body, nothing more than her no-thingness.

Carol C. Clover claims in her discussion of the possession genre in *Men, Women, and Chainsaws* (1992) that "some women are more open than others", referring to the long history of various mystical and medical beliefs regarding the openness of female body during menstruation to possession and other effects of threatening forces.<sup>173</sup> But is the Girl's openness really comparable to that of the Woman? The Girl seems to be portrayed in horror, as well as in its critical interpretations, again as merely a to-be-woman. Or, is it the Girl's indefinability that deems her more open for possession? In teenage she gains a signifiable body as a woman, but before that her disembodiment may be the actual lure and promise of free entry. The Girl here appears as an empty territory to be occupied either by forces from

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<sup>172</sup> Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London & New York: Routledge, 1993), 40.

<sup>173</sup> Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*

outside or by the awakening internal forces of female sexuality. She herself remains a passive, innocent victim, but her vulnerability to these possessions may, however, also unveil the threat she poses.

In *The Exorcist* the girl seems to be pure matter for the demon to occupy. When possessed, she can only express herself by calling for help in faint handwriting that appears just above her belly button, in flesh pushing against her skin from inside the body. This could be read as a sign of the active role of the body, as a reminder of the importance of embodiment as inseparable part of subjectivity, never totally occupied nor repressed. Or, is this just another example of the Girl's body as pure unmarked matter, waiting to be given form and function as maternal-feminine?

In her reading of the scene Clover argues that the female body is in this genre of films put to trial and made to "speak its secrets". After all kinds of trials from medical tests to religious protocol Regan's body finally "becomes readable", her "skin is made to speak the truth about what it hides".<sup>174</sup> But is this really just any female body? And what is the truth that the skin could speak here? It could be the truth of a girl becoming captive in her own body and the signifying form given to it in teenage. Whose truth is this?

Barbara Creed's reading of this scene emphasises that the girl is "trapped inside her own body, a prisoner of her own carnality".<sup>175</sup> Her possession is overtly sexual and touches on a number of taboos around female sexuality. Creed argues that she becomes both a "castrating girl/woman" and "a figure of extreme abjection as her body is transformed into a playground for bodily wastes". She claims that the girl "is possessed not by the devil but by her own unsocialised body".<sup>176</sup> The Girl and the Woman are conflated here problematically into a single castrating and abject figure. Is it not the

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(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 77.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid., 80-82.

<sup>175</sup> Creed 1993, 41.

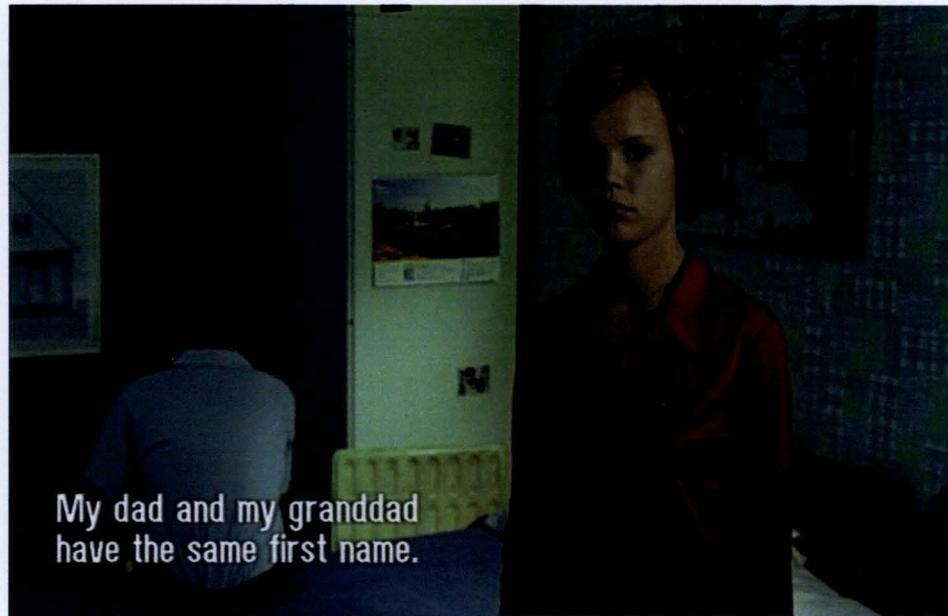
<sup>176</sup> Creed 1993, 40. In the heart of Creed's discussion is a claim that the girl is actually possessed with "an incestuous longing. Regan's descent into the realm of abjection enables her to speak her desires". Ibid., 41.

Woman's unsocialised body that is actually marked, and socialised, exactly as abject, too close to nature? The Girl's body could be seen as something else, predating this marking, still unmarked. This no-thingness haunts the possession story. It resists all attempts to make it readable. All we get is the heavily masked monster-look or the innocent girl before and after the attack. Or a red shirt.

Maybe the red shirt of the girl in *Today* (1996-7), who appears to be also on the verge of puberty, functions then as a mask, as an impenetrable surface. It refers to the body and draws the girl out as a disruptive being, a material stain. It is not simply the body that cannot be represented in its dynamic processes and fleshiness, but the embodied being. The menstrual blood is often taken to encapsulate the painful shift, the discovery of the gendered body, its demands and limits. Yet here we only have a representation of this representation, the code of redness disentangled from its intimate link with flesh and the interior of the body.

#### GHOSTLY STAINS

The girl haunts her father's story in *Today* as a red stain. In the corners and doorways, she hovers at the edges of the scenes. She looks at and speaks about her father, but he does not seem to notice her presence. As a narrator in her father's and grandfather's tragedy, involved yet detached, she inhabits the border, where the fictional realm and the time-space of the viewers meet. She is a mediator, neither here nor there, present nor absent. Is she a ghost?

EIJA-LIISA AHTILA *TODAY* (1996-7)

The smoothness of the stain is haunted by the possibility of a disruption, an appearance of a point of material thickness, a stain on stain. This stain is like a ghost, whose sudden reappearance sends tremors through the harmonious order and balance of things. It cannot be exorcised, neither anticipated nor appropriated, but it keeps returning in new ruptures. The stain could be, thus, associated with Jacques Derrida's notion of the ghost, or the specter(s). Derrida's specter is always more than one, and no more one.<sup>177</sup> It haunts all structures of hegemony, solidity, and order, setting all oppositions in motion and resisting constant attempts from all directions to conjure and exorcise it – critical analysis and observation battles with it, either trying to domesticate it within clarity of forms or to deport it.<sup>178</sup>

Is the specter just another conceptual tool for approaching the unnameable, the unmarked, that threatens the binary order? That which has been here already named, in an effort not to name, both abject and stain. The appearance of the ghost, like that of the stain and of the abject, does not fill the criteria of flesh. Instead, they reveal the inadequacy of the prevailing

<sup>177</sup> Derrida refers to the spirits as “the *more than one/no more one* [*le plus dun*]”. Derrida 1994, xx.

<sup>178</sup> E.g. Derrida 1994, 165.

understanding of the body and matter as the negative of the mind. The abject reminds of the irreducible fluidity and uncontrollable force of matter to change, to cause change, to overflow. The stain also allows this radical materiality of all embodied subjects to not exactly come into view, but to disrupt the whole notion of a view by performing yet another effortless escape. The specter could be seen to play with this same disappearing act, as Derrida argues:

"For there is no ghost, there is never any becoming-specter of the spirit without at least an appearance of flesh, in a space of invisible visibility, like the dis-appearing of an apparition. For there to be a ghost, there must be a return to the body, but to a body that is more abstract than ever."<sup>179</sup>

Derrida's ghost calls for abstract materiality that collapses the order of oppositions. Appearing as an apparition, instead of a solid formed matter, it seems to tease the viewers, laughing at our inability to see matter – like the Girl, whose embodied being escapes from the grasp of representations. Are the girls in red shirts, thus, appearances of no-thing?

The abject seems too closely defined, given formless form, in its association with the porous borders of the body. The stain, then again, allows us to think this haunting on the boundaries of the embodied subject, while the notion of the ghost inhabits all areas of knowledge and vision, the in-between of all structures and orders. The stain may allow me to rethink the Girl away from both the determined to-be-womanhood as well as from the abstraction of the line of flight.<sup>180</sup> Maybe the red shirt, or the stain, as it appears in my investigation here, is a kind of a ghost. It may be one of the many specters, but also more than one, no more one. As a ghost it haunts the borders of representation and threatens all attempts to take possession of the world and one's place in it through a centred perspective. As Derrida claims, to possess

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<sup>179</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>180</sup> See discussion of Deleuze's and Guattari's notion of the Girl as a line of flight and a fugitive being in the chapter 2a. *No-Thing Leaking*. Deleuze & Guattari 1988, 271, 277.

the specter means to be possessed by it.<sup>181</sup> Trying to grasp some kind of hold of the Girl I am haunted by her with increasing intensity.

As Ahtila presents these ghost-like figures that slip from the viewer's grasp time after time, she denies me a coherent viewpoint and my vision begins to stumble. A ghost does not seem to respect, or maybe even know of, any manners and rules that hold the boundaries erect, untouched. Is Elisa in *The House* (2002), then, a ghost as well as a red stain? Boundaries collapse around and within her. I see her sewing black curtains, but next to this image two scenes are haunted by her absence. When the visible is finally being closed off by her, we see her simultaneously welcoming the darkness in a corner of her living room and letting the curtains down by the window. She is more than one, and none. The blurring of boundaries and loss of unity is emphasised by her experience of being a site for the world, different places and people, to inhabit:

"I meet people. One at a time they step inside me and live inside me. Some of them only for a moment, some stay."



EIJA-LIISA AHTILA *THE HOUSE* (2002)

This occupation by others can be seen as a reference to the insurmountable contradiction the prevailing models of subjectivity present for a female subject. The prioritisation of mind over matter in the leading strands of Western thought presents a model of identity as a self-contained unit, where the role of the body is that of a passive container or facade for interior depth, the subject. But as female sex is closely associated with nature and matter, defined in terms of its reproductive function and maternity, the only female subject position offered in this oppositional logic seems to be one as an

<sup>181</sup> Derrida 1994, 132.

envelope or container for others.<sup>182</sup> As Luce Irigaray has argued, the "maternal-feminine" is a place without a place.<sup>183</sup> She cannot take her own place as her body is marked as a place for others. Maybe Elisa has taken this role to an extreme, now revealing in her symptoms the absurdity of this position?

Elisa's symptoms refer to possession. She is not possessed by evil or any other supernatural forces, but by others and the world around her. As Clover points out, the similarities between occult horror story and psychological drama are obvious. Exorcism is, thus, comparable to talking cure.<sup>184</sup> Normative subjectivity is disrupted by possession, but here she is not forced to go through exorcism.<sup>185</sup> There are no demands to re-stabilise her, to fit her into the so-called normal female subjectivity, or to make her body speak its truth. Is she still a victim of the paradoxical demands for her as a female subject to occupy the body as a subject, while also being a female receptacle? Or, maybe this hints at a different embodied mode of being a vessel: neither the maternal-feminine nor the psychotic, who has lost her own perspective in space. Openness to the world may not have to mean passivity as a vessel or a victim.

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<sup>182</sup> In her reading of Plato and particularly his cave metaphor Luce Irigaray drew attention to and challenged the definition of the female sex and maternity in terms of "chora" as passive matter that offers a place, a receptacle, for (re)production without contributing anything to this process itself. Irigaray 1985a, 243-364. This has influenced a number of thinkers, particularly in the rethinking of the body in the 1990's. E.g. Christine Battersby discusses critically the model of subjectivity, where the body functions as container for the subject, in relation to patterns of gendered identity and embodied subjectivity. Battersby 1998, 38-60. Elizabeth Grosz maps out the binary of the body and mind, and the sexes, from Plato and Aristotle through Cartesian tradition to contemporary notions of the body as passive matter, an object, a vessel, or a signifying medium. Grosz 1994, 5-10. Judith Butler discusses also the association of maternal body and the feminine with "chora" and the suppression of it as passive matter, and compares here Julia Kristeva's and Irigaray's readings of "chora". Butler 1993, 27-55.

<sup>183</sup> Irigaray 1993a, 10. Irigaray also writes about woman as being naked without her own place. She has not and cannot use the surface and/or envelope that she is, so she has to create artificial ones, with her clothes, make-up, and jewellery. This tempts me to weave another link to the red shirts, which I cannot, however, develop further here.

<sup>184</sup> Clover 1992, 67. Clover argues that "the "talking cure" film is a realistic and secular calque on a tradition represented in something closer to its archaic form in possession horror". Clover 1992, 110.

<sup>185</sup> See later: speech is thought away from expression of interiority in the chapter 3a. *Thinking Aloud*.

Female embodied subject as a vessel is vulnerable for possession by all kinds of trouble, by evil and insanity alike. According to Creed, "woman is constructed as possessed when she attacks the symbolic order, highlights its weaknesses, plays on its vulnerabilities".<sup>186</sup> Is Elisa attacking the order in her own way? She seems to adapt to the impossible role given, challenging subtly its meanings and the expectations of normative mode of subjectivity in the process. What is at stake in this appropriation? Judith Butler examines critically the notion of the feminine-maternal receptacle and the dangers and difficulty in reclaiming it. Butler stresses that when the figure of the receptacle is made to stand for the excluded it excludes everything else in the feminine, which remains unfigurable by the figure of the receptacle.<sup>187</sup> Therefore the model of gendered subjectivity as a vessel has to be mobilised revealing its complexity.

"Fine, I don't want to be in your economy anyway, and I'll show you what this unintelligible receptacle can do to your system", Butler captures, thus, "Irigaray's response to this exclusion of the feminine from the economy of representation" without losing sight of the troubling playfulness that entwines with the radical challenge it presents.<sup>188</sup> With strategic repetition Irigaray sets in motion the figure of the feminine-receptacle in its many contradictions and opens it for re-evaluation, which affects other figures and dichotomies attached to it as well. Does Elisa effectively do the same? Failing her mimicry, her attempt to fit into the envelope of female subjectivity Elisa becomes a disrupting stain. She may be proposing another way of understanding form, matter, in-between and boundary, shifting their relations as Irigaray calls us to do.<sup>189</sup> Failing mimicry may be read as mimesis, or at least as having the same effects as strategic repetition might have.

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<sup>186</sup> Creed stresses that in this attack "she demonstrates that the symbolic order is a sham built on sexual repression and the sacrifice of the mother." Creed 1993, 41. Is Creed not here, however, sacrificing the Girl, repressing her specificity?

<sup>187</sup> Butler distinguishes between Kristeva's and Irigaray's takes on the chora: "Whereas Kristeva insists upon this identification of the *chora* with the maternal body, Irigaray asks how the discourse which performs that conflation invariably produces an "outside" where the feminine which is *not* captured by the figure of the *chora* persists." Butler 1993, 41-2.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>189</sup> Irigaray 1993a, 12.

Woman threatens with what she lacks – her own place, claims Irigaray.<sup>190</sup> This may also be the threat revealed, but disavowed, in possession stories: the complexity of this vessel, which is not simply explainable with reference to the maternal and its already multiple readings from castration to nurture, but is entwined with even more significations, fears and ideals. Elisa's case, for example, may suggest a mode of subjectivity, which in its openness to the outside defies unity, yet is neither passive nor destructive. It could be seen in relation to the feminine and the maternal, but is here not specifically associated with them.<sup>191</sup>

Like a ghost Elisa seems to have a rather strange sense of space and time. In its indefinability the ghost relates to its environment accordingly in this radically borderless and unbound way. This reminds of Caillois' notion of mimicry and the loss of one's perspective, of becoming one with the space as the boundary between the subject and the space merges. Could the ghost provide us an example of this merging, but as another way of negotiating one's being in space? Being a ghost, more than one and none, challenges the notion of possession and allows us to think about the collapsing boundaries and loss of unity not only in terms of passivity and the vessel-like body. The ghost may entwine together the two extreme poles of the stain. The stain, both as cultural and as disruptive, is ghost-like, a "disappearing apparition", an event.<sup>192</sup> Even while losing her perspective and merging with the multiple space(s) Elisa remains a disturbing stain. Like a ghost she is capable of letting borders and orders shift without losing herself completely in this process as expected. Appearing and disappearing, and letting go of the visual, she does not seem to be dependent on single centred perspective anymore, or on seeing and being seen.

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<sup>190</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>191</sup> See discussion of the feminine in the *Introduction* and the chapter 2a. *No-Thing Leaking*.

<sup>192</sup> Derrida refers to the screen, which could here also be named the stain, as imaginary, something absent and phantomatic. The visibility of the invisible, the specter, is amongst other things what one imagines and projects onto this screen. But the screen always has a structure of disappearing apparition itself. Derrida 1994, 99-101. This supports my argument in its emphasis on the viewer's implication and active role despite the lack of mastery or control.

“Not-to-see is defect penury thirst, but not-to-see-oneself-seen is virginity strength independence.”<sup>193</sup>

Does Hélène Cixous offer us here a way to think anew the Girl’s virginity, and maybe even the so-called innocence, as strength? This suggests a position not tied to the never-ending power game of looks, the dialectics of seeing and being-seen. Has the Girl got, without having to be blind, “blindwoman’s lightness, the great liberty of self-effacement”?<sup>194</sup> No-thingness, virginity and vessel may be rethought as no more in terms of a lack, as they escape from the economy of visibility. Elisa’s loss of the perspectival position in space and her deliberate closure of the visual, could be seen as a way of holding onto this Girl’s independence. Not as a retreat back to something lost, but as a reclaiming of this position. Lines, who crawls over the bridge acknowledging she must look mad, and Elisa both seem to defy the demands to take a post in the battle between seeing and being-seen, framing and being framed, where boundaries need constant reinforcement. Instead they hold onto a ghostly perspective in a suspended space of encounter and desire, between I and the world, always open for surprises and in a state of wonder instead of capture.<sup>195</sup>

#### STAINED MASKS

In *If 6 Was 9* (1995-6) a group of teenage girls share their stories that all trace sexual awakening in different ways. Some of the narratives refer directly to holes of the body while in the images of urban landscapes the focus lies on passages, gates, doorways, gaps. Entry into womanhood appears symbolized by openings, yet nothing leaks. There is not clear direction or linear development to be detected.

<sup>193</sup> Hélène Cixous, “Savoir”, in Hélène Cixous & Jacques Derrida, *Veils* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 12.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

<sup>195</sup> See Cixous’ reference to being between two worlds, blind and seeing. Cixous 2001, 12-13. Compare with Irigaray’s notion of wonder, and the emphasis on mediated immediacy or distanced proximity in the chapter 3b. *Witnessing* and the *Conclusion*. Irigaray 1993a, 12-13, 72-82.

EIJLA-LIISA AHTILA *IF 6 WAS 9* (1995-6)

The occurrence of supernatural powers is often linked to the first appearance of menstrual blood. One of the most notorious cases of this is *Carrie*.<sup>196</sup> Creed sees this focus on the transitional period of puberty and the rite of passage of menstruation in relation to a dramatic shift from passive to active in the victim of possession that is often highlighted in horror films.<sup>197</sup> Before menstruation girls tend to be represented as inactive, in waiting. As *Carrie* then, after the massacre she has just carried out at the school ball, returns home and washes away the blood and make-up from her body, she returns from adult to child again, argues Creed.<sup>198</sup> As a child she retreats back to innocence. All the threat and evil is associated closely to the tropes of female sexuality, the feminine red stains of blood and lipstick. This clichéd emphasis particularly on menstrual blood, and the female reproductive body it refers to, covers over anything else that might be the actual cause of horror and underlying these accepted explanations. Could this be read as an attempt to disavow the threat of the unmarked, the Girl?

Similarly menstrual blood is in horror films linked to hidden powers according to Clover.<sup>199</sup> In the possession story the female body is an object of fascination due to its difference, its inner life that escapes from vision. From this stems the desire to make her body speak and the preoccupation with

<sup>196</sup> Both Creed and Clover point out the association of woman's blood to supernatural powers, which links closely to the mythical and historical representation of woman as witch. In Clover's words: "supernatural and psychosexual intersect". Clover 1992, 71; Creed 1993, 79.

<sup>197</sup> Creed 1993, 65.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>199</sup> Clover claims that menstrual blood does not, thus, seem to have much to do with loss or lack and castration. Clover 1992, 78.

evidence and signs, Clover argues.<sup>200</sup> This suggests that before menstruation there is nothing happening inside the Girl's body. Or, even worse for this order of the visible: that this in-out formula does not fit, there are no signs, no-thing visible.

The women and the girls in Ahtila's works do not bleed. Instead they hold onto their masks, let no-thing leak. Their bodies do not, therefore, become marked with fluid femininity and the troubled boundary of inside and outside of the female body. They refuse to enter into this economy that demands visible signs of their difference originating in a hidden interior. They may suggest a mode of embodiment that escapes from this model of femininity as a leaking and nursing fleshy vessel. Is this threat of another, incomprehensible mode of embodiment, what is at the core of the fascination expressed and disavowed in horror films? Could openings, points of entry and exit, be approached in another way, not only focusing on the evidence that is expected to flow from them? They may also come to life and stop us, "provoking a different kind of encounter and recognition", as Avery Gordon points out.<sup>201</sup> Maybe the passages and holes of all kinds that populate *If 6 Was 9* suggest that something else than leakages take place on the boundaries.

The girl in *Today* does not leak either. She witnesses instead her father's flowing tears that according to her threaten to fill their house. Both male and female bodies can be seen as vessels, Mary Douglas has argued. This notion of body as vessel is, however, gendered with differently operating and valued vital fluids:

"Females are correctly seen as, literally, the entry by which the pure content may be adulterated. Males are treated as pores through which the precious stuff may ooze out and be lost, the whole system being thereby enfeebled."<sup>202</sup>

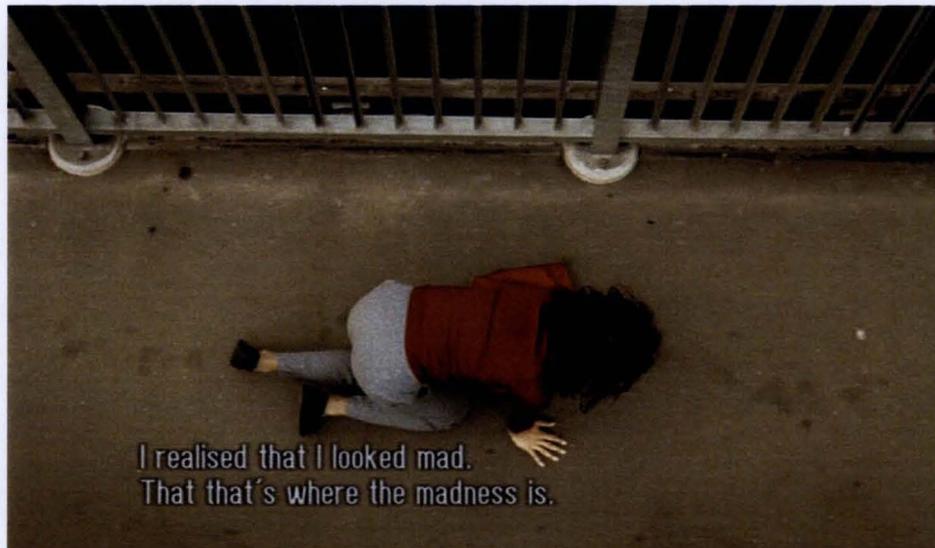
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<sup>200</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>201</sup> Gordon 1997, 67.

<sup>202</sup> Douglas 1984, 126.

In *Today* these distinctions become confused in subtle ways. The girl does not allow us any entry nor does she leak evidence of her pure contents, her inner truth. Dad then again oozes considerable amounts. He may be enfeebled even more as this precious stuff is not linked to sexual powers. Neither semen nor tears are defined as polluting by Douglas and Kristeva, but in Dad's case tears are very close to being abject.<sup>203</sup> They stain and thicken, becoming inseparable from the ambiguous, viscous stuff coming out of his nose. Together with the convulsive body these fleshy fluids trouble his masculine subjectivity and its solid, rationally controlled boundaries. His daughter is here the one who lets no-thing enter or exit her embodied being, but calmly observes as if from a distance the spectacle of his father's embodied grief that borders possession.



EIJA-LIISA AHTILA *THE PRESENT* (*THE BRIDGE*) (2001)

The woman in *The Bridge* (part of *The Present*, 2001), lines, points out that madness is in its visibility. This can be compared to Creed's argument that "horror emerges from the fact that woman has broken with her proper

<sup>203</sup> Douglas claims that: "Tears are like rivers of moving water. They purify, cleanse, bathe the eyes, so how can they pollute? But more significantly tears are not related to the bodily functions of digestion or procreation. Therefore their scope for symbolising social relations and social processes is narrower." *Ibid.*, 125. See also discussion of Kristeva's definition of the abject and the exception of semen and tears from its frame in chapter 2a. *No-Thing Leaking*.

feminine role" and "made a spectacle of herself".<sup>204</sup> Possession and madness, like femininity and sexual difference, depend on visible signs on the body and behaviour. Could the cases of Elisa and lines be read as mimesis, appropriation and defiance of this visible difference, and not simply failed attempts at mimicry, as I suggested earlier? Am I witnessing "spectacular resistance" that Homi Bhabha links to "moments of civil disobedience within the discipline of civility"?<sup>205</sup> Subtly breaking the codes and conventions, becoming a spectacle, they blur the visible and deny us any clear signs. All the evidence I have is a collection of red shirts and some crushed lipstick. What can I do with these red stains that do not seep from any hidden interiors? These signs address me without referring to anything beyond them, to any truth or essence. Instead they direct my attention to the boundaries.

Surface can be reconsidered as a model for subjectivity, where its inscriptions and movements create all effects of depth, Elizabeth Grosz argues. Subjectivity could be understood as fully material and materiality as inclusive of operations of signification.<sup>206</sup> What does the surface, thus, mean? Instead of surface becoming a new "essence" and the notion of depth false, just an effect in a reversal of the order, could this be considered as surface-as-depth? Subjectivity appears as an ongoing negotiation with the stain, as already argued. As a material effect, a mediator, stain spreads within the fabric of the surface, but also stands out. As a cultural filter it infiltrates everywhere blending different elements together and reinforcing the oppositional structures in the continuous process. This is how it can also be troubled from within, and clotted in stains to mark the sites of fractures in these structures. The stain in its both modes of operation weaves through the materiality of the surface giving it depth. It confuses any sense of direction between inside and outside making the boundary itself material with

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<sup>204</sup> Creed 1993, 42.

<sup>205</sup> Bhabha 1994, 121. The father in *Today* could also be seen to be making a spectacle of himself and, thus, causing horror as he unsettles the expectations and solid boundaries of rational male subjectivity in his visceral mourning. In contrast to Elisa in *The House* and lines in *The Present* he does not, however, appear to actively search for alternative ways of dealing with the impossible demands of the modes of gendered subjectivity on offer.

<sup>206</sup> Grosz 1994, 210. Grosz refers here to Möbius strip as a model.

thickness that defies solidity. The two functions of the stain are not distinctly separate or opposites, but woven together. Neither aspect of the stain is stable, but they are products of constant negotiation where borders always get confused, shift, and may even cease to exist.

To challenge the persistent logic of surface and depth, the stain has to be thought of in relation to the notion of the mask. Silverman points out that in addition to the stain Lacan uses other metaphors for conceptualising the screen, or the relation of subject to representation: envelope, double, mask, and thrown-off skin. According to her, mask "implies self-concealment behind something which is worn, but not psychically assumed".<sup>207</sup> The mask seems to emphasize the surface, the effect of the cultural screen as not affecting psychical interior. Silverman prefers the stain over the others as it allows, for example, for a better specification of the agency available to the subject.<sup>208</sup> The body is not mentioned here. Is it also assumed (in terms of mask, envelope, double, or thrown-off skin) to be just surface, or that which hides behind? The notion of the stain can problematise this opposition that the other terms tend to leave intact and reinforce in their role as additions or veils on the surface. Stain questions both the free play with masks as well as determinacy (of the body).

Yet when mask is thought of in relation to stain it starts to gain weight and depth. The mask does not hide anything as such but, actually, reveals that there is nothing to see behind it. It is no longer a veil that needs to be, or could be, stripped away. Lipstick is where we have to start from, not from the redness of blood, or flesh. This is where Susanna's rebellion begins in *The Wind* (2002). She resists tropes of femininity without, however, attempting to retreat to some nostalgic childhood innocence like Carrie. Maybe she becomes here the Girl that is unmarked by the veil of innocence, the defiant Girl or a fugitive being.<sup>209</sup> Or a defiant fugitive, who does not escape, but

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<sup>207</sup> Similarly the other terms suggest exterior or surface effects according to Silverman: Envelope contains the subject, double indicates identification with a distance and thrown-off skin refusal to wear. Silverman 1996, 202.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid., 196.

<sup>209</sup> See discussion of Deleuze's and Guattari's notion of the girl as a fugitive being in the

instead tackles the demands to take her place in the field of visibility and unsettles this whole field as a result of her spectacular resistance.



EIJA-LIISA AHTILA THE WIND (2002)

Susanna's room may be her mask. Is it haunted? Is Susanna the one who haunts, or is she haunted herself? This inseparability of haunting and being haunted reveals the complexity of the position of the girls in horror. Haunted, or possessed, they end up reinforcing the ideal of innocent, passive receptacles. But simultaneously their no-thingness, the unmarked, keeps haunting these narratives. While haunted by their individual tragedies they also haunt referring to wider cultural repressions.<sup>210</sup> As in Susanna's externalised internal space, haunting always collapses distinctions, such as between private and public. Susanna's space is like a room full of ghosts that need to be reckoned with. Here any detail can suddenly call and take me, with Susanna, somewhere.

The ghost is compared by Avery Gordon to Roland Barthes' punctum, the "little but heavily freighted" detail that haunts and "enlivens the world of ghosts".<sup>211</sup> In his discussion of punctum Barthes claims that the "mask is the meaning".<sup>212</sup> This may suggest that all we ever reach at is just another mask. Yet finding the image of his mother as a girl, he celebrates the vanishing of the mask. He seems in the end to be searching for an essence, a truth, from behind the surface effects. The ghost appears again as a girl, but as in most ghost stories, her haunting is cut short by unmasking.

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chapter 2a. *No-Thing Leaking*. Deleuze & Guattari 1988, 171-277.

<sup>210</sup> See e.g. Gordon 1997, 140-1.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>212</sup> Barthes 2000, 34.

Punctum is in this context problematic as it tends to refer to some depth that breaks through, or to a truth of the viewing subject and/or photographed subject/object.<sup>213</sup> Punctum could, however, also suggest a way out of the prevailing structures of signification if it really manages to prick the viewer, not from behind the masks, but by giving the mask(s) unexpected substance. Can it be thought of as a rupture of signification and representation that does not, however, need to refer to something individual as truth and origin in opposition to the shared cultural veils? According to Gordon punctum, like the ghost, is “a highly particularised, if also a fully social, phenomenon”. Instead of some personal truth punctum, like a ghost, evokes “the blindfield” and the necessity of finding it.<sup>214</sup> Yet, it does not necessarily call for a search of a cultural blind spot and for its revelation, naming. It functions as a dynamic site of connection, not unmasking.

In terms of masks Caillois’ notion of mimicry appears also problematic. Silverman critiques Caillois for reverting back to the opposition of surface and depth when contrasting humans and the rest of nature. In this comparison the masks worn by human subjects do not seem to threaten subject’s being, whereas the morphological transformations deem the insects inauthentic and inessential in their essence.<sup>215</sup> Humans can apparently play with masks, but nature gets absorbed into them. Lacan gives similarly humans, as subjects of desire in their essence, this ability to play with the function of the screen, the stain, without being captured in it.<sup>216</sup> And those who do get absorbed must be mad? Or, women and other feminised others, whose subjectivities are considered to be mere surface effects and whose being is actually tied to nature anyway. When thinking of mimicry as a negotiation with(in) the stain, subjectivity emerges as an embodied process on the borders of signification. Subject’s being is constant becoming, without a solid core any more than insects do. This is why women threaten with what they lack, their own place, and why Irigaray’s playful repetition of the mimetic feminine role can be so

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<sup>213</sup> This raises also questions about truth as/of woman/mother, and the innocence of child/girl, problematised here with the figure of the Girl.

<sup>214</sup> Gordon 1997, 107-8.

<sup>215</sup> Silverman 1996, 134-5.

<sup>216</sup> Lacan 1981, 107.

troubling. They reveal that it is all about mimicry, or failures of mimicry, on the boundaries, surfaces.

#### SLIPPING MASQUERADE

The stain reveals what the mask tries to hide, or to express, depending on how one looks – the lack of depth and flesh. Like failing mimicry the effort to become (part of) a picture is ruptured by stains. Masquerade of femininity could be said to escalate here into an exaggerated attempt to conform to the expectations and models of femininity on offer. The influential notion of masquerade was introduced initially by the French psychoanalyst Joan Rivière in her article *Womanliness as Masquerade* (1989) as a notion that theorised the way women could cover up their "masculine" characteristics, such as activity and independence, in a veil of femininity in order to gain a recognised and acceptable female subject position. Furthermore, she argued that womanliness could not be distinguished from masquerade.<sup>217</sup> The notion has been developed critically by amongst others Mary Ann Doane in *Femmes Fatales* (1991), who emphasises that it reveals femininity to be a mask without substance, sustained by inessential decorative layers and gestures that veil only the absence of any "real" femininity as such.<sup>218</sup> According to Doane masquerade is a radical challenge to the conception of the female body as present-to-itself, which she links particularly to Freud's "distinction between the immediacy of knowledge (in relation to vision) in the little girl and its delay or distancing in the little boy". Doane emphasises the constructedness of femininity as closeness and is critical of its appropriation by feminist thinkers, such as Irigaray.<sup>219</sup> She sees masquerade as allowing for the distance needed for the production of knowledge, breaking the tight bind of female subject to her body and its image.<sup>220</sup>

<sup>217</sup> Joan Rivière, "Womanliness as Masquerade", in V. Burgin, J. Donald & C. Kaplan, ed. *Formations of Fantasy* (London & New York: Routledge, 1989), 38.

<sup>218</sup> Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (New York & London: Routledge, 1991), 25, 34, 37.

<sup>219</sup> Doane stresses here that Freud's "statements about female subjectivity are symptomatic of a larger cultural configuration". *Ibid.*, 8, 22.

<sup>220</sup> Doane refers to the body as a disguise that women can use and claims that "masquerade

The implicit assumption of an underneath is, however, left in the air. This notion of the mask and the need of distance does not address the body and its role in much any detail.<sup>221</sup> Are we just further removed from the body, which nevertheless remains unthought and possibly unthinkable under the layers of masks, or representations? Masquerade does not structurally disrupt the binary logic.<sup>222</sup> In the end it does not destabilise the dichotomies such as femininity and masculinity, surface and depth, or proximity and distance. Can the mask be given depth and materiality that does not necessarily assume an underlying essence – whether something to be revealed or something always out of reach?

Due to its dependence on the definition of masculinity, "femininity is in actuality non-existent", Doane claims.<sup>223</sup> This reminds me of the claim posed by amongst others Irigaray, who does not, however, accept that the only possible mode of subjectivity and agency is by definition masculine. Irigaray's strategic repetition, mimesis, seems to open different possibilities than masquerade in its appropriation of closeness. Acknowledging the risks involved in the reclaiming of the notion of proximity, Irigaray stresses that "the desire for the proximate rather than (the) proper(ty)" can be understood to "imply a mode of exchange irreducible to any centering".<sup>224</sup> She aims to open cracks in the oppositional logic for a different sense of proximity, instead of accepting that distance is necessary for subjectivity.

So what are Ahtila's women doing with their masks of femininity, such as the red shirts? Instead of attempting to adapt while hiding those other aspects of femininity that do not fit in to the prevailing normative modes of being, they may be strategically repeating cultural codes and conventions to the point that they start to fracture. This can be thought of in Irigaray's terms as

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doubles representation". Ibid., 25.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>222</sup> Doane acknowledges that masquerade "makes femininity dependent on masculinity for its very definition. Thus, although it may not secure a feminine "essence" it does presuppose a system and a logic dictated by a masculine position, once again subordinating femininity." Ibid., 38.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>224</sup> Irigaray 1985b, 79.

mimesis, which according to Naomi Schor is a strategy for “transforming woman’s masquerade, her so-called femininity into a means of reappropriating the feminine”.<sup>225</sup> This performance escalating from masquerade to mimesis begins to undo itself, giving rise to questions of what escapes from this frame of femininity and the impossible subject position it offers. The binary oppositions appear intertwined, vulnerable and unstable.

Doane points out, but fails to explore further, an interesting slippage in the notion of masquerade that seems useful here: "In Riviere's analysis, "normal" femininity is a masquerade, but masquerade, as in the case of her female patient, is pathological."<sup>226</sup> Does this make femininity also pathological? This seems like a reinforcement of the age-old link between femininity and illness, both physical and psychical, as well as with deceit. Yet the difference here lies in the denial of essence, where femininity in its pathological traits could be rooted. Do the women in Ahtila’s works *The Present*, *The Wind* and *The House* challenge this link between femininity and pathology more productively, in more complexity, as they appropriate the feminine role as a vessel, yet refuse to be passive victims of possession? Their symptoms reveal more about the ideological structures that define them as ill and unfitting to the limits of sanity, than about femininity or female embodied subjectivity.

What escapes from the frame of femininity has been strategically called the feminine by Irigaray and others, as discussed earlier. According to Judith Butler, the feminine has ended up monopolizing, thus, the sphere of the excluded in a problematic way:

"the feminine is "always" the outside, and the outside is "always" the feminine. This is the move that at once positions the feminine as the unthematizable, the non-figurable, but which, in identifying the feminine with that position, thematizes and figures"<sup>227</sup>

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<sup>225</sup> Schor 1994, 66.

<sup>226</sup> Doane 1991, 33.

<sup>227</sup> Butler 1993, 48.

The non-existence of femininity, as presented by masquerade, remains within the logic of the same, reveals its logic and operations but does not suggest any ways to change it. The feminine, and particularly the maternal-feminine receptacle, as the non-figurable, seems to also persist in complex knots tied to the dichotomous sexual difference, unable to unsettle its foundations.

Could the no-thingness of the Girl offer possibilities for developing the radical potential here further? Notions of closeness and immediacy are connected to innocence, and other attributes of childhood, and particularly girlhood, as well as to everything and everybody considered natural, or primitive, etc. These notions need to be rethought so as to problematise the hierarchies attached to them as well as the linear model of development. When innocence of the Girl is problematised, how might proximity and presence (to/of the body) appear then? How can the no-thingness of the Girl be thought away from purity and blankness that waits to be given form and meaning as maternal-feminine receptacle? Does the red shirt, as a stain and a mask, help me here?

The red shirt in *Today* could be seen to function as a mask that simultaneously lifts the girl's embodied being from the inhabited space, the realm of the narrative, and makes her the point of focus within it. The shirt gives her form and presence. The opening image in *Today* with the grinning mask may be not just accidental. The mask is plain surface without the expected (material) depth that is needed as its opposite in order to place it within the binary structures of signification and representation. As an unmarked the Girl does not fill the place of depth and/or content – so the red shirt becomes a stain marking the site of disruption that the embodied subject of the Girl is. As a mask it is not a plain surface then anymore, but has its own thickness and materiality, with no-thing to hide. It can be now recognised as oriented outward, instead of referring persistently back to what it covers up.

This points to the inevitable failure of masquerade, the impossibility of keeping the oppositions intact and separate. As the mask becomes a stain on stain, the unmarked begins to take space for itself. Yet, central to my argument here is that it does not emerge as something previously hidden, but as a mobilising effect on the positions both defined and repressed by the binary structures. Thinking about these masks as stains allows us to move away from both the notions of the abject unbound matter and the endless surfaces of masquerade. The disruptive stain does not bring into view some true materiality, or give a glimpse of any authentic subjectivity that lies beneath the cultural smooth stain. Instead it reveals a gap, a space that cannot be mapped. The unmarked embodied subjectivity of the Girl escapes from us, and with it all other embodied subjects slip from our grasp, while they could be said to turn toward us instead of referring back to within themselves. The mask appears as a surface of contact.

#### FINALLY: MEDIATIONS

Lucia, a tiny baby girl in red, embodies a border between her parents, simultaneously separating and binding them inseparably together. She is a silent witness of her parents divorce in Ahtila's *Consolation Service* (1999). Irreducible to, yet indistinguishable from them, she is a site where all clear distinctions collapse. Baby girl, whose name refers to purity and whiteness, in a bright red jumpsuit. A no-thing, a knot of connections, a mediator.



EIJA-LIISA AHTILA *CONSOLATION SERVICE* (1999)

In its challenge to unity and the oppositional logic the ghost shares clearly something with the notion of the feminine, neither one nor two.<sup>228</sup> What happens then, when we shift attention from the figure of the Woman to the Girl unmarked by the tropes of femininity? The Girl's "stolen body" (in theory and visual culture alike) as ghostly, a no-thing, leads us to the cracks in the foundations of binary sexual difference and the morphologies encoded there.<sup>229</sup> However, as I have argued in this chapter, this does not necessarily call for a closer scrutiny of these openings and what may emerge from there – such as another model of embodied subjectivity or order of signification. Starting with an operation similar to Irigaray's mimesis of female morphology, I strategically repeated the unmarked form allocated to the Girl and found nothing, only not-yet and not-quite. This demanded a rethinking of the veil that covers nothing. The figure of the Girl together with the red shirts as stains on stain guided my focus onto the surfaces. Not unlike, yet not quite like the feminine, it also called for a reconsideration of proximity and similarity, disentangled from their associations with the female body and the feminine yet without doing away with the notion of embodiment as such.

The figures wearing red in Ahtila's works have emphasised for me that embodiment cannot be defined within the binaries of body and mind, surface and depth, proximity and distance. They remind me of the constant process of embodiment, and that "bodies themselves, in their materialities, are never self-present, given things, immediate, certain self-evidences", as Elizabeth Grosz puts it.<sup>230</sup> Instead of focusing on the body and its specificities so as to give form for the characters, the embodied subjects are mapped out in an

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<sup>228</sup> See discussion of the notion of the feminine in the *Introduction* and the chapter 2a. *No-Thing Leaking*.

<sup>229</sup> The no-thingness of the Girl, as the ultimate disembodied body, could be argued to challenge the "disembodied body of masculine reason", as discussed in its contradictions by e.g. Judith Butler. Butler 1993, 49. See also Grosz' claim that: "what remains unanalysed, what men can have no distance on, is the mystery, the enigma, the unspoken of the male body." Grosz 1994, 198. The opposition of distance and proximity becomes questionable again here.

<sup>230</sup> Grosz 1994, 209. Grosz argues that this is due to embodiment insisting on alterity. This could be compared with the discussion of the thinking subject as fundamentally dialogic in the next chapter. Self-difference appears thus to characterise subjectivity both in terms of the body and the mind, or, the embodied being in its complexity. Furthermore, alterity does not then refer to the body as that which is other, but embodiment as being a process, entwined within the world, and therefore resisting capture by definitions etc.

unfolding web of relations within the narrative and its many layers in Ahtila's works. The figures in red, and many of the other characters, are points of connection within the narrative as well as between the viewer and the fictional realm. They act as mediators, like Lucia, between all the pairs associated with the opposition of mind and body.<sup>231</sup> Yet, crucially mediation here neither leaves the oppositions intact as an in-between, nor does it undo them by opening space between the binaries as such for something beyond them to emerge. Instead it draws attention to what happens on the boundaries, on the edges, in the encounters.

The key shifts that can be detected in this chapter could be summarised as moves from questions around possible modes of embodied subjectivity to concerns about its formation in singular contacts. Or, from the possibilities of unveiling what has remained an unmarked mode of embodied being to surfaces that do not hide anything as such. For my approach this has meant a shift from interpretation and re-signification, from attempts at marking the unmarked, to critical encounters, which are examined in closer detail in the following chapters.

These moves go hand in hand with the turn away from repetition as either mimicry or strategic mimesis, both of which negotiate the field and limits of representation. This is connected with the shift from masquerade in its implied persistence on the oppositions of surface and depth. The notion of similarity has arisen here in relation to all of these terms and, notably, been disentangled from sameness. Resemblance is, therefore, not a surface effect in opposition to an original or a depth. Instead, it opens a space of mediation. It allows for contacts but not for fusion, on the surface. Revisiting Roger Caillois' reference to loss of self in becoming "just similar", similarity to something suggests a sense of location yet no fixed position. Similarity allows for proximity as and on the surface that defies marking and reduction

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<sup>231</sup> On the binaries associated with the opposition of mind and body, and their problematisation, see the chapter 2a. *No-Thing Leaking*, and e.g. Grosz 1994, 20-1.

to an assumed core. Proximity is, moreover, no longer immediacy, associated with certain types of bodies or embodied subjects.<sup>232</sup>

Similarity does not simply operate in the field of representation that refers elsewhere. This takes me back to the Girl as a figure and demands further consideration of what it may mean for this figure to no longer figure, i.e. to function as a representation. Following Jean-Luc Nancy, this is then a figure that does not stand for anything else than itself. It weighs in itself, as an event.<sup>233</sup> It happens. It is not a signifier referring directly to a signified yet neither does it operate as, for example, a metaphor. Instead, as a figuration it may be what Rosi Braidotti claims to be a marker of a situated position. For her this allows for temporally and spatially situated narratives that destabilize the certainties of the subject.<sup>234</sup> In terms of the unmarked, this may emphasise positionality as not rooted in an interiority, a body or an identity, but as situatedness in relation to others. While taking cultural and historical coordinates into account it defies any sense of fixity or ground as such. The figure of the Girl may operate as this kind of figuration in my engagement with the figures in Ahtila's works: they call for entangled micro narratives not only of themselves but also of others, myself included, in each encounter.

The figure of the Girl has to be also distinguished in its operations from the feminine and the problematics of it having become in itself a figure that

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<sup>232</sup> See the earlier discussed Doane's critique of the reclaiming of the terms associated with the feminine, e.g. in Irigaray's work, as reinforcing the collapse of femininity and female subjectivity into the body. This view is problematised in the following chapters with a return to proximity e.g. in relation to the challenge posed on the notion of presence by Jean-Luc Nancy's emphasis on the "to" as a space of mediation at the heart of the notion presence-to-itself. Doane 1999; e.g. Nancy 1997, 77.

<sup>233</sup> Figure is closely associated with signification and the critical reconsideration of meaning that will follow in the next chapters. As Nancy writes, the figure exposes "the inapproprable gravity of meaning", i.e. in it meaning weighs. Nancy 1997, 82. See also in the next chapters references to Deleuze and Guattari's rethinking of language, speech and writing away from sense – as both proper sense and figurative sense. Furthermore, this distinction in itself already suggests that figuration has mediation built into its operations, yet, in a metaphor the space between remains a gap defined by what it mediates, i.e. the metaphor and what it stands for, and not a space of contact and emergence.

<sup>234</sup> Braidotti 2006a, 90. Braidotti's notion is related to her ongoing critical rethinking of subjectivity as nomadic, whereas my emphasis lies not on the modes of subjectivity reflected or produced in the figurations and the situated narratives but on the intersubjective engagements at the heart of them. See also in the chapter on witnessing further discussion of Braidotti's notion of situatedness in relation to accountability and empathy.

stands for all exclusion, which was discussed earlier. As Braidotti argues, the feminine can be understood as a project and a movement geared towards a non-binary notion of interrelation.<sup>235</sup> The movement of the feminine has been, however, often halted both strategically and mistakenly into a representative figure, as Butler amongst others argues.<sup>236</sup> The Girl may be a figure that allows for this movement to go on, taking the project further. Instead of a figure of unmarked or of disembodiment that is open for universalisation, it focuses here on singular engagements that take place on the surfaces, points of contact, where subjects are in a constant process of becoming. Crucially, this does not ignore embodiment but gives the surface its weight.<sup>237</sup> Embodiment appears then as an entwinement within the world. The figure of the Girl is characterised by an outward orientation, instead of a reference back to within itself. This is how it happens, in the present and for the future.

The outward move that characterises the turn to the surfaces is discussed in further detail in the following chapters in terms of, for example, exposure. The shift that has taken place in my journey with the Girl could be also sketched out as a rethinking of excess as exposure. The surfaces and edges I have been drawn to are not just thresholds of spaces or boundaries of subjects, where transgressions take place. They are sites of communication and, as such, of orientation toward the others. Mediation does not, thus, equal a medium, a bridge between another world and us. Rather it is a space that can never be fully crossed or closed. This is where haunting takes place, as an address and a call for a response. Haunting is itself mediation, Avery Gordon argues.<sup>238</sup> It is a process of contacts.

In a way, the Girl as unmarked and the red shirts as disruptive stains have addressed me as well as urged me to think what actually happens when I am addressed. Following Lucia and the others, trying to address them in turn,

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<sup>235</sup> Braidotti 2006a, 183.

<sup>236</sup> See e.g. Butler 1993, 36-49.

<sup>237</sup> Compare discussion in the chapter 3a. *Thinking Aloud* on thought as weighty, which further undoes the binaries of mind and matter and interiority and exteriority.

<sup>238</sup> Gordon 1997, 19.

writing ghost stories – I am haunted. Focusing my attention to these hauntings, these contacts that haunt, I am drawn into them. I become involved, alerted to the necessity to do something. I am no longer immersed, nor detached. More than one and no more one, I am pulled to the middle and to my edges like a ghost that weaves together things individual and shared. Haunting is “neither premodern superstition nor individual psychosis”, as Gordon stresses. It is a particular way of knowing what is happening and has happened. Being haunted is a “transformative recognition”.<sup>239</sup> It is a rupture caused by similarity. Thinking, seeing, writing with the Girl, I may be discovering other ways of knowing that do not demand solidity and stability of distinctions, positions and naming.

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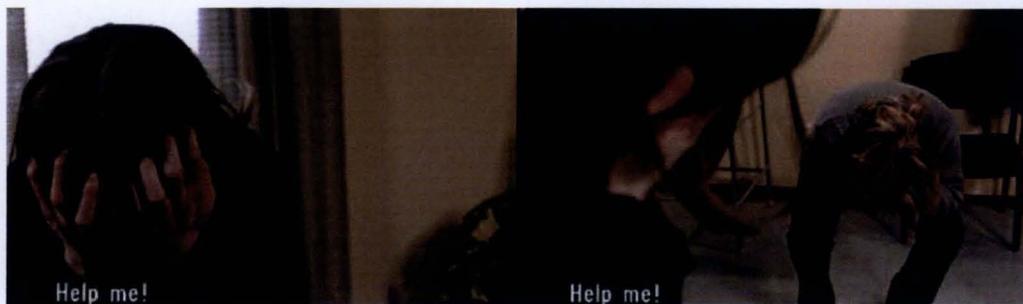
<sup>239</sup> Ibid., 7-8.

### **3. THE ADDRESS**

**EIJA-LIISA AHTILA *CONSOLATION SERVICE* (1999)**

The installation of the work is a cinematic setting, yet the screen is split into two images. The main protagonists, a couple going through divorce, are mainly pictured on separate images, which offer slightly different perspectives into the same narrative scenes. The narration is carried forward by a voice-over and sequences of dialogue between the characters. As the voice-over narrator tells in the beginning, the story is comprised of loosely distinguished three parts: the first provides instructions on how to end a relationship, in the second this happens, and the third is characterised as a consolation service.

With their tiny baby the couple visits first a counsellor, who guides them through the emotions and practicalities associated with divorce. The estranged couple then party with a few friends and end up crossing a bay covered by spring ice that breaks under their weight. The underwater scene turns from the characters' initial panic to a calm image of floating bodies with a poetic voice-over. At the end the woman sits at home on her own when her ex-partner appears out of a cloud of pixels in the hallway. After some failed attempts she no longer tries to grab hold of him but responds to his silent bow with another. He smiles, disappears and does not reappear again.



### 3A. THINKING ALOUD

#### FIRST: SPOKEN TO

The ceaseless flow of loud headlines in the media demand my attention with their messages. They appear to provide me with information yet fail to help me make sense of much. I feel that I am left with no space for thought, no space for response. My writing is here driven by a desire to overcome the sense of incapacity to do anything when faced with the seemingly never-ending tragedies, whether in fiction or in news reports. Tired of being a consumer, consumed by overwhelming emotions that do not tend to allow for anything beyond the tears of sadness, anger, or joy, I search for ways of crafting out space between myself and what I see or hear. This does not imply detachment but gestures towards a space of mediation where sharing and empathy no longer mean identification, as erasure of difference. There emotion does not cancel out signification, and understanding is not the only conceivable result. There silence does not merely equal acceptance, witnessing reception, thought withdrawal.

“Instead of getting upset over the gigantic (or so they say) growth in our means of communication, and fearing through this the weakening of the message, we should rather rejoice over it, serenely: communication “itself” is infinite between finite being (...) communication takes place on the limit, or on the common limits where we are exposed and where it exposes us.”<sup>240</sup>

Jean-Luc Nancy urges us in *Inoperative Community* (1991) to celebrate the excessive means of communication. As the message gets hazy in this cacophony, the modes of address and my position as the addressed become

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<sup>240</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community* (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 67.

increasingly important. This implies a shift from message to the means, yet no longer as methods predetermined by their aim. Communication is then not an end, not a closure. It is not exchange of messages or production of meaning, as will be argued in depth here. The various modes of address draw attention to communication that takes place between, on our limits, as Nancy writes above. The liminal space we are drawn to in communication is not an end in itself either, and it knows no end. There the exposure, which Nancy refers to, is not a revelation but an opening forward and outward, following the orientation of speech. This space I aim to examine and inhabit with a focus on the event of speech and its movement. What matters here is not understanding but encounter. When I am spoken to I am not simply given, shown or told, but called for.

The various modes of speech that address me in contemporary media as well as in Ahtila's works have drawn my attention to the unsettled boundary between documentary and fiction as well as, in close association, that of showing and telling. The overlap of the conventions of documentary and fictional narration, and the blurring of the distinction between monstration (i.e. showing) and narration, call for a rethinking of the related notions of immediacy and mediation, description and event (mimesis and diegesis). This entwines with the shift from the questions of what is shown or told to the enquiry on how and for what effect. Showing or description appears to be a matter of distribution of information. Meanwhile, telling tends to emphasise mediation, interpretation and production. Yet their clear-cut distinction does not hold, I will argue in this chapter, as I shift focus further, onto the possibilities of communication opened up by different modes of address. This I attempt to reflect also in the diverse modes of description and narration, throughout the thesis, that aim to disallow oppositional distinctions in their dialogue.

Furthermore, when focused on as modes of speech neither showing nor telling needs to be approached in terms of knowledge or understanding. Neither promises immediacy any longer. They both operate in and open up a space of mediation that troubles, amongst others, the separation of internal

and external realms. They both take place on the limits, where communication can also happen. When stepping aside from the media headlines, the messages demanding to be heard, making sense has to be thought anew as well, away from closure – no longer as solitary interpretation but not inter-production of meaning either. Meaning is no longer an end of communication. How can I then respond when addressed?

My engagement with Ahtila's works has led me to examine communication and speech as complex events, where a space necessary for dialogue is constantly under production. Communication is not transmission or exchange, but sharing, as Luce Irigaray writes in *The Way of Love* (2002).<sup>241</sup> A driving force in Irigaray's thought is the critique of conventions and institutions that paralyse this movement:

“Dialogue then is limited to a complicity in the same saying, the same world, and not considered as a novel production of speech determined by the context of an exchange in difference.”<sup>242</sup>

How do we achieve this creative space of dialogue in difference called for by Irigaray? According to her this space necessary for communication is created by listening, by silence, and by the reaching out of speech towards the other. This opens up an in-between, a space of mediation, not of immediacy, she argues in *I Love to You* (1996).<sup>243</sup> The space is produced in dialogue, yet it is also that which makes communication possible. In dialogue, both the speaker and the listener as well as the space of their encounter happen, together. This is where communication takes place, both in front of the works and within this article.

While the boundary between documentary and fiction blurs in media, the immediacy of transmitted reality is questioned and its performative nature emphasised, the viewer may be challenged to take an increasingly active

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<sup>241</sup> Irigaray 2002, 27.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>243</sup> Irigaray 1996, 109–119.

role in its construction.<sup>244</sup> I claim that Ahtila's moving image installations appropriate modes of narration familiar to us from other media and, thus, allow for a rethinking and re-experiencing of viewership. I focus here particularly on the characters' mode of speech in the works – to each other, to themselves and to us viewers. The works reach out towards the viewer with numerous audiovisual means, but here I focus specifically on speech and the problematics related to it, only touching on different visual, spatial and temporal aspects as they entwine with speech. These all take part in the production of a space of communication and I examine the other aspects in more depth elsewhere in this thesis, such as the address of the visual in the chapter on the Girl.<sup>245</sup> I stress, however, that the modes of speech I focus on here are not solely a matter of the aural. Bodily gestures, for example, are an integral part of expression, which I hope to emphasise in the following examples.

My discussion of the characters' modes of speech in Ahtila's works can be said to generalize as well as to ignore some of the complexity and diversity of her oeuvre. However, my aim is not to provide a complete appraisal of her practice nor even of individual works. Instead, this discussion of speech draws from my ongoing dialogue with the works and is geared beyond description or analysis. What I call the modes of speech in Ahtila's works are not something residing simply in the works, but more accurately could be characterized as my impressions that allow for me to assume the position of the addressed. As Barbara Johnson has written in her critical account of the

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<sup>244</sup> This thesis sets out to unsettle on many levels the assumed distinct realities of the work (fiction) and of the viewer. See e.g. the problematisation of the notions of immersion and detachment in relation to cinema and installation art in the *Introduction*. This is at the heart of my attempt to rethink spectatorship as an active engagement, an encounter. What the construction of reality may mean is at the core of this enquiry and points towards co-production in communication, where the notions of producers as well as the product are thoroughly questioned.

<sup>245</sup> See also e.g. Taru Elfving, "The Girl", in Maria Hirvi, ed. *Eija-Liisa Ahtila: Fantasized Persons and Taped Conversations* (Helsinki: Crystal Eye & Kiasma, 2002), 205–208; Elfving 2003a; Taru Elfving, "Seeing Red" in *Parkett*, no. 68 (NY & Zurich: Parkett, 2003c); and texts published in Finnish: Taru Elfving, "Thinking Aloud", in Taru Elfving & Katve-Kaisa Kontturi, ed. *With Art: Steps Towards Participatory Research* (Helsinki: The Society for Art History in Finland, 2005), 21–33. Taru Elfving, "Puhuteltuna, todistajana: Eija-Liisa Ahtilan videoinstallaatiot ja vuoropuhelun tila", in Olli-Jukka Jokisaari, Jussi Parikka, Pasi Väliäho, ed. *In Medias Res: Hakuja mediafilosofiaan* (Tampere: Eetos, 2008), 95–125.

address in *A World of Difference* (1987), direct address is related to “the desire for the *other’s* voice”.<sup>246</sup> My reading of the characters’ speech as an address can, thus, be seen to be driven by a desire on my behalf to make contact. Yet I problematise any sense of directness of the address here and, therefore, shift attention from the voice and its capture towards the space of encounter opened up.

The characters appear to occupy uncertain positions as speakers, as will be examined in detail shortly. This is echoed in who can occupy the place of the addressed and how. Narration, where the distinct positions of both the speaker and the addressed are troubled, “suspends the certainty of references not by erasing these differences but by foregrounding the complex dynamism of their interaction”, Johnson writes.<sup>247</sup> Focus shifts not only from what is said and how the speaker is positioned in her speech, but also from who appears (visually and otherwise) to speak and from how I find myself as the addressed. The space of address appears as a space of difference and of communication. This is where my attention lies here: not on what is spoken and from what perspective, or who speaks or who mediates what is shown and told, but on what this mediation allows for.



EIJA-LIISA AHTILA *THE HOUSE* (2002)

With Ahtila’s works, time and again, I find myself suddenly staring at a speechless face, expressionless yet full of charge. These faces seem to gaze into nothing while their voices continue emanating from elsewhere. Or, at times a character is silent in one of the adjacent images while speaking in another. Then they gain familiar kind of unity again: they speak to the camera

<sup>246</sup> Barbara Johnson, *A World of Difference* (Baltimore & London: John Hopkins University Press, 1987), 185.

<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

and, therefore, to me, a viewer. The voices and the images of the characters are in flux, constantly changing their connections ever so slightly. The boundaries of the characters and their realm, their own coherence and their relation to me, are unsettled by this wandering voice as well as the multiplied images. Who is addressing who?

The speech as well as the gaze of the characters both tend towards bridging the void between their reality and mine, yet never quite close that gap. Or, actually, they may question this very distinction as well as the assumption that the characters inhabit and communicate their own reality. While appearing to draw closer they simultaneously hold onto a distance. This initial impression of distanced proximity (returned to in depth later) is largely due to the characters' wandering voices and mode of speech that in all its awkwardness, nevertheless, seems to be addressed to the viewers. Both the source and the destination of their words remain unfixed. The sentences flow smoothly, but as if recited. The matter-of-factness of speech matches curiously well the lack of expressions, which adds to a sense of disjointedness even when the image and the voice of a character meet. This mode of speech detaches the characters from what they speak and unsettles the conventions of both fictional and documentary narration, cinematic illusion and truth claims, mediation and immediacy.

I have been trying to address this mode of speech for some time now. From early on in my research I saw it as one of the strategies Ahtila uses in her works to unsettle the boundary separating the fictional realm of the characters from the space of the audience. At some stage along my exploration I happened upon the notion of thinking aloud as a descriptive term amongst others that were all geared towards gaining hold of the works and their operations. If the characters were thinking aloud, that could perhaps explain at least the inexpressiveness and the unfocused direction of their speech. The layers and disjunctions apparent in the speech could be more plausible on the plane of thought. Am I listening to thoughts spoken aloud, materialised in words? As I will discuss in detail in what follows, thinking aloud did indeed allow me a point of contact with the works. It did

not, however, explain anything, but drew me into the space opened up by the speech in the works, their address and my attempts, in turn, to address them.

This chapter works in tandem with the next one on witnessing. Thinking aloud has, as a notion, allowed me to examine the mode of speech in Ahtila's works as an address that opens up a space of communication. Furthermore, it focuses on both speech and thought as calls for engagement. Witnessing, then again, examines more closely what happens in this space and how, in particular, I may as a viewer inhabit it, or how I may respond to the address. The wandering voices of the characters are central to both of the chapters. They drew my attention, at first, to the distinction of visual and aural, where sound is often understood as more freeform and unbound than the structured and ideologically infused realm of the visible.<sup>248</sup> In Ahtila's works the images appear at least as unfixed as the voices in their complex choreography across multiple screens. The works can also be said to disrupt the conventions of narration structured around the positions of seeing and speaking.<sup>249</sup> They play with the inbuilt mobility of these positions and push them to the breaking point, where they no longer guarantee the characters nor the viewers secure places of seeing, speaking or listening. I discuss in more detail the entanglement of images and voices of the characters in relation to witnessing. Thinking aloud troubles, however, also this opposition as it entwines together with another similar binary, that of speech and thought. Conventionally thought is defined as more open or freeform than its counterpart, like sound in relation to image. I argue here that thinking aloud makes tangible how speech does not simply solidify free-flowing thoughts, or externalise something previously internal. It also problematises other persisting dichotomies such as immediacy and mediation, that are associated with thought and speech, respectively.<sup>250</sup>

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<sup>248</sup> See e.g. Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: the Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).

<sup>249</sup> See e.g. Mieke Bal's text on narration and focalization. Bal 2006, 3-39.

<sup>250</sup> The problematisation of the distinction of immediacy and mediation is at the heart of my enquiry, discussed later in detail. This could also be related to the opposition of absence-

The investigation here does not tackle the question of voice, although this does deserve its own in depth examination elsewhere. Instead of asking what this becoming-audible in thinking aloud may imply, I focus on this movement as a move outward, forward and toward. Becoming-audible breaks away from representational operations: speech does not represent thought as a sharing of something subjective, or a mediation of something essentially irreducible. Moreover, audibility in thinking aloud does not refer to an end of some kind but signals movement. This same shift is present in the following discussion of witnessing as well, as a step aside from the gaining or giving of voice, which implies an existing and representable identity to be voiced. Rather, my argument is geared towards an understanding of both thinking aloud and witnessing as dynamic and open-ended processes. Both notions allow me to focus on the space of this reach and movement that, I claim, characterises the address. They respond, thus, to the key questions posed at the end of last chapter regarding haunting: they explore mediation in terms of becoming, knowing as a transformation, and haunting as an address, as an entwinement with/in wordly contacts.

With both of the notions I shift attention from what is said to the reach of saying, silences, seeing and listening. Not only speech but both thought and witnessing are invested here with the potential of action and, more specifically, not interaction as much as co-action. Both chapters sketch out how my writing – and my thought and witnessing – may act as a response, taking responsibility. I aim to map out the emerging space of communication while placing it, simultaneously, at the heart of the acts that give rise to it. For example, what is considered internal, i.e. thought, is opened outward from within even before becoming speech, because a thinking subject is always already in dialogue with(in) oneself, as I will argue.<sup>251</sup> This is yet another

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presence, e.g. in the distinction of written and spoken languages, yet this is beyond the scope of my research here. See e.g. Jacques Derrida, "Signature, Event, Context" in Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1982).

<sup>251</sup> See discussions later in this chapter on Arendt's thoughts on conscience, Nancy's notion of presence-to-onself, and Johnson's emphasis on self-difference. See e.g. Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (San Diego, New York & London: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1971), 188, 193; Nancy 1997, 77; Johnson 1987, 164.

reason why communication cannot be defined as an end, a product of some kind. It is entangled inseparably with the means themselves.

#### THOUGHT – A LEAP, AN ACT

An elderly woman, Vera, unloads the dishwasher in her apartment and, once finished with the task, pours herself a drink. Meanwhile she keeps on talking, as if to herself, about contemporary society, sexuality, alienation, commodification. Or, actually, her voice continues at times as a voice-over, while she no longer appears to talk.



EIJA-LIISA AHTILA *TODAY* (1996-7)

Vera and her monologue in *Today* (1996-7) gave me the notion of thinking aloud. She seems to be absorbed in her own thoughts, as if thinking aloud yet not addressing anyone as such. Her thoughts are, however, really too carefully articulated to be just that, random thoughts. What kind of freedom, flow or formlessness do I expect of thoughts? Here they appear not so much as leaps from the constraints of communication as above the conventions of

society, as leaps to the position of an observer. Simultaneously they seem to flee from her internal, enclosed realm, outward.

“What is a leap, if thought is indeed a leap? What sort of escape from gravity?”<sup>252</sup>

Following Jean-Luc Nancy’s question posed in *The Gravity of Thought* (1997), what is thought a leap from? As a leap thought is distinguished from, amongst others, immanent matter and speech. Instead of an opposite, however, thought is closely entwined with its counterparts. Nancy alerts us to the persistent oppositions such as material and immaterial, thing and meaning, that the notion of thought carries with it. The definition of thought as weightless and free, transcendental, can be and has to be problematised. For Nancy, a condition of the activity of reason is the “weight of a localized body”.<sup>253</sup> Yet this does not tie thought down, but instead it “can be only by being open to the thing” that is thought.<sup>254</sup> Thought as a leap appears then entwined with the heavy and light matter of things. It is never purely internal or immaterial, but always already connected. It arises from and addresses the world.<sup>255</sup>

A leap implies thus movement, orientation. It may, furthermore, imply a departure and a return, yet it also instigates change. The world one comes back to is never quite the same as that which one leapt from, as Catherine Clément stresses in her discussion of syncopes, which was also referred to earlier in relation to the Girl.<sup>256</sup> She suggests that a leap is a rupture and, as such, both “a matter of shattering and reuniting”.<sup>257</sup> If leap is a rupture, then neither the direction of the leap nor the return follow the coordinates and distinctions of in and out, here and there, familiar and strange. The unknown

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<sup>252</sup> Nancy 1997, 76.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>254</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>255</sup> See affinity between thought and the address here: both are located yet move outward, beyond their location.

<sup>256</sup> Clément 1990, 1.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid., 88.

one leaps to with thought is not simply elsewhere but also here. It is a rupture in what is known, in one's position in and perspective on the world. It is an opening that always leaves a trace, a shift not only in the world, but also in the one who leaps.

Thoughts are, therefore, potentially dangerous, as they can rupture the order(s) of things. As leaps they reach towards the unknown, the unpredictable. They are capricious, they flee. Clément writes about thoughts as young girls, who escape from the grasp of (male) analysts and philosophers, vanish and transform, threatening the order of dialectical philosophy.<sup>258</sup> As also discussed earlier, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari associate similarly change and movement, becoming and the in-between with the figure of the girl, which they describe as fugitive and a line of flight.<sup>259</sup> The notion of line of flight could be further compared with the leap as both break out of the boundaries of solidity and unity as well as of the dualistic order. Thus leap has no longer to do with the swiftness associated with thought as immaterial and transcendent.<sup>260</sup>

As a realm of leaps, thought allows for experimentation and play with all kinds of logics. Yet, simultaneously, it does not surrender to anyone's mastery. Is my thought then no longer my thought, if I am not its master? Does it pose a potential danger not only to the discursive order of language or the conventional understandings and uses of speech, but also to my position and boundaries as a thinking subject? This challenges the Cartesian subject, whose self-presence relies on thought. I am not interested here in the internal splitting or decentering of the thinking subject as, for example, in psychoanalysis and the theories of the unconscious.<sup>261</sup> Neither am I concerned with undoing the linguistic model(s) that deem everything outside

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<sup>258</sup> Ibid., 85–93.

<sup>259</sup> Deleuze & Guattari 1988, 232–309.

<sup>260</sup> See Arendt 1971, 44.

<sup>261</sup> See e.g. Avery Gordon's critique of Freud's theory of the unconscious for rooting all hauntings inside the individual, in the unconscious, denying thus their origins in the encounters between the self and the world. Gordon 1997, 48. This resonates with my interest in the outward orientation of the thinking subject and the dialogical nature of thought.

the structures of language and beyond our reach.<sup>262</sup> Instead of replacing these critical models my approach relies on them yet attempts to make a move aside: as discussed in the *Introduction*, Luce Irigaray's work has allowed me to move from strategic repetition – a mode of critical intervention that aims to open up the structures of binary discourse, or “the logic of the same”, and of language to that which is excluded within it – and from the investigation of the excluded to the inquiry on the nature of communication itself and, furthermore, to the inhabitation of the space of communication. Thought as a leap suggests to me a move outward, an opening of the interior and the integrity of the subject out, towards the world and the collective realm.

Therefore, I am not interested in a return implied by a leap, nor in the change that affects the one who leaps with thought, as much as in the space opened up.<sup>263</sup> If thoughts are leaps, and ruptures, what happens when they are spoken aloud? The plane of thought seems to allow for contradictions, complexity and simultaneity not accommodated by speech. Thinking aloud draws attention to a point, where these leaps gain temporary tangibility and tentative forms. It appears to inhabit a threshold between thought and communication, internal and external, and challenges their distinction. Thinking aloud does not simply bridge a pre-existing gap or boundary, but actually makes space for this in-between. Furthermore, it locates both thought and speech there. Both are entwined with(in) the world yet also carry rupturing potential as leaps. Thinking aloud appears to give weight to thought and to send speech to flight.

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<sup>262</sup> The move away from the problematics of representation, as discussed in the *Introduction*, implies also critical positioning in relation to the linguistic model, yet direct in-depth consideration of this remains outside the remit of this thesis. See e.g. Simon O'Sullivan's call for a step beyond textual reading strategies which he associates with a turn from the linguistic, O'Sullivan 2006, 4-5.

<sup>263</sup> See later, Nancy's notions of exposure and meaning that shift focus from an implied return and the thinking subject to the movement itself and the spacing created, marked by “to”: “There is sense only once this being –to itself no longer belongs to itself, no longer comes back to itself.” Nancy 2003, 8. This is discussed in the next chapter on witnessing in closer relation to community and the notion of “being-with”.

As Vera's voice wanders, detaches itself from her as its source, it shifts emphasis from the origins of speech and thought to their movements. Simultaneously, the wandering voice questions its immediacy: the speech lacks spontaneity and directness as well as clear direction. In order to focus on the spacing created here, thinking aloud could be translated to a closely associated notion of speaking to oneself. This suggests the narrative trope of soliloquy, the cinematic conventions of which Ahtila appears to follow at times: the characters speak, but with their lips closed, and appear to address an audience, while the other characters seem oblivious to their speech. Seymour Chatman claims that in non-naturalistic narratives soliloquy consists of formal declamations, explanations or comments, which merge speech and thought.<sup>264</sup> This resonates with the speech of Ahtila's characters, even though it breaks in complex ways with the criteria set for soliloquy. This mode of speech troubles the assumed distinction of internal and external realms, and it has to be distinguished from interior monologue.

If Vera and the other fictional characters in Ahtila's works are talking to themselves, their speech is oriented outward, even though towards themselves. Thinking aloud, then again, expresses this movement without an assumed audience, without a set address. Neither thinking aloud nor speaking to oneself, however, have to be understood as closures, as turns inwards. Instead, they may both suggest openings, or even calls for dialogue. Emphasis shifts from the interior onto the edges of the thinking and speaking subject. I place the weight of my thought here on the outward movement that characterises thinking aloud. This is also a move toward, a space or distance of "to", as Nancy writes:

"the distance of the presence-to-itself of an existence whose existing means precisely this presence-to – a to of being (presence) itself, the to of a sending, of a sending back, of a throw, a projection, a rejection, the to of a yet-to-come, of an expectation, an attention, a call"<sup>265</sup>

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<sup>264</sup> Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1978), 181. See also Chatman's definition of soliloquy: *Ibid.*, 178-9.

<sup>265</sup> Nancy 1997, 77.

The weight of thought lies in its outward reach, towards the future and towards the world and others, in its address to what lies beyond the here and now. Yet, as Nancy argues in *A Finite Thinking* (2003), the “to” is an opening, a gap or a fissure. It is not to be considered as a relation, but as an event.<sup>266</sup> It is not determined by its origin, nor its destination or direction, nor by the relation between the two. It is a matter of exceeding these positions, of excess as exposure.<sup>267</sup>

Exposure carries the significations of unveiling or disclosure. Yet it does not only refer to a revelation or a showing of whatever pre-exists the act, as in the service of knowledge production or transferral of meaning. Exposure also endangers as well as initiates contact.<sup>268</sup> Associated with excess it begins to resonate with emergence of something not predetermined or anticipated. The disruptive excess, which Irigaray calls for with strategic repetition (mimesis), is made space for by “jamming the theoretical machinery” of dualism that claims to produce univocal truth and meaning (see discussion of mimesis in the *Introduction*). She underlines that this is not a matter of (women) becoming (men’s) equals in knowledge or constructing an alternative logic.<sup>269</sup> This excess does not allude to the realm of the material, the feminine, the irrational. Instead, it opens onto an unmapped terrain, ungoverned by the order that opposes meaning and matter, internal and external. It calls for novel notions of, amongst others, subjectivity and communication. Associated with exposure and excess, thus, the movement of thought reaches to and beyond the boundaries of the thinker and of thought itself.

Thinking aloud highlights the outward orientation of thought. Thought acts in the world, and this act is where the spacing of “to” happens. Thought, the “soundless dialogue” with ourselves, is no longer conceivable as passive contemplation like it has been understood, Hannah Arendt argues in *The Life*

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<sup>266</sup> Nancy 2003, 7.

<sup>267</sup> Nancy 1997, 78-9.

<sup>268</sup> See e.g. *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000-).

<sup>269</sup> Irigaray 1985b, 78.

*of the Mind* (1971).<sup>270</sup> She claims that instead of being opposed to doing, like theory to practice, thought is action yet unlike knowledge. In her examination of the supposedly lone activity that is thought, she turns to Kant's distinction of thinking and knowing, reason and intellect.<sup>271</sup> The role of thought in knowledge production is that of a means to an end, whereas reason asks "unanswerable questions of meaning".<sup>272</sup> What thought aims at, then, is not determined, yet this does not deem it aimless action. The notion of meaning that appears to drive thought here, as distinguished from knowledge, I will return to later. What is at stake here, first of all, concerns the relation of thought to the world. Thoughts can neither present nor represent reality, Arendt claims.<sup>273</sup> Thought is not observation that leads to understanding of the world. Arendt withdraws thought from direct engagement with the sensible world, the world of appearances, yet insists that this is not a question of transcendence.<sup>274</sup> She relies here on the phenomenological understanding of appearance that does not allow for the separation of the spheres of ideas and matter, or mind and body: we are all appearances and, furthermore "we are of the world and not merely in it", she writes.<sup>275</sup>

How are thoughts, then, of the world? Thought is geared towards appearances: it expects something to appear to it, Arendt claims, yet it also anticipates its own appearance as it is "conceived in speech even before being communicated".<sup>276</sup> The act of thought is, thus, characterized by emergence. Thinking is always already turned forward and outward, towards communication, sharing and becoming. Thinking suggests here, to me, that to be of the world is not so much a matter of origin as of orientation. Thought is, according to Arendt, dependent on being spoken – either in silence, with ourselves, or aloud.<sup>277</sup> Thought opens out, towards dialogue. Yet, it is not

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<sup>270</sup> Arendt 1971, 6.

<sup>271</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>272</sup> Ibid., 54, 62.

<sup>273</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>274</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>275</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>276</sup> Ibid., 24, 32.

<sup>277</sup> Ibid., 99. The sense of outward orientation and dialogue is also supported by Arendt's emphasis, discussed towards the end of this chapter, that thought is not built on previous

necessarily geared towards a presupposed destination, an audience, she stresses.<sup>278</sup> Thinking is a withdrawal from the company and communication with others, yet in doing so opens up the thinking being for a dialogue with oneself, she argues. This is what makes it an activity.<sup>279</sup> As I argue here, this withdrawal does not lead to a closure or a turn inward, but unsettles the very opposition of interior and exterior. Dialogue, speaking and being with, is at the heart of thinking and the thinking being.

This brings me back to Jean-Luc Nancy. He also refers to Kant's distinction of reason and understanding when he writes about thought as not-knowing, yet not an opposite or negative of knowing.<sup>280</sup> For him, this thinking is a matter of a passage, the "to" or toward, not of intention, end, or content.<sup>281</sup> Not unlike Arendt, he stresses that the thought, the not-knowing, cannot be appropriated: in its openness it does not allow for its mastery as a means to an end.<sup>282</sup> Instead he weaves a link between thinking and the "urgency of communication".<sup>283</sup> It is a "response to what never ceases to call" us.<sup>284</sup> For me this resonates with the ethical question posed by Arendt about thinking as action that works against evil-doing. Conscience is a by-product of thought, of dialogue with oneself, she argues. One needs to stay friends, to live in peace with oneself.<sup>285</sup> The space of the movement of thought, of the "to", emerges as a space of "with". This emergence, the space of appearance and of exposure, may be the very aim and act of thought.

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thought, indebted to and determined by it, like knowledge, but takes place in complex intersections within the world as action. See *Ibid.*, 212.

<sup>278</sup> *Ibid.*, 98. She distinguishes here thought further from appearance, which she claims depends on a spectator.

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

<sup>280</sup> On Kant see e.g. Nancy 2003, 36-7, 42. Not-knowing, according to Nancy, "isn't to postpone final knowledge until a later date or to a higher register, but to enter into the obscurity and the opacity of what is no longer a matter of knowing in any way, shape, or form." *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>281</sup> Nancy writes about this "concealed thinking" as a "thinking that appeals to its passage to the other alone, without intention, beyond all intention, for nothing, nothing except our being between us, nothing except our being in the world." *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>282</sup> *Ibid.*, 47. See also Nancy 1997, 10, 81.

<sup>283</sup> Nancy 2003, 42. Nancy refers here also to community and generosity, which I will return to in the chapter 3b. *Witnessing*.

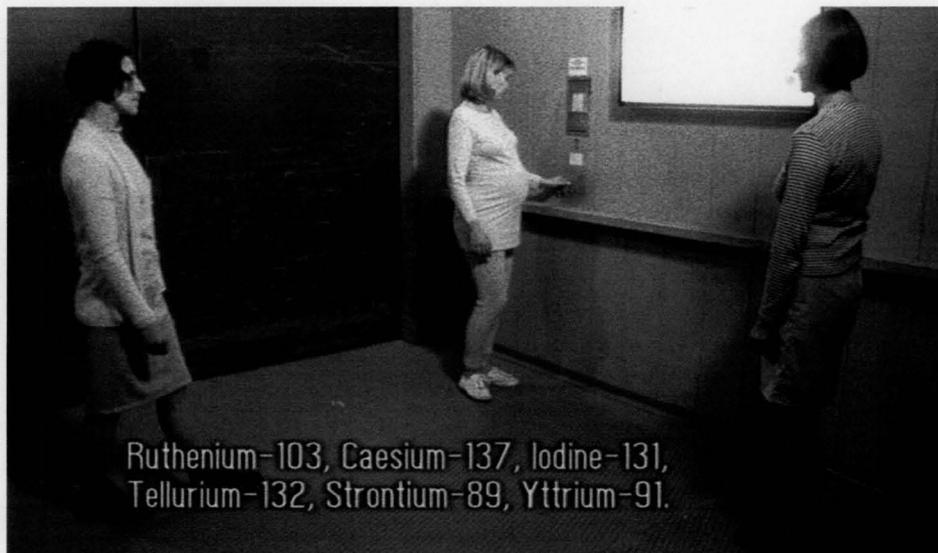
<sup>284</sup> *Ibid.*, 297.

<sup>285</sup> Arendt 1971, 188, 193. She writes, "conscience is the anticipation of the fellow who awaits you if and when you come home." *Ibid.*, 191.

The movement of thought, such as becoming-audible in thinking aloud, is what founds my attempts at bringing Ahtila's works into dialogue with philosophical questions in this thesis. If her works are approached as thought in action, as I claim in the *Introduction*, they do something in the world. This does not call for articulation, interpretation or translation of what they do, but encourages the weaving of connections between the operations of the art works, those of philosophical works as well as of my own writing. These encounters, moreover, give rise to further thought, communication, action.

#### ON RECITATION AND THE ADDRESS: WHO SPEAKS?

In the work *Gray* (1993) three women seem to be reciting the same text together. They do not really address each other, nor directly me, the viewer. They may be thinking aloud, sharing the same thoughtscape. Or, maybe they co-inhabit a text, a shared plane of discourse that here refers to some post-catastrophe scenario with all its collectively internalised fears and plans of action.



EIJA-LIISA AHTILA GRAY (1993)

The characters in Ahtila's works do not always appear to be so much thinking aloud as reading aloud. They often address their words to the camera in a

matter-of-fact mode familiar from documentary narration. Yet, much of the time they seem to be reading aloud a script, as if speaking out someone else's thoughts and words. Ahtila's works could be seen to unsettle both the conventions of documentary and fictive narratives as well as the distinction of the two. Furthermore, they seem to resist my conceptual frame of thinking aloud. However, the notion of thinking aloud does not aim to describe the way the characters speak. Thinking aloud is a starting point as well as a node, which allows for different departures. It allows me to bring various critical questions into play with the works, as well as focuses attention on the address of the works and my encounter with them.

A retake is thus due. I had already once wrapped all the different observations regarding the characters' speech neatly together in my argument, or so I thought: they all emphasize the outward orientation and dialogic nature of both thought and speech. I focused on language and, particularly, its use as if it was not one's own, which underlines its role as mediation.<sup>286</sup> Collective and individual, internal and external entwine further together. The language used could then be seen to function as a rather inadequate yet necessary tool of mediation, which only hints at the complexity it aims to encapsulate. This investigation of mine, however, still assumed a particular subject using language strategically or unable to use it as her own. It also referred back to the production and transferral of meanings as well as to deconstructive approaches to dominant structures or orders, such as the binary logic. Both the speaker and the notion of mediation call now for another kind of examination, no longer in terms of specific uses of language(s) and transmission of messages.

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<sup>286</sup> My emphasis was earlier on the appropriation of language(s), associated with Irigaray's mimesis, i.e. strategic repetition. See e.g. an early version of this chapter, published in Finnish: Elfving 2005. I referred then also to Deleuze and Guattari's as well as Trinh T. Minh-ha's thoughts on being a stranger in language, which is no longer here discussed in terms of subjectivity but in relation to the senselessness of speech and mediation. Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari, *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature* (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 1986); Trinh T. Minh-ha, *When the Moon Waxes Red* (New York & London: Routledge, 1991).

The question now posed, first of all, concerns the origins of thought and speech: who is thinking or speaking here? The artist could be said to be present in this awkward, performed speech of the characters. The disjunctions between image and speech of the characters, i.e. the wandering voice that at times appears like a narrator's voice-over, could also be explained away as the author's voice. Yet, the words, however scripted, are not mere messages transported by the characters, or the actors, as mediators. Furthermore, who and what addresses me here is not reducible to the artist as an origin. Narratology distinguishes different narrative levels of address: author addresses reader, implied author implied reader, narrator narratee, character other characters.<sup>287</sup> I claim that in Ahtila's works this order is subtly disrupted. As in thinking aloud, the distinctions of interior and exterior, not simply of the fictional realm and the viewer's reality, but of intra- and extradiegetic levels or of story and discourse, are blurred. Viewer's position as the addressed becomes then also uncertain.

To get to grips with what happens with/in this mode of speech, I shift focus onto the address, careful however not to conflate the two. Who is addressing me, a viewer, in the works? Or, who is addressed here, in this speech with uncertain coordinates? The address does not originate in someone or somewhere as such. As Vivian Sobchack has argued in *The Address of the Eye* (1992), address refers both to a location and the activity of projecting outward (see the *Introduction*). For her, address is always situated in a body, but also able to extend beyond it. Based on this understanding an intersubjective engagement appears to be built both on the address that locates one while it reaches towards the other(s) and on the recognition of the address of the other as that of another subject.<sup>288</sup> With Ahtila's works, however, I cannot locate an embodied subject that addresses me, except possibly as the cinematic installation itself. This view is supported by Sobchack's emphasis on the engagement between the viewer and the film as an embodied being. Sobchack grounds this on the distinction of primary foundations (the film/work as an embodied being) and secondary structures

<sup>287</sup> See e.g. Chatman 1978, 147-151; Bal 2006, 14.

<sup>288</sup> Sobchack 1992, 25 & 55.

(e.g. discursive) and codes (e.g. narrative). Even if these both are understood in terms of mediation and as simultaneous, like Sobchack stresses, for me this raises further questions about recognition: when I cannot identify the origins of speech in the works, I am denied the possibility to reduce the other (the depicted characters as much as the work) to what I already know. Neither can I then define the works or the characters as fixed entities nor position myself in relation to them.

Identifying who addresses me seems beside the point. Focus shifts to the space opened up by speech, the space of address. Here the recognition of the source of address is not a priority, or even of much relevance. The notion of interpellation, as introduced by Louis Althusser in *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* (2001) (see also the *Introduction*),<sup>289</sup> is useful here even though it also focuses on the production of subject positions as well as on the processes of recognition. Interpellation draws attention to how subjects are called into being by recognition and misrecognition of themselves as the addressed. Moreover, the subjects are hailed by ideology, not an embodied subject. As Althusser argues, ideology does not merely hail, but it is this very hailing.<sup>290</sup> To consider, thus, the address itself as discourse that is in constant production in the very acts of address means, first of all, to locate both the address and the discourse in all the subjects involved in the process of addressing each other, whether the cinematic work, the filmmaker, the character on film, or the viewer. Secondly, this implies that it does not make sense to distinguish between some modes of address as pre-discursive and some others as discursive. This appears to be in line with Sobchack's emphasis on mediation, if understood as denial of access to any immediate experience prior to or beyond discursive structures such as language.<sup>291</sup> The discourses are within as much as without me, and, therefore, I do not have conscious access to all the aspects of my embodied subjectivity and the discourses it is constituted by or with/in. Neither can I map out exhaustively any subject position either as the origin or the destination of the address.

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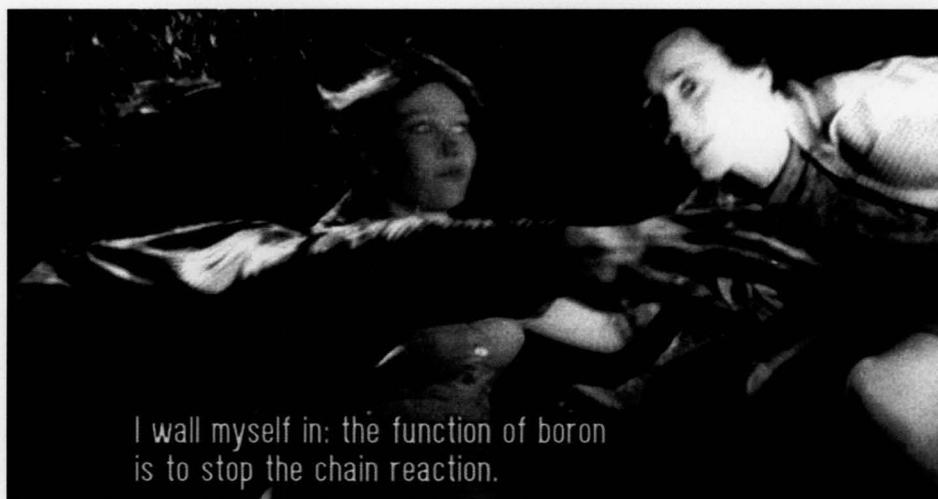
<sup>289</sup> Althusser 2001.

<sup>290</sup> Ibid., 117-8.

<sup>291</sup> Sobchack 1992, 11-13.

This reinstates that I should not scrutinize what I mis/recognize, i.e. the subject positions or what is re/produced in the address. Instead the focus lies here on how the address takes place, and returns later to the question of recognition, as recognition of irreducibility.

My attempt to sidestep questions of mis/recognition is supported by Donna Haraway's emphasis on interpellation as interruption. As she argues, hailing ruptures momentarily the order of things and opens all the parties briefly for reconsideration, not necessarily for mere reconfirmation (see *Introduction*).<sup>292</sup> Address is, thus, an event that unsettles for a moment all the parties as well as their relations. It takes place between, in a space of encounter, and is no longer retraceable back to whoever speaks, produces speech, or responds to it as a call. Situated in the world and, simultaneously, oriented towards it, address is a process of entanglement, not unlike thought as a leap. The same applies then to discourse. It no longer makes sense to try and locate the address or the discourse, whether these are understood as one or not. Instead, my attention is drawn to the encounters, in which they are produced interlinked with speech, text, narratives and various subject positions.<sup>293</sup>



EIJA-LIISA AHTILA GRAY (1993)

<sup>292</sup> Haraway 1997, 49–50.

<sup>293</sup> My view on the address, as being produced in the encounters, differs thus here from e.g. Irit Rogoff's reading of the address in Kutlug Ataman's work, where she claims the speakers are using the viewer, as the addressed, in the production of their subjectivities. Irit Rogoff, "De-Regulation: With the Work of Kutlug Ataman", in *Third Text*, No. 97 (London: Routledge, 2009).

Perhaps I, a viewer, also co-inhabit the texts with the women in *Gray* (part of a three-monitor installation *Me/We, Okay, Gray*). The words are then not recited as something fully pre-existing the acts of speech. As the notion of co-inhabitation suggests, the speakers are in a process together with each other and with/in the text. This brings me to the performativity of speech.<sup>294</sup> An act of speech takes actively part in the process of reinforcement and reworking of linguistic conventions and codes. Speech is never completely immediate and direct transmission of messages, yet it is not mere repetitive copying or representation (of thoughts or the real) either. The mode of speech that reminds of quoting or reading a script can be seen, first of all, to draw attention to the impossibility of direct translation or transferral. Reading aloud and its potential does not, however, have to be understood only in terms of its operations as appropriation or strategic repetition that unsettles conventions, established points of reference and familiar fields of significations. The way the women in *Gray* and, for example, the girls in *If 6 Was 9* (1995-6) speak together focused my thought on the sharing of speech over production of meaning and the operations of language. As Judith Butler argues in *Excitable Speech* (1997), a choir of others always speaks in my speech.<sup>295</sup> Thanks to the reiterability of language, speech can communicate and make sense. But also due to this reliance on repetition, “the past and the future of the utterance cannot be narrated with any certainty”, Butler claims.<sup>296</sup> The operations of speech are marked by excess that resists capture. How speech acts is never completely determined by the speaker.

Moreover, speech is an outward act, as J.L.Austin suggested in his introduction of the notion of performativity in *How to Do Things With Words* (1962).<sup>297</sup> It acts on the world. Its event takes place between us. Neither the

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<sup>294</sup> On performativity, see J.L.Austin 1962. As mentioned earlier, my understanding of the notion has been, in particular, influenced strongly by Judith Butler. See Butler 1990; Butler 1993; Butler 1997.

<sup>295</sup> Butler refers to inheritance, yet notably my argument steers away from any such reference to determinacy as well as from the problematics of subjectivity being produced in and through speech: “In some sense, it is an inherited set of voices, an echo of others who speaks as the “I”.” Butler 1997, 25.

<sup>296</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>297</sup> Austin emphasises that the words act in performative utterances. Their act is not dependent on e.g. internal processes of thought accompanying the utterances, although e.g.

openness and outward orientation nor the excessive nature of speech, however, only concern signification. Here my focus on how speech acts differs considerably from those of both Austin and Butler. I will claim that sharing is to be found at the heart of speech and communication, yet not only in terms of its aim and ability to signify. The question does not concern who speaks or what is spoken. Ability to speak is dependent on self-difference, not self-identity, as Barbara Johnson claims in her discussion of address and narration.<sup>298</sup> This resonates with the notion of thought as opening one for dialogue within and without. Thinking and speaking are geared towards and founded on sharing. Furthermore, meaning and sharing entwine together in complex ways, as I argue in what follows. This implies a shift of attention from both signification and origin of speech to the engagements allowed by it.

#### SPEAKING TO

In *Consolation Service* (1999) the couple going through divorce bark at each other. Standing apart, facing each other, one starts and the other joins in, barking back. The space between the couple is filled with louder and louder barks. They may well be venting anger at each other but, simultaneously, they appear to be making contact.



EIJA-LIISA AHTILA *CONSOLATION SERVICE* (1999)

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non-commitment to what is said can make the speech acts “unhappy”, i.e. misleading etc. Speech acts take place between us. Words are our bonds, he states. See e.g. Austin 1962, 10.

<sup>298</sup> Johnson 1987, 164.

Speech takes place to and with someone. This may sound commonsensical yet deserves closer consideration. Luce Irigaray has written about the orientation of speech and described words as “paths going from one to the other”.<sup>299</sup> According to her the direction taken can be even more important than what is said. Communication is about searching for and making connections, she states. She underlines the nature and function of speech as a mode of reaching out.<sup>300</sup> Yet speech is characterised by the move toward and the sharing implied by “to” and “with” even if the other remains indeterminate. Speech makes space as it moves away from the speaker, towards the other and, at times, back again, as expressed by both the notions of “thinking aloud” and “speaking to oneself”. The direction out and towards, together and apart, opens up a space of communication and co-existence, as Nancy writes.<sup>301</sup> The other, however undetermined, addressed in speech is crucial for the orientation of speech, its act(ion). Responding to speech as a call, taking up a place as the addressed is to allow for it to act. Yet this does not define the space opened up.

Communication between the barking couple in *Consolation Service* could then be seen as neither transmission nor reception of messages or meanings. Barking may turn the void separating the couple into a space where encounter is possible. Even in all its aggression the barking reaches out towards the other, like a call or an outstretched arm. The estranged couple express in their conversation with a therapist how the accusing words have no longer offered paths towards but instead have attempted to define and capture the other. The barking may return them to the space of communication, the space of the “to”, where speech reaches out and not merely signifies.

Barking focuses attention in dialogue to its mode of operation, the acts of speech, instead of its content. I do not approach it as a symbolic or

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<sup>299</sup> Irigaray 2002, 15.

<sup>300</sup> Ibid., 15; Irigaray 1996, 113.

<sup>301</sup> Nancy 2000, 62. More later on Nancy’s notion of “being-with”, referred to here by “co-existence”.

metaphorical element that breaks with realism in the work. This would suggest that it is just another signifying layer to be interpreted. The oppositional distinction of realism and fantastical is also highly problematic.<sup>302</sup> Barking is not an expression that completely does away with the verbal here either. Hence the representational function of language, i.e. its referential relation to the real determined by conventions, in the service of sense, is bypassed.<sup>303</sup> It does not, however, leap beyond signification, to what is dualistically defined as material and irrational – the side of the body and the uncontrollable, the feminine.<sup>304</sup> Nor does it lead to the realm associated with nature, emotions and drives as opposed to the rational.

First of all, barking may not be used here strictly as a mode of speech, but it is not immediate or instinctual guttural noise either. The emphasis on the outward orientation and the performativity of speech aims to break away from this problematic opposition of matter and meaning, as well as the distinction of the real and its representation.<sup>305</sup> Words, or in this case woofs, may push their way to the boundaries of signification, where new possibilities open up

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<sup>302</sup> See e.g. Robert Stam, *Literature through Film. Realism, Magic, and the Art of Adaptation* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005a), 13. Stam problematises the distinction by e.g. pointing out that cinematic narration always merges the realistic and the fantastical together in complex ways, such as in its deployment of monstration and montage.

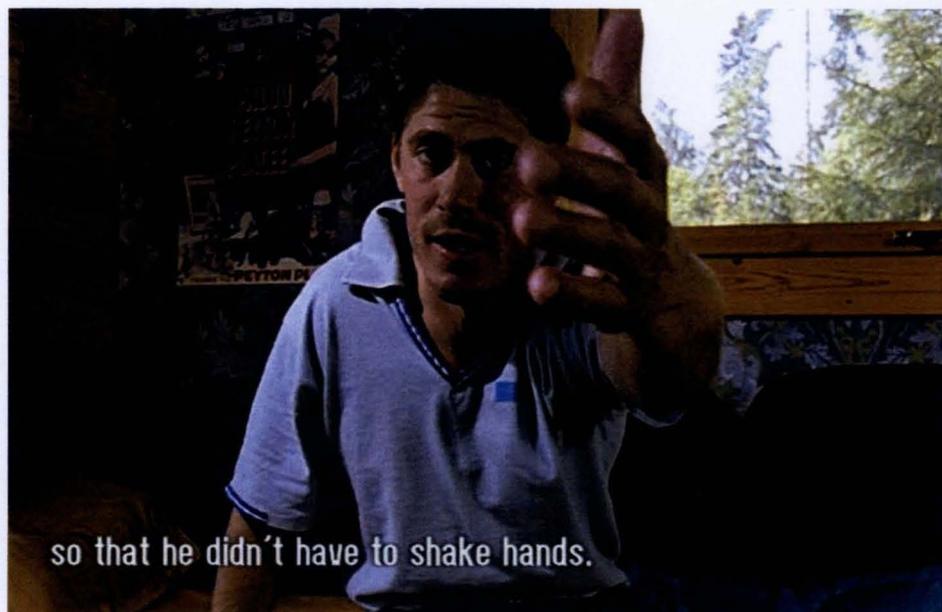
<sup>303</sup> According to Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari the so-called common use of language is symbolic and representative, in the service of sense rather than the senses. Deleuze & Guattari 1986, 19–20. See also e.g. Barbara Johnson, who refers to Paul de Man's thought in questioning "purely representational view of how language works". She writes about a residue of operations that cannot be interpreted as signs. Johnson 1987, 6-7. J.L. Austin, then again, stresses the need to distinguish sense and reference in relation to meaning, while emphasizing the distinction of force and meaning. Austin 1962, 100. However, as will be discussed here these distinctions do not hold as clear-cut oppositions. The sense of sense appears unfixed as meaning itself is rethought.

<sup>304</sup> The distinction of signification and materiality runs the risk of reinforcing their opposition and, furthermore, other related binaries such as mind-matter, masculine-feminine. E.g. Barbara Creed has written about this in her examination of horror films and particularly the gendered embodiment in them. According to Creed the body takes control over the female victim as she screams and her expression fails to signify. She loses her sense, her subjectivity. Barbara Creed, "Horror and the Carnavalesque", in Leslie Devereaux & Roger Hillman, ed. *Fields of Vision: Essays in Film Studies, Visual Anthropology, and Photography* (Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, 1995), 144. Here it is important to distinguish the use of sounds that defy the conventions of speech and predefined signification in Ahtila's works from this mode of aural expression predetermined as material and meaningless.

<sup>305</sup> Similarly, as discussed earlier, the notion of thinking aloud troubles these oppositions drawing attention to a mode of materialisation and movement that refuses to fix and pre-assume signification.

for expression. What is at stake here does not concern what is expressed, or the possibilities of expressing what was previously inexpressible, but how expression takes place. Barking may actually rupture the priority of representation and signification – in its “senselessness” speech begins to express differently, intensely, as Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari write in *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature* (1986).<sup>306</sup> Barking could be seen to push to an extreme the economical use of language that according to Deleuze and Guattari turns poverty of signification into a wealth of intensity:

*“Language stops being representative in order to now move toward its extremities or its limits.”*<sup>307</sup>



EIJA-LIISA AHTILA *TODAY* (1996-7)

Speech does something here. As an example of intense use of language Deleuze and Guattari mention repetition and particularly children’s way of repeating a word “to make it vibrate around itself” until it loses its points of reference, its signification.<sup>308</sup> This makes me think of the way the father in *Today* repeats various bits of sentences as if thus trying to make sense of his troubled relationships with his own father and his daughter. He reiterates his

<sup>306</sup> Deleuze & Guattari 1986, 21–22. See also O’Sullivan 2006, 70.

<sup>307</sup> Deleuze & Guattari 1986, 23.

<sup>308</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

words in his speech, but some of them are also visually reproduced, or materialised: for example, his trousers fall to his ankles after he tries to articulate his feelings in this very metaphor. Similarly the images in Ahtila's works are often multiplied on the adjacent screens, and even subtitles are repeated across all of them. Instead of clarifying matters the various kinds of repetitions, however, tend to complicate things. The seemingly simple statements and other repeated elements gain more and more complex resonances. Yet the repetitions do not merely undo conventional readings or demand re-signification. They make me increasingly aware of myself as a viewer, not just in my attempts to decipher and capture it all, but as the addressed. This senselessness of speech is no longer an opposite of sense, as this opposition is already defined within an internal logic of language and its representational function.<sup>309</sup> Moreover, as Austin states, speech cannot be nonsensical only, for example, vague or void. He differentiates speech here from language, which in its failure may end up as nonsense.<sup>310</sup> This emphasizes the acts of speech over speech as messages. In speech, however, different modes of communication coexist. As Austin suggests, acts *of* saying something are always also acts *in* saying something.<sup>311</sup>

For me, the intensity and senselessness does not, then, allude here to some kind of an embodied mode of communication as opposed to the production of meaning, but to a call of a kind. What does this call do? Language stripped to its bare bones may reveal contradictions and blind spots within it, but it may also make it do unexpected things, in unexpected ways. Deleuze and Guattari relate this awkward use of language to being a stranger, which also

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<sup>309</sup> See also Nancy's claim that thinking inscribes the limit of signification in language, yet this limit does not verge on nonsense, as this is itself a form of signification. Nancy 1997, 69. This could be linked with his emphasis on thinking of the limit, not of limitation – not of the abyss or of nothingness, but of "the un-grounding of being". Nancy 2003, 27. See in relation to his association of sense with touch, the limit and the between, *Ibid.*, 39–40.

<sup>310</sup> Austin 1962, 98.

<sup>311</sup> *Ibid.*, 94-100. Austin distinguishes the act in saying from the act of saying, or illocutionary act from locutionary act, the latter of which has meaning while the former has a force. Yet, he claims that to perform a locutionary act is always also to perform an illocutionary one. This suggests to me a possible shift away from the prioritisation of signification. Austin focuses, however, on analysing different modes of communication/operation in speech acts, whereas my investigation centres on the space of communication opened up by speech.

Trinh T. Minh-ha has written about in *When the Moon Waxes Red* (1991).<sup>312</sup> As a stranger in the language one uses, one's position is never secure nor is the transferral of meaning to be taken for granted. As the other, the stranger, can no longer be positioned either quite inside or outside language, a space for her opens up on the border. From here it becomes impossible to merely reflect on the content without simultaneously questioning how, by what means, it is materialised and how its meanings are inter-produced in the process, as Trinh stresses.<sup>313</sup> The question of "how" refers to the role of language as mediation, but not necessarily only in terms of signification, i.e. its referential distance from the so-called real, but also as mediation between speakers. Moreover, mediation does not merely concern production of meaning or means to an end. Neither does it have to be understood as an irrecoverable loss or lack of immediacy. Mediation alludes also to the space of possible communication opened up by speech, on the thresholds of language and the speakers, and in between them. This calls for a reconsideration of the inter-production, referred to by Trinh, as well as the notion of meaning itself.

There are resonances here with the notion of critical inhabitation, which acknowledges language as not a mere tool but something each speaker is entangled with/in. It also underlines the possibility to linger uneasily on the borders of language (or, for example culture or fields of knowledge), never able to gain mastery over it, yet not simply mastered by it either. This means that one has to give up one's secure position and sense of control as a speaker, as Trinh argues about the stranger.<sup>314</sup> Could I think of the example of the father in these terms? He suggests in his repetitive speech that he cannot make clear sense of the things he is telling. In his inability to make sense he becomes feminised. This lack of control over one's thoughts, emotions and self-expression can be associated with reciting and, furthermore, thought as a realm of leaps as discussed earlier. Speaking words that are not one's own, or thinking thoughts not strictly mine, gestures

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<sup>312</sup> Deleuze & Guattari 1986, 26. See also Trinh T. Minh-ha 1991, 199.

<sup>313</sup> Trinh T. Minh-ha 1991, 198.

<sup>314</sup> Trinh T. Minh-ha 1991, 199.

towards a loss of self, possession even, or inauthenticity and lack of interiority traditionally attached to femininity, and/or deemed pathological. Yet, as argued before, reading and thinking aloud underline the outward orientation of speech and shift emphasis to the edges of the subject. If this speaker's position is understood as an inhabitation of a threshold, it opens onto a space of mediation that is a space between, a space of "to". As Irigaray claims:

"The "to" is the guarantor of indirection. The "to" prevents the relation of transitivity, bereft of the other's irreducibility and potential reciprocity."<sup>315</sup>

The "to" keeps the space of mediation open. Furthermore, in Nancy's thought this "directional sense" that "heads in all directions at once" gets entangled with signification, instead of being opposed to it.<sup>316</sup> This supports my view that the outward reach and intensity or senselessness of speech discussed above is not incompatible with or definable as the negative of signifying functions of speech – whether this concerns barking or an awkward use of language as a stranger. Neither can it be determined by a specific direction nor by an end. In fact, the distance of "to" is meaning, according to Nancy.<sup>317</sup> He associates meaning also with the space between: "meaning takes place between us and not between signifier, signified, and referent".<sup>318</sup> Meaning is no longer a matter of interpretation, Nancy stresses, but an event.<sup>319</sup> It is not reducible back to the subjects of the encounter, any more than the movement towards, the space opened up by thought and speech, or the address is.

The distinction of thought and knowledge, as discussed by Arendt, may complicate matters here further, but in a helpful way: the senselessness of speech can be thus distinguished from knowledge and understanding. Meanwhile the reach of speech entwines with meaning in the space of

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<sup>315</sup> Irigaray 1996, 109.

<sup>316</sup> Nancy 2003, 40.

<sup>317</sup> Nancy 1997, 77.

<sup>318</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>319</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

address. Meaning does not take place here through co-production or viewer's interpretive input, which could be said to complete the work.<sup>320</sup> This would assume that meaning and its origins can be located back in the work and/or the viewers, even if both are seen to be also produced in the process. Instead, as Nancy emphasises, it is never completed, but always yet-to-come. Both Nancy and Irigaray call for a meaning as a sharing. Irigaray associates this closely with communication, with speech "generated and unfolded between the two", which starts from the two but then can no longer be divided again.<sup>321</sup> The space of address, of speech and of meaning, cannot be defined as a between-two. It is not a relation, reducible back to the sum of the positions whose encounter allowed for its emergence.<sup>322</sup>

## TELLING

The narrator (voice-over) in *Consolation Service* explains that she finds herself in between words. She takes hold of them, creates a role for herself, and begins to act. Does she, thus, tell herself into the story, take part in it? The narrator's speech may be another mode of thinking aloud. The story, including her words, is not simply the narrator's, although it is also created by and in her speech. As she puts it in her own words, which are not quite hers, she grasps the sentences, the lines, that the characters act, speak or read out. She is not one of the characters, but not outside the narrative either.

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<sup>320</sup> On the reader's interpretive role, see the classic post-structuralist discourse on the death of the author and birth of the reader, e.g. Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author", in Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text* (London: Fontana, 1977); Michel Foucault, "What Is a Author", in Josue V. Harari, ed. *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1979), 141-160. See also e.g. the aesthetics of reception and influence, introduced by Hans Robert Jauss into the discourse of literary history and theory. According to Jauss the significance (both in terms of potential of meaning and of influences) of (literary) works unfold in the events of their reception reflected against the horizon of expectations, both in terms of other works and everyday social experiences. Hans Robert Jauss, *Towards an Aesthetic of Reception* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

<sup>321</sup> Irigaray 2002, 27; Nancy 1997, 78.

<sup>322</sup> The space of address, and the encounters and communication taking place there, require a critical rethinking of the notion of inter-subjectivity, amongst others. I have decided to steer away from the notion because of its persistent emphasis on the subject positions even when focusing on what takes place in the space of address opened up. See more in the *Introduction* and the next chapter on witnessing.

EIJLA-LIISA AHTILA *CONSOLATION SERVICE* (1999)

Yet neither are Ahtila's characters simply in the fictional realm. They are telling the story as well, not merely acting it out. The wandering voices of the characters are at times not rooted in visible embodied subjects but act as voice-overs. They seem to be somewhat detached from their own narratives, neither quite inside nor outside. As suggested earlier, the coordinates and boundaries of the narrative realm as well as the different levels of address become confused in the narration.<sup>323</sup> Like the narrator, the characters appear to think and read the story aloud, instead of claiming it as theirs. Their speech (whether voice-over or not) tends to be descriptive, which I claim further reinforces a sense of mediation. This troubles the distinction of showing and telling, or monstration and narration that lies at the heart of narrative theories.<sup>324</sup> This distinction, with its roots back in the opposition of mimesis and diegesis, or description and event, is open for challenge, as Mieke Bal has argued. Description is also performative, she claims. It creates narrative: it is a form of "world-making", not mere illusory representation.<sup>325</sup> According to Austin the difference between constative and performative utterances is a matter of emphasis: either on the act of saying or the act in

<sup>323</sup> See Barbara Johnson's claim that when the boundaries between narrator and character are unsettled yet not completely undone by the narrative voice, it is no longer possible to identify either the subject or the nature of discourse. Johnson 1987, 171.

<sup>324</sup> See e.g. Chatman 1978, 146-7. Distinction of mimesis and diegesis implies a direct presentation assuming an overhearing audience as opposed to communication from narrator to audience, or a sense of witnessing in opposition to a sense of narration. This problematic will be returned to in relation to witnessing.

<sup>325</sup> Bal 2006, 120 & 138. See also Robert Stam's emphasis on cinematic narratives as performative utterances as well as his argument on film's specific capacity to simultaneously narrate and monstrate. Robert Stam, "Introduction: The Theory and Practice of Adaptation", in Robert Stam & Alessandra Raengo, ed. *Literature and Film. A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Film Adaptation* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005b), 11, 35.

saying. To state is always also to perform an act, when considered not as a sentence but as an utterance in a speech situation.<sup>326</sup> Thus, description does not merely create fictive worlds, but acts in complex events of speech.

The narrative reality can no longer be seen as directly presented in the characters' acts or the audiovisual landscape. This illusion is troubled by the disjunctions of temporal and spatial coordinates in the installations, but it is also disrupted by the speech that fluctuates between different modes of address and usually distinct levels of narration. It makes me question how does the visual address me? It does not offer me a view into the realm of the characters and the events, nor does it give me an insight into the characters' subjective experiences. What kind of world(s) are these "monstrations" making? Whose worlds am I seeing from an unfixed perspective here? In manifold performative ways the characters' mode of speech claims an uncertain position at the thresholds of the narrative realm and their own stories, as if simultaneously acting out, reporting on and producing the narratives. Similarly the multitude of views in flux, which are offered in the installations, refuse unified perspectives. The relationship of what is seen and what perspective it is seen from, like the distinction of what is shown and what is told, is complicated as the points of view defy fixity.<sup>327</sup> The question of who sees or mediates my view, just like the question of who speaks, is sidestepped as attention is drawn to the mediation and the space it opens up, the space of address.

If the characters are not simply within the story, are they with it instead? Are they, like the narrator, addressing the narrative, speaking to the story?

"Who speaks? What speaks? The question is implied and the function named, but the individual never reigns, and the subject slips away

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<sup>326</sup> Austin 1962, 99, 138.

<sup>327</sup> See the distinctions in narratology of who speaks and who sees, of what is seen and who sees, and from what point of view (through the eyes of a "focalizer") the viewer/reader sees, i.e. is given entry into the narrative, Bal 2006, 3–39.

without naturalizing its voice. S/he who speaks, speaks *to* the tale as s/he begins telling and retelling it. S/he does not speak *about* it.”<sup>328</sup>

If a story is addressed, as Trinh T. Minh-ha suggests above, the speaker does not hold a position of mastery in a binary relation of subject and object. The story and its telling do not provide representation or fix the identity of the teller. The story is neither assumed to pre-exist nor be the product of the teller, nor do the story and the teller fuse together in the speech act, as she argues.<sup>329</sup> The narrative and the narrator remain distinct although entwined in the becoming of each one. The speech, the telling, opens up a space of mediation and co-narration, distinct from the hierarchical distance marked by “about”. Or, the story and its telling are mediation themselves, as Trinh T. Minh-ha claims.<sup>330</sup> The mediation she refers to concerns representation, yet not simply the denial of immediacy in representation, but the adaptation that takes place in narration. Narration as a performative utterance is an act, an event, and does not simply refer to a pre-existing reality (script, original story etc), as Robert Stam has argued.<sup>331</sup> Moreover, all aspects of the story and its telling add to this event, also the so-called descriptive ones. The directness of presentation is questionable, and so is access to a story beyond its telling.

What is the story then, the story addressed in its telling? Is it a collective or a personal narrative, something hidden or something openly and repeatedly told? The simultaneous distance and possibility of communication established by the address, by the “speaking to”, guarantees the story irreducibility. The story cannot be pinned down, or emptied out, in its telling. This resonates with the idea that showing is also always telling, but not necessarily telling what it shows, as Bal argues in relation to museum displays.<sup>332</sup> The story is within yet beyond its telling and showing. It is always more, and also elsewhere, never one with itself nor with its narration. What

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<sup>328</sup> Trinh T. Minh-ha 1991, 12.

<sup>329</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>330</sup> She writes: “A form of mediation, the story and its telling are always adaptive. A narration is never a passive reflection of a reality.” Ibid., 13.

<sup>331</sup> Stam 2005b, 11.

<sup>332</sup> Bal 2006, 201.

then are the stories addressed in Ahtila's work? I could call them stories of gender, of normality, of relationships. This naming, however, could not take place simply in the works, in their narration. These stories are also addressed by me, a viewer, as they emerge in my encounter with the works. I speak to the stories, not only to the artist, the narrators, the characters.

I would claim that each event of the story and its telling opens a space of encounter and of becoming. This is another aspect of their role as mediation. In Ahtila's works the characters and the narrator meet there, all addressing the shared and unshared stories in their own ways. This is also where I may join in. How do I then speak and listen to the story, address it, instead of taking it as something told? How do I take part in its telling? This has not got to do with the production and/or completion of meaning through an active role of interpretation, as argued earlier. More so, it could be seen as a continuation of narration, following Bal's claim that viewing is itself imbued with narrative process.<sup>333</sup> However, I emphasise that it has to do with the outward reach, the movement toward of speech and thought. It has to do with exposure, with the space opening from the edges of the thinking, speaking and writing subject. Does thinking aloud, thus, allow for lingering on the space opened by speech and its reach, before speech solidifies into a message? Or, perhaps it simply unveils that speech and what is spoken, as well as the speaker and who is spoken to, never solidify after all.

Thinking aloud may suggest a mode of practice I could undertake here, in my own writing. This is something I was made acutely aware of in a conversation with another viewer of Ahtila's work. It was a call to continue dialogue – to keep my thoughts open, directed outward. For a while, I had not been thinking aloud myself, but had become fixated on a figure of thought. Figures and figuring as representational operations was what I aimed to move away from both in my own critical approach and in what I focused on in the works. Thinking aloud was meant to shift attention from the speaking subjects to their modes of communication. If I was to think aloud in my writing, what

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<sup>333</sup> Ibid., 258.

kinds of engagements with the works and with theory would that imply? Opening my thoughts out would mean they no longer belonged simply to any one of the participants in the dialogue. Moreover, the outward orientation entwines with a move forward, as discussed earlier. When not relying on previous thought, thinking projects to the unknown, allowing for unexpected and non-predetermined points of connections to emerge with(in) the world and with(in) myself. Arendt calls for a notion of thought that does not arise from and rely on a (teleological) continuum of past thought and tradition as knowledge production.<sup>334</sup> For me this evokes an urgency to think – to think for, to and with oneself – as general rules and shared principles have been lost, given up or dismantled. This is thought in action, as action. It is rooted in the present, yet not determined by the past or the future, its origins or its end.<sup>335</sup> Nor is it defined by its content. It is not aimed at knowledge production but at meaning, that is sharing.

In the beginning I suggested my attempts to address the modes of speech in Ahtila's works, and the questions arising from them, lead me to the space of address. What does it mean to address a question, a work or something in it? It implies a response to a call that does not originate in the work, but is already shared. A response to the call that voices ceaselessly the urgency of communication, perhaps.<sup>336</sup> My address happens, thus, similarly between us, in the encounter(s). My thought takes place there and is no longer simply mine.

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<sup>334</sup> Arendt 1971, 212. She writes here about a loss of continuity of past and of "certainty of evaluation", and about a fragmented past as characterising the conditions we live in.

<sup>335</sup> See Arendt's argument that thought is no longer "politically marginal activity" once it reaches beyond one's own life span, judging the past and willing the future into being. Arendt 1971, 192. Thinking in the present is then not determined by its past or its future, yet it is oriented towards the future as well as outward, beyond the bounds of the individual. The notion of judgment (of the past) is here problematic for me, as I will discuss in some detail later in relation to witnessing and Mieke Bal's notion of "suspension of judgment". Bal 2006, 455. See also the notion of the present in relation to questions of locatedness, as discussed earlier in terms of the address, as well as to thought being both located and transgressing this with their movement. This is returned to in the next chapter on witnessing and in the *Conclusion*.

<sup>336</sup> See earlier discussion. Nancy 2003, 42, 297.

Simon O'Sullivan writes, following Deleuze, that thought arises from an encounter with something in the world. This encounter is not a matter of recognition, but of a rupture that forces me to think.<sup>337</sup> Arendt also associates thought with rupture: according to her thought interrupts the everyday, until its urgencies in turn disrupt thought. Thinking is "out of order".<sup>338</sup> These two views are not necessarily incompatible, I would claim. Encounters interrupt the habitual and allow for a momentary flight. This temporary withdrawal does not, however, have to be understood as introversion or enclosure. As I have discussed here, thought makes space for dialogue and reaches back out towards the world. It is dependent on encounters, on ruptures, while it makes them possible by opening the thinker for communication within and without. Thought keeps me on the edge of myself.

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<sup>337</sup> O'Sullivan 2006, 1. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (London: Continuum, 1994), 139.

<sup>338</sup> Arendt 1971, 197.

**EIJA-LIISA AHTILA *IF 6 WAS 9* (1995-6)**

The work begins with the voices of girls filling the dark space. Their unconvincing recitations of moaning and fragmentary dialogue remind of clumsy sex scenes in porn. The girls give themselves full points for the performance and then, on the three adjacent screens, images appear of an automatic doorway of a shopping mall, from where two girls emerge.

The narrative is structured around individual stories, told one at a time by teenage girls. Their words are mainly addressed to the camera. The rest of the girls often linger by as if half-listening while engaged in mundane activities of eating, school work, playing the piano. Matter-of-factly the girls share their memories of, amongst others, a first encounter with porn and childhood fascination with the holes of the body.

The storytelling takes place mostly in domestic settings, while the intervals between them scan across cityscapes and zoom into urban passages, such as a gateway or a path in a park. Towards the end of the work many of these sites can be identified, according to the story of a girl, as public places where people have confessed to having had sex.



### 3B. WITNESSING

#### IN THE MIDDLE

“I imagine – ruf ruf. Ruf ruf. I am standing in the middle of characters’ lines. Without action I grasp the sentences and function as the narrator.”

The voice-over narrator in Eija-Liisa Ahtila’s video installation *Consolation Service* (1999) finds herself, according to her own words, in the midst of spoken lines. She is like a witness to the words, amongst them. This space between and around the dialogue is where she speaks from, tells the story. In one of the scenes the narrator is, actually, referred to as the neighbour, who is writing this story. Does a story need a witness, or a narrator who bears witness? What is my role then as a viewer, as one of the witnesses to the narrative – addressed by both the narrator and the characters?



EIJA-LIISA AHTILA *CONSOLATION SERVICE* (1999)

I am spoken to in the media daily, with various tones of voice and from numerous points of view – whether informed, convinced, confessed to, etc. Traditional news reportage with its talking heads and narrative conventions merge together with documentary stories and competition dramas, i.e. the whole spectrum of the so-called reality-TV. In some of them I can vote and take part in directing the reality of the competitors. However, is it possible to

see my role – as a witness to this reality – as active beyond the cast of votes? What is the role of the viewer as a witness to all sorts of confessions alongside ceaseless horrific events? Is she only a passive receiver, an emphatically identifying viewer or a voyeuristic cynic? Or like a passer-by, who by accident has ended up in the middle of the events? If as a viewer I become, thus, implicated, what kind of responsibility does this involve? How can I assume responsibility, act? These questions are the driving forces within my writing here.

Ahtila's works draw my attention to the nature of speech as a performance, a narration, an event or an act that reaches out and towards – an address. The characters in Ahtila's works speak to me. They direct their words and their gaze towards the viewer like in documentary narration, from news reportage to reality-TV. The usual position of this talking head is problematised in the images, where it appears at times on a single screen yet sometimes is present on a number of adjacent screens simultaneously. For example, the bond between the image and the voice is broken momentarily. At times a face stares at me mute while the voice of this character keeps on talking to me from elsewhere. At other times the character is speaking on one screen while silent, possibly listening, on another. The presence of a character in many parallel images emphasises the sense of disjunction between the characters, their stories and the fictional realm they inhabit. They act as if witnesses and narrators to their own lives. Through narration the characters appear to distance themselves from the events and attempt to make their experiences sensible, available for sharing. This distance can also be sensed in, for example, the matter-of-factness of their speech, or even a lack of expression. Yet sensibility does not here merely refer to clarity of meaning nor does the distance provide a detached perspective needed for analytical focus. Instead, they open up a space of mediation and contact, a possibility for communication, both with oneself and with others.<sup>339</sup>

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<sup>339</sup> See later: the space opened up by speech, which simultaneously pulls together and apart; a space of address, of touch and of communication. See also Nancy's thoughts on the "presence-to-itself" and the emphasis on the "to", which also marks the outreach of speech in "speaking to", as discussed in the chapter 3a. *Thinking Aloud*. Nancy 1997, 77.

The characters appear to fluctuate or split between simultaneous acts of witnessing and bearing witness, or moments of experience and their narration. Yet this experience of witnessing is not of immediacy here. It does not refer to a truth, nor does it show something or merely register what is shown as opposed to the event of telling.<sup>340</sup> The distinction between monstration and narration is troubled. According to its definitions witnessing refers in its various contexts of use to both showing and telling.<sup>341</sup> Witnessing as a notion may, thus, suggest that neither is simply representative or descriptive repetition (discussed in the previous chapter *Thinking Aloud*). Furthermore, neither mode of witnessing provides evidence or refers in an uncomplicated manner back to an original event as such. Both what is witnessed and what is told is here in a process of becoming. The focus shifts from veracity to dialogical processes.

If the characters' mode of speech is described as testimonial, this paves way for the consideration of the viewer's position and engagement with the speech that addresses her. As a listener to the testimonial the viewer becomes a so-called secondary witness, a witness to the process of bearing witness. My argument is guided by a shift of attention from veracity of the witness account to the address, and to the encounter called forth by it. This implies a number of crucial moves: first of all, a shift aside from an emphasis on the position of the witness that guarantees the truth value of the account and which may be reinstated through the act of bearing witness when, for example, testimony is a mode of working through trauma.<sup>342</sup> Furthermore, the secondary nature of the witnessing that the viewer is involved in, looking at and listening to the testimony, has to be also problematised. If authenticity or truth are not at stake here but engagements, the notion of witnessing allows for a further critical investigation into what happens in the space of address,

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<sup>340</sup> See the narratological distinction of mimesis and diegesis, discussed in the *Introduction* and the chapter 3a. *Thinking Aloud*.

<sup>341</sup> See e.g. *Oxford English Dictionary Online* 2000-; Betty Kirkpatrick, ed. *Cassell's Thesaurus* (London: Cassell & Co, 1998), 756.

<sup>342</sup> In the discourse on trauma truth is also problematised, yet the focus remains on the subject/self and its position. See e.g. Felman & Laub 1992.

what emerges from it, and what kind of an active role this may allow for the viewer.

Here it is important to pay some attention to what I refer to as the characters' speech. As discussed earlier, the awkwardness of their speech and the wandering voices are due to a complex audiovisual choreography characteristic to Ahtila's works, to her use of cinematic means of narration together with the multi-screen installation format. The impression that the characters address me, a viewer, and reach out of the fictional realm with their speech, is down to the image at least as much as to the voice. The images of the characters speak to me, yet who addresses me cannot be pinned down as easily (discussed in the chapter *Thinking Aloud*). The rather inexpressive articulation together with the disjunctions between the voice and the image only give constantly fluctuating coordinates for the possible origins of the speech. These audiovisual elements entwine with what is said and give the characters' speech its confessional, or, as I will argue, its testimonial nature. When in the following I refer to speech, this aims to encapsulate the audiovisual speech situation in its complexity that is described here.

In terms of the discourse on witnessing I must, therefore, underline that speech or text is not privileged here over image. As Frances Guerin and Roger Hallas persuasively argue in the anthology *The Image and the Witness* (2007), the critical discourse on witnessing from the 1980's onwards has in its close affiliation with trauma studies largely focused on the spoken or written testimonial, i.e. on language and listening in the process of bearing witness. The image as a witness, and its troubled status as evidence, has not been theorised to the same extent.<sup>343</sup> This poses a considerable challenge to my work, yet also highlights its specific focus. How can I think of the viewer's position as a witness to the audiovisual testimonial – not only as a listener to the spoken accounts, but also addressed by the image, the cinematic body of the installation work as well as the embodied fictional characters and the

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<sup>343</sup> Frances Guerin & Roger Hallas, "Introduction", in Frances Guerin & Roger Hallas, ed. *The Image and the Witness: Trauma, Memory and Visual Culture* (London & New York: Wallflower Press, 2007).

unfolding visual landscape and events of the narrative? The image, however, is not examined here as a document and its veracity is not of relevance to my investigation. Therefore, the attention on the address bypasses the problematics of representation and the impossibility of absolute truthfulness or capture implied in it, which haunts the discussions of the visual in relation to witnessing.<sup>344</sup> As is notably emphasised in the discussions of testimony and trauma, the recreation of the original events or the reliving of past experiences is not what is at stake in witness accounts, but the production of subjectivities and of shared narrative memories through address, through speaking and listening.<sup>345</sup>

How does this address, this speaking and listening, take place in the field of the visual? What does the image and its encounters give rise to beyond representation, beyond making visible or acting as truth claims? How does it operate otherwise? Hilary Robinson addresses specifically the visual in her discussion of Irigaray's strategic mimesis as a practice of rethinking representation. She proposes a notion of "witnessing-woman" as an alternative to Irigaray's "parler-femme", suggesting that witnessing could be an active mode of reclaiming and reworking within the field of representation.<sup>346</sup> Her argument implies, yet does not make an in-depth claim for, an assumption that witnessing involves active agency and, thus, differs from passive viewing. In the field of the visual, as a parallel to speech, witnessing suggests performativity. This is what I set out to explore here in detail. What else can this imply than active participation in the economy of representation? What else is at stake in witnessing than visibility, voice or knowledge, of and about the witnessed and/or the witness? Testimonies, as well as various kinds of documentaries, can be seen as productive in terms of exposure, i.e. as revelation, and evidence. They make visible and inform, and the knowledge shared has some intrinsic value. This brings us again back to the questions of truth. It suggests that knowledge does something,

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<sup>344</sup> See e.g. Guerin & Hallas 2007.

<sup>345</sup> See e.g. Felman & Laub 1992.

<sup>346</sup> Robinson argues that the notion of witness-woman indicates both "an active witnessing of the construct 'woman' and the performative mode of a woman bearing witness". Robinson 2006, 42.

yet it also asks how knowledge is produced and who does it empower. My investigation, however, is geared here not towards knowledge but sharing, the event of communication through witnessing and not any content as such that may be transferred in it. Or, knowledge itself has to be, thus, reconsidered as an event.

So, what else does witnessing give rise to than awareness and understanding? Frances Guerin argues that the image is not merely a mediator in an intersubjective relation between, for example, witness and viewer, but it can be said to have its own agency.<sup>347</sup> The image addresses, beyond and aside from what it pictures, as discussed earlier in relation to the address. As a viewer-witness I engage with and respond to it, not solely to what is depicted or who is speaking in it, such as the characters in Ahtila's works. However, my argument does not focus here on the question of presence that Guerin refers to, whether of or in an image, as I want to shift attention away from the positions of the witnesses per se.<sup>348</sup> The momentary encounter in itself, and what happens there, is the key to my considerations of witnessing as a viewer. Furthermore, mediation, not immediacy, is of crucial importance to this encounter, as will become apparent later. Mediation can be said to persist in all modes of witnessing. As a narration that refers to the past, the witness account, or the act of bearing witness, is distanced from the event and the experience of witnessing itself. The notion of truth is always highly problematic in this context as personal memories entwine with collective ones when filtered through available modes and languages of narration. Yet aside from the question of truth, I argue that this non-immediacy is what guarantees a space for the address and for the encounter.

My emphasis on the secondary witness, the viewer, can be seen as problematic, particularly in the face of the testimonies of victims and/or

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<sup>347</sup> Frances Guerin, "The Grey Space Between: Gerhard Richter's 18. Oktober 1977", in Frances Guerin & Roger Hallas, ed. *The Image and the Witness: Trauma, Memory and Visual Culture* (London & New York: Wallflower Press, 2007), 114.

<sup>348</sup> Central to the argument of Guerin and Hallas is the notion of "iconic presence", or the ability of images to bring the event into iconic presence and, thus, mediate intersubjective relations. See e.g. Guerin & Hallas 2007, 9-10, 12-13.

survivors of horrors and tragedies beyond the scope of the experience and imagination of most of the viewers.<sup>349</sup> However, I will argue that this shift from veracity and, for example, from giving and regaining voice, does not devalue the so-called first person witness accounts. Furthermore, it does not imply a choice between the speaker and the viewer. On the contrary, it highlights the importance of dialogical engagements at the heart of the processes of witnessing. It puts weight on the present and the future of these processes instead of the past they refer to, on the event itself instead of its origins. It focuses on what witnessing does and what it may give rise to. The issue of responsibility also emerges anew from these engagements, as argued in detail later. Responsibility does not here concern a singular experience that demands yet defies complete truthful depiction. The questions of who can speak as a witness, what are the criteria of truthfulness, or who controls the image, are sidestepped with the shift of attention from the speaker and the origin. Responsibility arises from the address and implies, therefore, the viewer-witness as much as the one giving testimony or the producer of the image.

With an emphasis on the encounters I sidestep the need to differentiate between, for example, first person and secondary modes of witnessing. This move also calls into question the distinctions of presence and absence, or inside and outside. As attention is drawn to the middle – of the process of witnessing, between witnessing and bearing witness, between witnesses – the following questions gain urgency: How does witnessing relate to the address? What kind of communication does it imply? What happens, if witnessing is thought of in terms of impossibility and irresponsibility? This chapter aims to tackle these questions through a critical focus on the following notions: the space of silence and proximity, empathy as similarity and rupture, and exposure as encounter.

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<sup>349</sup> See e.g. Stephanie Marlin-Curiel's discussion of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the ethically charged and complex problematics of bearing witness either to the experience of others or to our own witnessing or trauma. Stephanie Marlin-Curiel, "Re-collecting the Collective: Mediatized Memory and the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission", in Frances Guerin & Roger Hallas, ed. *The Image and the Witness: Trauma, Memory and Visual Culture* (London & New York: Wallflower Press, 2007), 69-81.

## WITNESSING AND THE ADDRESS

Ahtila's characters often appear to tell us about the past. They repeat their experiences, go over events as if rehearsing them, or analysing them through reiteration. For example, in *The House* (2002) Elisa describes the gradual rupture of the coordinates of her self and her home. She talks in and about the present, not about the past, yet her mode of expression implies narration, repetition. This is not, however, a return to or a representation of the past. She describes what she sees and experiences in the present, as if in wonder.

EIJALIIISA AHTILA *THE HOUSE* (2002)

Luce Irigaray has written about wonder as a mode of encountering something for the first time. She calls for this emotion of surprise and delight, which does not aim to possess the encountered as an object, to be returned to its place between two subjects as a guarantee of difference and an open space that is never fully crossed.<sup>350</sup> Elisa's wonder in the face of her everyday environment could be seen as a refusal to take anything for granted, a reminder that the world persists as unknowable and unfixed. Observation then no longer produces clarity but seems to complicate matters as discussed earlier in relation to description (in the chapter 3a. *Thinking Aloud*). Yet, together with the mode of speaking that reaches out towards the audience, description as wonder may not be necessarily an attempt at capture at all, but a way of insisting on distance and of lingering in this unmapped space. The notion of the here and now no longer promises

<sup>350</sup> Irigaray 1993a, 12-13, 72-82.

immediacy but acts as a site of something else than knowing or possessing.<sup>351</sup>

The way Elisa invites us into her own private realm and shares her thoughts with us has an air of confession. Yet her mode of speech differs from confession so far as that is understood to be a revelation of a reality that has already taken place or is otherwise determined.<sup>352</sup> Speech that reminds of confession fixes here neither a truth of a certain past nor a private reality internal to the subject. Instead, it reaches to and opens up the borders of the speaker's realm onto a space of communication, where the distinction of internal and external loses its fixed coordinates.<sup>353</sup> According to Jean-Luc Nancy communication takes place on our boundaries as exposure – both uncovering and opening one to the other.<sup>354</sup> Confessional mode of speech may also be thought of as an exposure, not simply an unveiling. It calls for a witness, invites for an encounter. It may, then, be understood as testimonial – a testimony using confession as its vehicle, to borrow Shoshana Felman's words.<sup>355</sup> What is told is a medium for something beyond the confession. If all speech can be seen as "unwittingly testimonial", as Felman further claims,<sup>356</sup> no testimony, or any speech, is mastered by the speaker. This may refer to what is unintentionally unveiled in one's speech – of the speaker, but also of speech itself, and of communication. It may hint at both what is or can be said as well as at how speech operates, i.e. its address, its orientation towards others which depends on the others for its event. Testimony appears

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<sup>351</sup> Wonder is returned to in relation to unknowing in the *Conclusion*. See also discussion of unknowing in the chapter 3a. *Thinking Aloud*.

<sup>352</sup> On the definitions of confession, see *Oxford English Dictionary Online 2000-*: e.g. disclosure of something humiliating, acknowledgement of one's fault or of the truth of a statement or of sin, and declaration of belief. Ahtila's works could be also considered in terms of appropriation and unsettling of the tropes of documentary narration and the confessional in moving image works yet this focus on methods and conventions is beyond the frame of my argument and research here, as discussed in the *Introduction*.

<sup>353</sup> My argument problematises the assumption of pre-existing fixed and bound realities of e.g. the fiction and the viewer drawing attention to how these are constantly produced in the encounters. See the discussion of the threshold, surfaces and boundaries, as well as of e.g. the problematics of immersion in installation art and cinema, in the *Introduction*.

<sup>354</sup> Nancy 1991, 30, 60.

<sup>355</sup> Felman & Laub 1992, 14.

<sup>356</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

as an event of communication that does something beyond a revelation of a private past or an interior state.

Ahtila's characters appear to have unclear relationships with their own narratives, as if balanced uneasily on their borders. From these boundaries the characters call for the viewers to take part in the narration, handing out their stories as invitations and as demands.<sup>357</sup> They urge me, a viewer, to witness their testimonies as well as the world that both gives rise to and is told into being in their speech. A listener, or a secondary witness, is integral to witness accounts, as Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub argue in their seminal work on trauma and testimony *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1992).<sup>358</sup> A testimony is an address. It cannot be a monologue, as Laub states.<sup>359</sup> Furthermore, the ability to address and to be addressed is integral to the ability to witness and, entwined with it, the sense of subjectivity.<sup>360</sup> Yet, as testimony is always addressed to others, the witness can be seen as a medium or a vehicle for an event or an emergence of something beyond him/herself, Felman claims.<sup>361</sup> Thus, when understood as witness accounts, the characters' speech acts address the viewers, and the narratives no longer merely concern or convey singular experiences. Nor do they simply refer back to, confirm or give rise to subject positions.

The notion of witnessing allows further investigation into the characters' mode of speech as address, but it also concerns the viewer's position. The way the characters split onto parallel images, both in the roles of speakers and listeners, is one of the aspects that problematizes the position of the characters in relation to their narratives as well as multiplies viewpoints into and within the works. It is as if they simultaneously bear witness to and

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<sup>357</sup> The characters of Ahtila's works could be compared here with the public personas created in reality-TV, but this investigation remains beyond the frame of this thesis.

<sup>358</sup> Felman & Laub 1992. See also e.g. Mieke Bal's emphasis on the need of a second person to act as a confirming witness for narrative memories. Mieke Bal, "Introduction", in Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe, Leo Spitzer, ed. *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present* (Hanover & London: University Press of New England, 1999), x.

<sup>359</sup> Felman & Laub 1992, 71.

<sup>360</sup> See e.g. Felman & Laub 82; Bal 1999, x-xi.

<sup>361</sup> Felman & Laub 1992, 3.

witness their own testimonies, occupying different witness positions (of both firsthand and secondary witness) at once. This echoes with the emphasis on the dialogical nature of the thinking subject discussed in the previous chapter. The viewer, then, acts as a listener to the testimonies, but also as a witness to the complexity and fragmentation of the speaking and addressing subject: to the questioning of normative subjectivity and unity of an individual (see e.g. *The House* and the fracturing of the self in psychosis or *If 6 Was 9* (1995-6), where the stories of individuals have a collective air and challenge temporal linearity) or the simultaneous distinction and non-distinction of the characters' singular realities (e.g. *Today* (1996-7) and *Consolation Service*). At the same time the viewer's role is that of a witness amongst the others, always necessarily with a partial and unfixed perspective like that of the characters. I am listening to and looking at the speakers, while standing alongside the characters talking and listening to themselves.

The characters could be seen to both witness and give rise to something through the process of testimony.<sup>362</sup> As my focus is drawn to the abovementioned questions of subjectivity, I take part in this production. This is not so much despite as thanks to the way my position as a viewer is hardly any clearer than that of the speakers, who appear to be in the middle of a process without a secure place within or in relation to what they are witnessing, i.e. their own stories. As I am not guided into the narratives through single view points (such as those indicated by what is called the focalizer in narratology), I am made aware of the different levels of witnessing possible for me as an analytical viewer of the narrative: as a witness of the story, of the text, and of its production and reception.<sup>363</sup> But with their examples the characters also point me towards the multiple co-existing levels of listening as a secondary witness, which Laub defines as being witness to oneself within the experience told (autobiographical awareness), to the testimonies of others (as a companion on a journey), and listening to the

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<sup>362</sup> See distinction in e.g. Felman & Laub 1992, 16.

<sup>363</sup> See distinction of levels in Irene Kacandes, "Narrative Witnessing as Memory Work: reading Gertrud Kolmar's *A Jewish Mother*", in Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe, Leo Spitzer, ed. *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present* (Hanover & London: University Press of New England, 1999), 56.

process of witnessing itself (reflection).<sup>364</sup> As a secondary witness, responding to an address, I do not simply view the works from an analytical distance, but may get entwined within the witnessed and go along with the other witnesses, yet can also critically reflect on this complex event. The latter modes of witnessing are discussed in more depth in the following.

Neither the characters nor the viewer appear to occupy single definable positions as witnesses in Ahtila's works. According to a general definition, the witness is either a third party, for example between two rival parties in court, or a person with first hand experience.<sup>365</sup> The witness is either a neutral outsider, who has the authority to prove something true or false, or someone, who has lived through the event and therefore, necessarily, has a partial viewpoint on it. Witnessing has to do with both seeing and telling, and its definitions repeat the dichotomy between objective overall perspective and subjective view, distance and immediacy. Truth remains a matter of negotiation – whether it is understood as firsthand experience or the privilege of an impartial observer. However, there is also an insurmountable difference between being a witness and bearing witness, a gap between an experience and its articulation, a lived moment and its recollection.<sup>366</sup> This is marked by a shift from solitary witnessing to sharing, a transgression of solitude through an address, the importance of which Felman stresses.<sup>367</sup> The directness associated with first-hand witnessing is, amongst others, problematised by this gap. It also highlights the impossibilities, and potential, that permeate witnessing.

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<sup>364</sup> Felman & Laub 1992, 75-6.

<sup>365</sup> See e.g. Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (New York: Zone Books, 1999), 17.

<sup>366</sup> See e.g. Yomi Braester, ed. *Witness Against History: Literature, Film, and Public Discourse in Twentieth-Century China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), ix; Jane Blocker, "Binding to Another's Wound: Of Weddings and Witness", in Gavin Butt, ed. *After Criticism* (London: Blackwell, 2005), 52, 56.

<sup>367</sup> Felman 1992, 3.

## IMPOSSIBILITY AND COMMUNICATION

The witness accounts offered by the characters do not quite satisfy the criteria of testimonies of those with sovereign firsthand knowledge. Instead, they fluctuate constantly between the various witness positions, from witnessing to bearing witness and to witnessing their own testimonies. If taken as witnesses, Ahtila's characters do not fit into the clear-cut distinction of in- and outsiders. Am I, as a viewer, an outsider, or does my fragmented view or my assumption of a place as the addressee of the characters compromise this expected external perspective and objectivity?

Some notions attached to witnessing, such as the bystander, do unsettle this binary. In his discussion of witnessing in *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (1999) Giorgio Agamben focuses also on the space between the two opposing poles. Commenting on the testimonies of the survivors of Auschwitz he writes about events seen at close hand. Then the witness does not speak in the name of truth and consistency but his speech draws attention to that, which it cannot bear witness to. Agamben positions the witness on the threshold between inside and outside, in the space of impossibility and uncertainty.<sup>368</sup> This threshold is neither connection nor dialogue, Agamben stresses.<sup>369</sup> Perhaps it can be understood as an opening, and not a relation between, for example, inside and outside or experience and its recollection. It is, then, not defined by the two opposing poles, and it allows neither for their distinction nor fusion. It may be likened to the space of communication and proximity, which I examine later reflecting on the thoughts of Nancy and Irigaray. This is where my focus lies, this threshold opened up by the impossibility inherent in, or even driving witnessing, and not in what it is that cannot be borne witness to. I am not striving to examine where this impossibility originates, such as the horror that cannot be captured by the expressive means of language, but what it allows. The space that it clears I also aim to inhabit in what follows.

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<sup>368</sup> Agamben 1999, 33–35. On the impossibility to witness (death) from either inside or outside, see also Felman & Laub 1992, 232.

<sup>369</sup> Agamben 1999, 36. See discussion of threshold in the chapter 2a. *No-Thing Leaking*.

If the witness is positioned neither in nor out, but on a threshold, is this where the address of the witness account also arises from? The threshold would be, thus, not a space of dialogue between two, but an opportunity for the emergence of communication. The exploration of this space and of what emerges there, draws focus on how witnessing is entangled with speech and language. The importance of language is stressed in the critical examinations of witness accounts, for example in terms of the significance of speech and narration in the working through of trauma.<sup>370</sup> In testimony language is in process and in trial, Shoshana Felman claims.<sup>371</sup> This is echoed in Agamben's argument that language is born in and as testimony.<sup>372</sup> When bearing witness the limits of language are tested – language happens. The impossibility to bear witness – to say – may be what drives the urge to address, to speak and to allow language to emerge in testimony.

It may be the very impossibility that makes communication then possible. The existence of language does not, in itself, contain an obligation to communicate, as Agamben writes: "only if language is not always already communication, only if language bears witness to something to which it is impossible to bear witness, can a speaking being experience something like a necessity to speak."<sup>373</sup> The impossibility, which gives birth or spark to communication, is in my view not only something excluded by the internal logic of language.<sup>374</sup> It is not a lack or a void waiting to be filled within the limits or by the expansion of the bounds of a particular language. It is necessary for speech and for communication. This impossibility may be associated with the gap between bearing witness and being a witness that makes journeying together in language possible – the space that does not allow for an assimilation of experiences nor of privileging certain witness accounts as more valid than others due to their perceived relation to an authentic origin. I shift attention, thus, to the gap itself, as a space of address,

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<sup>370</sup> See e.g. Felman and Laub 1992; Bal 1999.

<sup>371</sup> Felman 1992, 5.

<sup>372</sup> Agamben 1999, 38.

<sup>373</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>374</sup> With testimony Agamben refers to the relation between inside and outside, the sayable and the unsayable in every language (or *langue*). *Ibid.*, 145.

from the distinction of experience and its articulation.<sup>375</sup> The emphasis of my argument lies not on the irreducible distance between language and what it refers to, and the associated problematic oppositions of matter and meaning or immediacy and mediation. Impossibility, or the beyond of language and representation, is not here linked to what can or cannot be spoken and shared. Rather, they have to do with the sharing itself, I argue, and the spacing necessary for it.



EIJA-LIISA AHTILA *TODAY* (1996-7)

The characters in Ahtila's works hover on the borders of the events, as if onlookers, witnesses. Their mode of speech distances them from the events and, in this way, seems to emphasise the shift that takes place in narration, the shift from witnessing to bearing witness. Their testimonies are marked by this impossibility of direct transfer or an unbridgeable gap inherent in witnessing. Yet they appear haunted by some kind of an impossibility to speak as well, or at least an awkward relationship to the language at their disposal (see chapter *Thinking Aloud*). It is as if they were trying to speak on

<sup>375</sup> See Nancy K. Miller and Jason Tougaw on the space between experience and its articulation: Nancy K. Miller & Jason Tougaw, ed. *Extremities: Trauma, Testimony, and Community* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002). This connects, later in this chapter, with the discussion of Agamben's thoughts on community and language, with its shift from content to speech itself. See also further examination of the space of address as a space of with, which troubles the above binary distinctions, towards the end of this chapter.

behalf of someone, possibly on behalf of themselves, in this fictive space-time of ruptured coordinates. In *The House* Elisa attempts to communicate and reframe her experience of psychosis and her fragmented self, who could not herself tell of her own experiences. In *If 6 Was 9*, then again, the voice of older women is audible in the speech of the girls as it attempts to recapture the awakening sense of sexuality, which the teenagers do not yet have their own language for.

The characters could be said to act out the impossibility of witnessing. Yet, they do not merely represent it, but this impossibility is what makes their witnessing possible.<sup>376</sup> The works do not represent processes of witnessing but implicate the viewer in the event of witnessing itself, no longer simply as a reader or a receiver. Or, in other words, following Agamben, in their speech the characters bear witness to their own incapacity to speak. This spoken language cannot be archived, Agamben stresses.<sup>377</sup> This event of speech cannot be captured, catalogued or interpreted. Instead, it requires that the viewer becomes another witness and responds to the address, listens. What is at stake here, for my argument, is not the gap between the event and its articulation that is impossible to overcome. Rather, this irreducible distance opens onto another space, that of address between the speaker and the audience. This spacing between the one bearing witness and the witnesses to this very event of speech is not to be bridged by, for example, understanding either. The emphasis shifts from attempts at capture through representation and signification of an experience. What matters here, in this notion of witnessing, is the movement, the outward orientation. The focus is drawn from what is witnessed, or what is impossible to bear witness to, to the encounters initiated in witnessing.

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<sup>376</sup> See later discussion of certain narrative structures and rhetoric tropes, such as fragmentariness, as a performance of trauma that invites the viewer to act as a narrative witness. Kacandes 1999, 62-65. However, neither the analysis of the operations of the works nor a focus on the viewer's involvement as a mode of reading is at stake in my argument here in its move away from the problematics of representation.

<sup>377</sup> Agamben 1999, 161-2.

What happens when speaking to and for someone? As mentioned before in relation to thinking aloud, the wandering voices of the characters appear to be without both clear predefined origins and a pre-assumed audience. Therefore, it is problematic to say that the works, or the characters in them, give voice to or speak on behalf of someone, who does not have one's own voice or language. This implies the pre-existence of a subject within the existing frame of language and knowledge, who needs representation and could be represented. Giving voice is also associated with visibility, representation and naming, i.e. recognition of the specificity of those previously excluded, silenced or ignored.<sup>378</sup> Ahtila's characters and their mode of speech, however, defy this as their voices never perfectly coincide with their images and never gain fixed points of origin. Yet, instead of being irredeemably lost and without a voice, they appear to insist on this openness and unfixity. The characters do not here regain previously lost subject positions or gain new ones through their testimonies, or through the address and response of a viewer-listener. I would argue that the work actually shifts focus away from what kinds of subjects the characters may represent or call forth. Instead, with their speech the characters gesture towards and call something, and not simply someone, into being.<sup>379</sup> This mode of witnessing may be drawing forward both the viewer and the speaker, into co-existence. The emphasis rests then on the space of address and encounter between them.

Speech is only communication when it happens together. As Luce Irigaray stresses, it starts from two, but can then no longer be divided again.<sup>380</sup>

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<sup>378</sup> Peggy Phelan's problematisation of identity politics that rely on the economy of visibility and representation has been central to my argument here. Phelan 1993.

<sup>379</sup> Ahtila has argued that in her works she sees performance as a mode of giving. Giving could, thus, be said to call for the receiver, or the viewer. Following my argument, it does not just call the viewer into being but for something to emerge in and out of the encounter. The critical discourse around the notion of giving is, however, beyond the scope of my research here. Eija-Liisa Ahtila, Email correspondence with Taru Elfving, 2002. See also texts based on this conversation, with some further discussion of performance as giving: Taru Elfving, "Eija-Liisa Ahtila: Alles tegelijkertijd (On the Thresholds)" in *Metropolis M*, no. 1, Feb/Mar 2003 (Utrecht, 2003b); Taru Elfving, "Eija-Liisa Ahtila. Acts of Sharing" in *Breaking the Ice: Contemporary Art from Finland* (Bonn: Kunstmuseum Bonn, 2006).

<sup>380</sup> Irigaray 2002, 27.

Irigaray writes about an unbridgeable distance, an interval: “a reserve of silence appropriate neither simply to me nor simply to the other, space between us where we are going our way toward one another through the gesture (of) speaking.”<sup>381</sup> There we move toward the other with our speech and speechlessness, addressing and listening. This space can no longer be defined as a between-two.<sup>382</sup>

When the woofs die down in the barking scene of *Consolation Service* the couple bury their faces in their hands and the woman cries for help. People from the waiting area walk quietly into the therapist’s room and sit down by the walls. Invisible to the couple and the therapist they seem to witness the divorce.



EIJA-LIISA AHTILA *CONSOLATION SERVICE* (1999)

The people listen, giving the couple the silence, where to speak. As Irigaray writes: “silence is space-time offered to you with no a priori, no pre-established truth or ritual.”<sup>383</sup> The silence created by the witnesses along the edges of this space and moment is not defined by anyone or coloured by any specific perspective. They all simply open up to the event, and through listening and looking allow it to happen. As stressed earlier, listening as a witness is a response that is called for by the address of testimony. But the

<sup>381</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>382</sup> On the space opened up by speech, see the chapter 3a. *Thinking Aloud*. This also has to do with questions of relationality (of e.g. subjectivity) as an open process, not definable in terms of the different parties, but gaining shape in their encounter, unfolding between them. This is comparable to the ideas of subjectivity as well as meaning as emerging from communication, as “being-with”. See e.g. Nancy 1997, 77–9; Nancy 2000, 1–15, 87; Irigaray 1996, 109–110; Irigaray 2002, 34–44.

<sup>383</sup> Irigaray 1996, 117.

witness is also to address silences, to hear them, as Laub states in his discussion of the psychoanalyst-listener's task.<sup>384</sup> The silences in speech are the potential ground of emergence, not unlike the silence offered to the speaker by the witnesses. The listener-witness' role is, thus, neither simply involved nor detached. She stands by and makes space with her distanced proximity, by being addressed and by addressing in turn by seeing and hearing.

What may silence allow for, what may emerge from it? Is this a space of mutual address, a site of an encounter, where meanings happen? Meaning is an event and a sharing according to both Irigaray and Nancy. It is then no longer merely informing or passing on, stresses Irigaray, while Nancy emphasises that it is never completed, but always yet-to-come.<sup>385</sup> Meaning, detached from representation, is no longer incompatible with the dynamics of address or with the senselessness of the orientation of speech (as discussed in the chapter *Thinking Aloud*). In her writing on witnessing in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996) Cathy Caruth focuses similarly on the openings that words create. Communication is not exchange but an encounter that unsettles our knowledge and perception.<sup>386</sup> The incomprehensibility of the encountered and the experienced, and the break away from understanding that follows, discloses a novel way to look and to listen. According to Caruth this is what makes witnessing possible.<sup>387</sup> When words no longer convey messages or promise to signify, they move towards the others, calling for witnesses.

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<sup>384</sup> Laub 1992, 58.

<sup>385</sup> Irigaray 2002, 27; Nancy 1997, 78.

<sup>386</sup> Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 35. According to her, this opening does not happen through meanings, but it is given birth by a demand (or a call to listen) that defies meanings and by the questions that arise from this. Compare with the "interruption" Nancy emphasises as that which maintains openness in communication, and with Irigaray's claim that communication is not transmission of messages nor exchange but sharing. E.g. Nancy 1991, 60–65; Irigaray 2002, 27.

<sup>387</sup> Caruth 1996, 56. Compare with the argument of Marianne Hirsch on the potential of images to rupture the narrative flow and allow for "indirect witnessing". Marianne Hirsch, "Projected Memory: Holocaust Photographs in Personal and Public Fantasy", in Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe, Leo Spitzer, ed. *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present* (Hanover & London: University Press of New England, 1999), 20. Hirsch refers here to the rupture or incomprehensibility as an exception or a detail within a narrative, while Caruth discusses the whole of the encounter in these terms.

Testimony addresses events or experiences that exceed signification, as Felman argues,<sup>388</sup> but it also operates itself beyond signification. This excessiveness does not imply opposition to sense. Instead meaning, like language, happens in testimony. Neither meaning nor knowledge can pre-exist it, nor can it be possessed outside of the “dialogic process of bearing witness”, as Felman writes.<sup>389</sup> With this I do not, however, refer to a co-production of meaning, or its completion in interpretative dialogue. Communication does not here take place on the plane of signification. In testimony, in its address, communication breaks free from the economy of signification and begins to operate otherwise. It may, then, no longer be a search, whether individual or shared, for an expression or a meaning for something that so far has remained unsaid, beyond words and understanding. What matters is not any particular information passed, discovered or produced, but the situation of bearing witness itself, the happening of knowledge, as Laub emphasises.<sup>390</sup>

As discussed earlier, the witness is positioned according to Agamben on the threshold between the outside and the inside, in a space of impossibility.<sup>391</sup> This impossibility must be also unhinged from the opposition of signification and nonsense, or the associated binaries of telling and seeing, recollection and experience.<sup>392</sup> Suspended in the middle it no longer refers simply to an impossibility to say or to understand. It is what allows, and demands, a shift away from the privilege of signification and production of knowledge. Impossibility in witnessing also implies dispersion as the witnesses do not fix the witnessed, but could be said to take the event with them, as Jane Blocker observes.<sup>393</sup> The production of the narrative and its meanings together, in communication, fails in the end to lead to a single truth, story or knowledge.

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<sup>388</sup> Felman & Laub 1992, 5.

<sup>389</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>390</sup> *Ibid.*, 62 & 85. In Laub's discussion of psychoanalytic listening practice the stress is on the working through of trauma and healing, or even re-construction, of the self that is allowed in this process. As will be evident later, my interests here lie not on construction of subjectivity but on witnessing as an encounter, yet this dialogic event is also my point of focus over any product as such, which are, anyway, inseparable from it.

<sup>391</sup> Agamben 1999, 33–35.

<sup>392</sup> “To bear witness, it is therefore not enough to bring language to its own non-sense”, but it has to open to that, which does not have a language, Agamben claims. *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>393</sup> Blocker 2005, 55-61.

Yet, as stated above, any products as such are here, anyhow, outweighed by the encounters that give rise to them, or where they emerge.<sup>394</sup> The response of listening, of witnessing, allows for narration and for making sense but, as an event, not for closure.

How is the encounter called forth? How do I become a witness? The woman's cry for help in *Consolation Service* can be seen as a performative that calls for and inaugurates witnesses.<sup>395</sup> It also places the viewers in the role of witnesses, makes them part of a silent group on the borders of the narrative realm and the event. As a witness nobody is fully an outsider.<sup>396</sup> As an addressee, a second person, the viewer-witness is implicated in complex ways. The viewer's engagement, its field of possibilities, is guided with various narrative tropes and strategies. Mieke Bal equates in *Looking In* (2001) direct address (in its numerous rhetorical forms) with a powerful speech act that "establishes a continuity between the subject of address and the addressee". Simultaneously, the viewer may be "rhetorically contaminated" by the similarity between her position and that of the witnesses within the narrative – whether an affirmative stance like my reading of the silent witnesses in *Consolation Service* suggests or, for example, something ethically problematic.<sup>397</sup> Indirection, such as in the form of gaps in

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<sup>394</sup> Jane Blocker writes about e.g. wedding photographs, as discussed above, but similarly media images of events (or fictive works such as Ahtila's) could be seen to reach out like words, calling for further witnesses. They make, thus, contacts possible, instead of merely attempting to freeze a moment gone and to communicate something about it.

<sup>395</sup> Performative utterances have the power to cause change, e.g. to declare someone innocent or guilty, as well as simultaneously to inaugurate witnesses to this event. See e.g. Blocker 2005, 53. See also questions of responsibility in witnessing, as this inauguration can be understood as "a call to duty", e.g. David Dibosa, "Witness This: Art, Memory, Democracy", in *Parachute: art contemporain / contemporary art*, 111 (Montreal: Parachute, 2003), 94. I problematise this emphasis on duty in a detailed discussion of responsibility here later.

<sup>396</sup> Compare second person, the addressee, with the third person. The novelist Siri Hustvedt has written about the importance of the witness in fiction as a third person, not fully an insider nor an outsider, not really present yet not absent either, like the narrator. Siri Hustvedt, *A Plea For Eros* (London: Sceptre, 2006), 63–65. Hustvedt focuses in her argument on the questions of vision meanwhile problematising the boundaries of reality and fiction, outside and inside, presence and absence. This has a close connection also to the problematics of subjectivity and otherness. E.g. Trinh T. Minh-ha writes about the "inappropriate other", who troubles the distinction of inside and outside, in relation to cultural difference and its representation. Trinh T. Minh-ha 1991, 65–78.

<sup>397</sup> Mieke Bal, *Looking In: The Art of Viewing* (Amsterdam: G+B Arts International, 2001), 103.

the narrative, can be also said to call for the viewer's involvement as a narrative witness, piecing the story together. Irene Kacandes, then again, associates this fragmentariness with traumatic symptoms: the viewer is urged to witness the indirections as silences that testify within the narrative.<sup>398</sup> However, what calls for the viewer does not simply reside in the works. As discussed in the previous chapter, a response to something as a direct address, for example, is guided also by the viewer's own desires.<sup>399</sup> The different modes of engagement as a viewer-witness, thus, touch on the problematics of identification as well as the persisting critical distinction of inside and outside. The uneasy balance on the threshold is also highlighted by the hazards that Felman and Laub associate with secondary witnessing or listening.<sup>400</sup> As a witness I am faced with the at times unbearable weight of questions of life as well as my own boundaries, amongst them the limits of my comprehension. The challenge is to remain on this edge, without withdrawing behind the walls of defensive reactions.

#### COMPASSION

In the work *The Hour of Prayer* (2005) a woman tells about the illness and death of her dog. In the four-screen installation she describes unemotionally the events, at times addressing the camera directly, at other times as a narrator's voice-over. The change of seasons is reflected in the scenes from New York via Finnish lakes to Benin. In

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<sup>398</sup> Kacandes 1999, 63, 65-66. See also Miller & Tougaw on different rhetorical tropes that allow for specific kinds of engagements with testimonial texts. They discuss e.g. asyndeton as a figure that invites the viewer to fill in the gaps and, thus, to "remember with" the other, which involves recognition of both what connects and what differentiates yet resists identification. Miller & Tougaw 2002, 10. Ahtila's works could be argued to both bear witness to traumatic events and with the use of particular rhetoric tropes to act out traumatic symptoms as gaps, silences and disjunctions in its narrative. Yet, as argued earlier, my argument does not focus on the textual or narrative strategies of the works, nor on witnessing as a mode of reading. On the complexity of possible readings that focus on the narration and, in particular, on the disruption and overlaying of various narrative conventions in Ahtila's work, see e.g. Mieke Bal's analysis of *The House*: Mieke Bal, "What if...? Exploring 'unnaturality'", in *World Rush 4 Artists* (Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 2005).

<sup>399</sup> See the chapter 3a. *Thinking Aloud*, and Johnson 1987, 185.

<sup>400</sup> Felman & Laub 1992, xvii.

between we catch glimpses of a dog. The speech is composed, even matter-of-fact, but its rhythm is soft. Past events are told, presented to me as a story. In the end of the piece the staging turns smoothly into a stage, the cinematic reality into a performance of a song.



EIJA-LIISA AHTILA *THE HOUR OF PRAYER* (2005)

I am not very fond of dogs. Nevertheless the story of a dog's death touches me. So does the barking in *Consolation Service*. I am not, however, interested in what touches me here as much as on what happens when I am touched? Following Irigaray touch could be associated with proximity – not a fusion but a contact.<sup>401</sup> To be touched by an image or a narrative does not necessarily mean either identification or emotional immersion in contrast to critical engagement and understanding. It can be moving, not just onto the verge of tears, but to the edges of myself, of what I know and of knowing itself. I respond to something as an address and am moved towards it.

The sorrow that surfaces while watching the work is not simply a matter of identification or empathy. Empathy, when understood as an ability to assume the other's position, is problematic because it implies that our feelings and experiences are commensurate. This, just like identification, may lead to a denial or at least to a forgetting of the unknowability and difference of the other. Cathy Caruth stresses that an encounter is possible once understanding is requested and simultaneously denied as an impossibility – this opens up a space, where easy empathy is disallowed yet we are not completely locked apart.<sup>402</sup> Similarity addresses in this way: it is “not only an analogy, “like you”, but an address: “listen to me”.<sup>403</sup> The similarity of our

<sup>401</sup> Irigaray 2002, 18; Elfving 2005, 28.

<sup>402</sup> Caruth 1996, 41.

<sup>403</sup> Ibid.

experiences – not their sameness – enables a connection that has room for difference. Like Caruth states in her writing on trauma, it is a call of an other, which demands to be heard and responded to, yet always remains mysterious.<sup>404</sup>

This openness, a kind of incompleteness, does not have to be considered in terms of lack. It is not necessarily a horrifying emptiness that gives rise to movement, desire and attempts of completion. What cannot be told, passed on or compared, may be seen as a common yet undefinable space. It does not so much resist signification as calls for its complexity and infinity. It is a space of address, of speech and listening, that allows for encounter. It may be integral to processes of healing and of regaining one's voice, as stressed in the discourse on trauma. Yet it is also a space of rupture, and this is what I focus on here.<sup>405</sup>

Witnessing is discussed in terms of unsettlement and, furthermore, associated with empathy but not with identification, by Nancy K. Miller and Jason Tougaw in *Extremities* (2002). Empathy appears, then, as an openness that allows for encounter yet defies closure either through fusion or resolution of some kind.<sup>406</sup> Similar to this notion of empathy, identification itself has also been thought of as a mode that insists on a space between. With an emphasis on identification-with, instead of identification-as, it has been critically reconsidered in the examination of witnessing by Marianne

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<sup>404</sup> Ibid., 8–9.

<sup>405</sup> Much of the theorisation on witnessing in relation to visual culture or narration focuses on trauma and the role of witnessing and witness accounts in the working through of trauma. Without wanting to dismiss these unquestionably invaluable and urgent investigations I aim to, however, open up the notion of witnessing to other modes of operations as I believe it allows for further considerations of various encounters, with their own urgency, in the everyday. See also Mieke Bal's discussion of witnessing in terms of healing, solidarity and narrativity. Bal 1999, x. Compare with my discussion of communication in terms of rupture and exposure, and the emergence of "we", later in this chapter. I do not see Bal's view as necessarily contradictory to mine, yet need to emphasise critical rethinking of e.g. terms such as commonality or making sense away from implied closure.

<sup>406</sup> Miller & Tougaw 2002, 6. They refer here to Dominic LaCapra's notion of "empathic unsettlement", Dominick LaCapra, "Trauma, Absence, Loss", in *Critical Inquiry* 25 (Summer 1999) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 722. See also LaCapra on empathy in writing history, analysis and observation, Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 40-42. See also Bal's emphasis on "ethical connectedness not based on appropriation" in her discussion of witnessing, Bal 1999, xii.

Hirsch. She refers to Kaja Silverman's term "heteropathic identification", or "identification-at-a-distance", as a way of "aligning oneself with" instead of assimilating the other.<sup>407</sup> This draws out the space between and problematises the very possibility of identification as fusion, sameness. However, persistence on the notion of identification continues to focus on subject and object positions as well as their specificities. With my choice of emphasis on empathy I aim to shift attention firmly on the space of "with" itself.

In Jean-Luc Nancy's thought similarity entwines with the question of the fundamental togetherness of being.<sup>408</sup> This Nancy depicts as a rupture in *Being Singular Plural* (2000). He also places compassion in this space of disruption:

"not compassion as a pity that feels sorry for itself and feeds on itself. Com-compassion is the contagion, the contact of being with one another in this turmoil. Compassion is not altruism, nor is it identification; it is the disturbance of violent relatedness."<sup>409</sup>

It is a matter of touches as well as of clashes but, as in Irigaray's thought, not of fusion. Empathy can, then, also be understood as compassion or "intense affinity", and not only in terms of identification, Rosi Braidotti claims in *Transpositions* (2006). She locates empathy between individuals and distinguishes it strictly from both the personal and the universal. Braidotti suggests that it is based on "the radical immanence of a sense of belonging to and being accountable for a community, a people and a territory."<sup>410</sup> This

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<sup>407</sup> Hirsch 1999, 9. See also Silverman 1996, 185. Hirsch also discusses identification and witnessing with a reference to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's emphasis on allo- instead of auto-identification, i.e. identification-with instead of -as. Marianne Hirsch, "Marked by Memory: Feminist Reflections on Trauma and Transmission", in Nancy K. Miller & Jason Tougas, ed. *Extremities: Trauma, Testimony, and Community* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 76; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 59-63.

<sup>408</sup> E.g. Nancy 1991, 33-34.

<sup>409</sup> Nancy 2000, xiii.

<sup>410</sup> Braidotti 2006, 205. Braidotti has dealt with the problematics of empathy in her work, e.g. in terms of an expanded notion of community (beyond humans) and ecological concerns. Here it is also, in my view, important to understand immanence in terms of being located, defying the opposition of matter and meaning. Empathy can be, then, understood as troubling the opposition of identification and analysis, or immersion and detachment.

refers, in my view, to a constantly re-situated sense of commonality that resists fixed definitions and in our encounters ceaselessly unsettles the bounds of ourselves and of what we know. It could be associated, thus, with the address and thought, which were both discussed in the previous chapter as simultaneously located and reaching beyond this location. It is not founded on a shared identity or rooted in an origin of some kind. Instead, as will be discussed in more detail later, it is a sense of belonging and of a community that emerges and keeps on shifting in communication.

Compassion, and the accountability Braidotti mentions, has to be also distinguished from a specific notion of responsibility as duty. In relation to witnessing Agamben brings up the question of responsibility and its link to the law, obligation and guilt. According to him irresponsibility, not responsibility, is what is central to ethical questions – not as an opposite of responsibility but as an area before all distinctions of good and bad.<sup>411</sup> A move away from obligation appears to be a key to the problematics of witnessing as well. An address that inaugurates witnesses is not so much a call to duty but a reminder of accountability beyond any sense of obligation.<sup>412</sup> It may be a matter of recognising one's implication, not as a sense of responsibility but as a feeling of some essential belonging, like that being-in-common that Nancy writes about. Nancy associates responsibility with response and engagement, and stresses that it is not “a task assigned to us, but an assignment that constitutes our being.”<sup>413</sup> Irresponsibility is, thus, not a denial of or indifference to one's implication. A touch is always a rupture, before any meanings and roles that assign responsibility. It does not, however, entail a return or a regression, but it is an opening, a reach out and

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Therefore, I argue for a notion of empathy that is no longer tied to identification, but associated now with “being-in-common” instead of “having-in-common”, following the differentiation by Irit Rogoff in her critique of empathic viewing and the related identity politics. Irit Rogoff, “No Longer Required: From Empathic Viewers to Participants”, in A.K. Jortveit & A. Kroksness, ed. *Devil-may-care: The Nordic Pavilion at the 50<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennial 2003* (Oslo & Ostfildern-Ruit: Office for Contemporary Art Norway & Hatje Cantz, 2003).

<sup>411</sup> Agamben 1999, 21–2. Compare with Butler's mention of responsibility that the citationality of language brings with it: “Responsibility is thus linked with speech as repetition, not as origination.” Butler 1997, 39. Instead of responsibility and obligation my argument focuses here on what performativity allows, i.e. pushing of the boundaries of the sayable and of what is predetermined in speech.

<sup>412</sup> See David Dibosa's suggestion that a witness is called to duty. Dibosa 2003, 94.

<sup>413</sup> Nancy 2003, 296. See also his notions of being-with and being-in-common, Nancy 2000.

a becoming. Therefore, witnessing has to do with proximity, being and coming close, similarity.

Communication is also this intimacy, which does not lead to fusion and which cannot be captured in words or detached from its event. Yet this, an impossibility, is what I attempt to approach here – to tell what has happened with Ahtila’s works, and to allow further communication to take place here in my writing. While reaching out to the edges of the fictional realm the speech of the characters in Ahtila’s works breaks away from representative expression. Their performance does and not merely represents something. Nancy writes that storytelling, performance or theatre “no longer means the scene of representation: it means the extreme edge of this scene, the dividing line where singular beings are exposed to each one another.”<sup>414</sup> It requires, therefore, another mode of listening than identification or analytical interpretation.<sup>415</sup> Listening appears as an exposure. It draws me to my edges, it addresses. Also the very hazards involved in listening, as discussed in terms of secondary witnessing by Felman and Laub, have to do with facing the questions of life and death that push against our limits and against the bounds of our habitual modes of communication. Exposure is not so much revelation nor transgression of the boundaries, but inhabitation of them.<sup>416</sup>

From our boundaries opens up potential to imagine communication without limits, following Agamben’s thoughts:

“if humans could, that is, not be-thus in this or that particular biography, but be only *the* thus, their singular exteriority and their face, then they would for the first time enter into a community without presuppositions and without subjects, into a communication without the incommunicable.”<sup>417</sup>

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<sup>414</sup> Nancy 1991, 65.

<sup>415</sup> Compare with Caruth 1996, 52.

<sup>416</sup> See also Miller and Tougaw’s discussion of the “politics of empathy” and “reading for the extreme” in relation to negotiations of “the limits of our civic engagement”. Miller & Tougaw 2002, 18.

<sup>417</sup> Agamben 1993, 65.

This refers, in my view, to encounters without predefined positions, as pure surfaces of contact, without assumptions about what lies beneath them. Communication is oriented then towards the future. It generates something, in this moment, without relying on what is already known. The unknown or the unknowing is no longer something impossible for speech and communication, but an opportunity and an invitation. This is what makes communication possible. It offers a space we can inhabit momentarily together without, however, coming to a halt. It no longer assumes knowledge as its counterpart, nor is its mobilising force powered by a need to know, to overcome the unknowing.<sup>418</sup>

With Ahtila's works I neither merely mourn my own losses nor take part in the grief of the characters. Something notable happens between. When the difference of the other in all its impossibility and incomprehensibility is recognised, an approach requires a distance, Irigaray claims.<sup>419</sup> Difference opens onto a no-man's-land, where we can meet. Encounter with the strangeness of the other unsettles also the familiar: "the recognition of nothing in common calling into question the proper of each one". Simultaneously this move towards the other allows me to become, in myself, Irigaray stresses.<sup>420</sup> Singularity, difference and the unknown, are not in contradiction with commonality, and neither is an essence incommensurable with an event.<sup>421</sup> The sense of being in common that we experience in this emergent space is not something found, but it is constantly given birth to in our contacts and proximity. It is not, for example, a solid foundation for my identity, but it allows me to ceaselessly become together with those I encounter. It allows us to co-appear, neither the same nor simply ourselves.<sup>422</sup>

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<sup>418</sup> See earlier discussion of e.g. thought and not-knowing, in the chapter 3a. *Thinking Aloud*.

<sup>419</sup> Irigaray 2002, 133.

<sup>420</sup> Irigaray 2002, 168; 1996, 104.

<sup>421</sup> More on singularity in relation to "co-essentiality" of being, or "being-with", see Nancy 2000, 1-99.

<sup>422</sup> On co-appearance and the related political and ethical questions, particularly in the field of visual culture, see e.g. Silverman 2000; Irit Rogoff, "Looking Away: Participation in Visual Culture", in Gavin Butt, ed. *After Criticism* (London: Blackwell, 2005), 117–134. Both refer these ideas back to the thought of Hannah Arendt. See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1958).

## WITH

In the installation *If 6 Was 9* a group of teenage girls tell stories which all, in various ways, have to do with the awakening of sexuality. The lines uttered by the girls have been composed of the narratives and memories of adult women. Together with a mode of speaking that reminds of recitation from memory or of reading aloud these slightly inappropriate expressions create a confusing effect that breaks the cinematic illusion as well as differs from documentary confession.

EIJALIIISA AHTILA *IF 6 WAS 9* (1995-6)

The stories are suggestive of adult recollections of childhood, and the girls appear to be, therefore, borrowing someone else's language and memories here. They are mediators between past and future, as well as between collective and individual narratives. By their curious detachment from the language used, the teenage girls voice this very displacement. They draw attention to the insufficiency of means to communicate their own experiences as well as to the problematic assumption of immediacy attached to the so-called first-hand witness accounts. Simultaneously they throw into turmoil the coordinates expected to fix the significations of the words they use with ease yet inexpressively, and seemingly without much investment. Meanwhile they hint at a possible other mode of communication between them, which I, a viewer, do not have entry into. When the girls speak with one another, I cannot hear their voices. It is as if I am excluded, or catching the scene of their exchanges by accident or in secret, eavesdropping. Or, perhaps my attempt to catch their words is geared towards understanding while their communication is not based on what is said.

The origins of the speech that I do hear, then again, seem to also escape from me. Who are speaking here? A choir of others, or “an inherited set of voices” to borrow Judith Butler’s words, can always be heard in one’s speech.<sup>423</sup> Do the girls unsettle this voice of convention, of others, or unveil it? Perhaps their speech simply defies this distinction between collective and individual. It may highlight that one is never a total master of one’s speech, but in it constantly negotiates one’s position as an individual within a collective.<sup>424</sup>

Is this “volatility of one’s “place” within the community of speakers”,<sup>425</sup> as Butler puts it, exposed by the awkward mode of speech in Ahtila’s works? The characters often hover with their speech on the boundaries of the fictive realm, somewhat detached from the other characters, from their own narratives, as well as from the viewers. Their speech does not have fixed origins and the meanings it carries appear similarly uprooted and instable. Focus wavers again from significations towards the different modes of address. These modes of speaking in the works are suggestive of various ways of positioning oneself within a group and of becoming part of a “we”.

As the girls one by one talk to the viewers, face to face, the others appear uninterested, listening only half-heartedly, if at all. They hang around in the background as if witnesses or some kind of support for the story. The presence of the group seems to simply provide affirmation for the individual narratives.

Listening, maybe even of a seemingly disinterested sort, makes space for speech – space, where narratives become shared. As Irigaray stresses, listening does not equal understanding but openness to the self-expression of the other and possibly also to something novel that may emerge between

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<sup>423</sup> Butler 1997, 25.

<sup>424</sup> This uncertainty is not only due to inherent excessiveness of signification, but can be also linked to the nature of speech as an event. See e.g. Butler’s thought that: “...the temporality of linguistic convention, considered as ritual, exceeds the instance of its utterance, and that excess is not fully capturable or identifiable (the past and future of the utterance cannot be narrated with any certainty...)”. Ibid., 3.

<sup>425</sup> Ibid., 4.

us.<sup>426</sup> Listening creates a space, where the stories can take place and shape. The simultaneous detachment and entanglement of the girls is underlined in this curious choreography of the narration. The intimate privacy of the stories is undermined by their collective presentation.<sup>427</sup> This could be compared to the scene in *Consolation Service*, where the silent witnesses in the therapist's room appear necessary for the private ritual of break up. How does this all affect the viewer, who is a witness to the stories that appear revealing, even disquieting? The girls present their stories in a collective adult language of sexuality, yet something mysterious seems to be folded within their shared silence, beyond the reach of the words. We cannot hear their shared discussions but the stories we do hear are obviously directed towards us, the viewers. Perhaps the girls invite me to join them, to listen and to witness with them. Like in *Consolation Service* I may here also become one of the silent witnesses, neither quite inside nor outside the narrative. According to the girls' example witnessing seems to mean not only seeing and hearing, but participation in a polyphonic narrative. This narrative appears here fragmentary, even collage-like. The mildly disinterested mode of listening that marks the co-presence of the group of girls in *If 6 Was 9* underlines the sense of disjuncture. Listening does not promise completion. Instead of smoothness and illusion of a whole, different coherence emerges that not only accommodates but actually consists of the gaps between the always slightly unfitting pieces.<sup>428</sup>

My role as a viewer-witness may be not so much to tell my story alongside the girls. Nor am I to fill in the gaps between them so as to make sense of the

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<sup>426</sup> Irigaray 1996, 116–117.

<sup>427</sup> Intimacy troubles the opposition of private and public as it occurs always between, e.g. between the girl speaking and those listening, her peers and I, her witnesses. It connects, thus, with the problematics of touch and proximity that are discussed here e.g. in the chapter 2c. *Haunting* and closely relate to the space of address.

<sup>428</sup> Ahtila's works break here with the conventions of cinematic narration and montage-techniques, where the storyline and fictional reality is built out of various elements. E.g. narratives that are constructed out of unrelated sequences of events, like individual tableaux, that in the end of the film are revealed to be connected, differ from Ahtila's work, where the individual stories are not separated completely, e.g. into different sets and scenes, but coexist, such as the stories told by the girls in *If 6 Was 9*. This complicates further the spatial and temporal coordinates as this is not a question of e.g. parallel lives, but instead, draws attention to how these rub against each other yet the gaps between them cannot be filled in so as to produce one smooth whole.

whole, or to forge it into a smooth narrative unity. The spaces between the stories, like the address of the girls, invite me to witness, to look and to listen. As a witness, I remain on the edges of the narrative, neither an insider nor an outsider. I may, nevertheless, become part of this group as long as its uncertain nature is kept in mind. I may take up a place alongside these entangled yet separate lives. The ambiguity arising in the narration from the clash of the individual and the collective, as well as of experience and expression (of sexuality), or of witnessing and bearing witness, emphasises that the group of girls is not simply based on a shared identity (such as shared experience specific to a gender and an age). Instead, it is formed in this very process of narration.<sup>429</sup> Hence, it opens towards the viewer yet does not invite identification. It holds onto a distance by, for example, quite literally closing the viewer out of the group's internal dialogues, which highlights desire for belonging yet does not guarantee its possibility.

A sense of commonality does not arise from recognition but from the event of speech. We become part of a community of speakers not merely through participation in the re/production of meaning, but by addressing and being addressed, bearing witness and witnessing.<sup>430</sup> Both the speaker's relationship to a community and this community itself are constantly shaped in different modes of speech and address, as well as in the various repetitions of the conventions of language. Community happens in communication. It is an event. Belonging, such as Braidotti's notion of "situated belonging" mentioned earlier, is not necessarily originary but constantly emergent. This view does not, however, deny the existence and effect of various modes of belonging pre-existing the event of an encounter, yet stresses that these are all in ceaseless production as well.

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<sup>429</sup> See the problematisation of identity and its foundations by e.g. the notion of the "unmarked", Phelan 1993. Discussion of the unmarked in relation to femininity and the figure of the girl in the Part 2: *The Girl*.

<sup>430</sup> See Butler on community of speakers, Butler 1997, 25. See also the claim that the author, speaker or narrator (the characters of the narrative as well as the viewer) has to give up one's mastery and control in order to challenge notions of essential identity and, furthermore, of e.g. otherness. E.g. Trinh T. Minh-ha 1991, 198.

In witnessing, just like in address and performance or thought and speech, to open and to move towards the unknown, as well as towards unknowing, is of crucial importance. Do “we” happen as this opening, as Nancy claims?<sup>431</sup> “We” may be this very space between, which is continuously told into being. A performance or a narrative calls its audience into being, in this in-between. According to Nancy, writing and each written work inaugurate a community.<sup>432</sup> Here the movement towards the other and to the future is central. Then speech, or writing, does not assume a specific, existing community, but in the event of address calls it into being, to listen and to respond.

This has some connections to the thoughts of Deleuze and Guattari on minor literature, on the expression that breaks away from representation and, according to Simon O’Sullivan, creates new ways of being. These modes of subjectivity imagined into being are always collective, he emphasises.<sup>433</sup> In speech the singular voice of an individual takes part in a diverse choir and, simultaneously, in the formation of a community – speech oriented towards the future ruptures the conventions of expression and the established community of speakers, unfolding this sphere of the familiar towards something new. This is not only a question of changing meanings of the messages, but of a novel form of communication that holds both the significations and the participants in a process of becoming.<sup>434</sup> To quote Nancy:

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<sup>431</sup> Nancy 2000, xii.

<sup>432</sup> Nancy 1991, 68.

<sup>433</sup> Deleuze & Guattari 1986; O’Sullivan 2006, 71–76. See also Miller & Tougaw’s thoughts on the “power to form a community entangled together through the act of listening” in their emphasis on the collective nature or desires and potential for a community at the heart of the culture of first-person writing: “a desire for common grounds”. Miller & Tougaw 2002, 2 & 19. They do not, however, examine this in much critical depth: for example, they do not address the risks of assimilation inherent in this “desire”, or whether the “common ground” is something pre-defined and found, or emerging in the event of encounter, of speech and witnessing.

<sup>434</sup> Butler’s notion of performativity has been criticised precisely for that it remains within the dualism of surface-depth and meaning-matter, and therefore the potential in repetition for change can only be understood as taking place on the plane of signification. See e.g. Braidotti 2002, 42, 56. The notion of being-in-language or the community of speakers does not, however, necessarily reinforce the opposition of signification (i.e. representation and the symbolic) and materiality. See later discussed Agamben’s idea of being-in-language as being-in-common, which breaks away from representation. Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community* (Minneapolis & London: Minnesota University Press, 1993), 86–7.

“We do not “have” meaning anymore, because we ourselves are meaning – entirely, without reserve, infinitely, with no meaning other than “us”.<sup>435</sup>

Testimony aims at bridging the distance between the speaker and the audience, claim Miller and Tougaw.<sup>436</sup> As I have argued, however, this gap cannot and should not be fully closed. Yet this move from a solitary position of a witness, through address and an empathic response, towards a possible community matters in itself. Here the distinction of speaker and listener demands closer attention with the help of the notion of the address. Can we, actually, define the direction and the origins of the address? Are “we”, the audience, being addressed by “them”, the characters in the fictional realm? If we, as an audience, are created as “we” through this very address, and if this address is understood as a collective effort and an invitation to share, and if we respond to this call, this distinction between them and us begins to dissolve. As discussed earlier (see chapter 3a. *Thinking Aloud*), address originates neither in those who address nor in those who respond. It happens in an encounter. Not unlike witnessing, address takes place neither in nor out, here nor there, but on a threshold. Does another “we”, thus, emerge from this space of address? Community, “we”, happens in the contact made possible by address – in momentarily shared imaginaries, as Irit Rogoff writes.<sup>437</sup> We, then, no longer encompasses only an audience. Following Nancy this could be associated with an interruption:

“It is a contact, it is a contagion: a touching, the transmission of a trembling at the edge of being, the communication of a passion that makes us fellows, or the communication of the passion to be fellows, to be *in common*.”<sup>438</sup>

Communication that gives birth to community is contagion and contagious. It is disturbance on our edges that does not allow them to solidify but keeps

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<sup>435</sup> Nancy 2000, 1.

<sup>436</sup> Miller & Tougaw 2002, 11.

<sup>437</sup> Rogoff 2005, 123–124.

<sup>438</sup> Nancy 1991, 61.

both the singular individual and the community open. The way community is turned outward appears to be insisted on by both Nancy and Agamben. The notion of outward that haunts my text does not, in the end, refer to another space as such, but it can be understood as a threshold that makes communication and contact possible.<sup>439</sup> Agamben also positions speech at the heart of community in *The Coming Community* (1993). According to him an obstacle between the world and the speakers is formed by the separation of language from what it reveals and manifests in this media age. At the same time, however, this allows us to experience our “own linguistic being – not this or that content of language, but language *itself*, not this or that true proposition, but the very fact that one speaks.”<sup>440</sup> Agamben suggests that there may be a way to “co-belong without any representable condition of belonging”, i.e. a possibility to form a community that does not affirm a specific identity. This being-together is based on being-in-language, i.e. on belonging itself, according to him. As such it threatens the forms of community based on identity, such as a nation state.<sup>441</sup> In my view it turns the separation, which Agamben mentions, from a border into a space between that both connects and distinguishes us all in communication. This unbridgeable space no longer necessarily refers to a void separating, for example, the material world and the speaking beings. It may be located between speakers, when speech as mediation allows for their communication. This takes us back to Nancy’s urge to rejoice over the loss of clear messages.<sup>442</sup>

An audience shares a mode of witnessing, although everyone takes what is witnessed along with them, further and elsewhere. Perhaps we, in the end, always witness our own being-with, which Nancy claims to be our ontological state on being.<sup>443</sup> It draws together and apart, just like the space held open by

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<sup>439</sup> Agamben calls this threshold a “face”. Agamben 1993, 68. The problematics of the face could also be investigated further, e.g. in relation to Deleuze and Guattari’s discussion of faciality and their call for the dismantling of the face in connection to problematisation of signification and subjectivity. Deleuze & Guattari 1988, 167-191.

<sup>440</sup> Agamben 1993, 83.

<sup>441</sup> Ibid., 86–7.

<sup>442</sup> Nancy 1991, 67.

<sup>443</sup> Nancy 2000, xvi.

the word “with”, where we co-exist.<sup>444</sup> Testimonial narration that calls for witnesses draws attention to this space that arises between the works and the witnessing audience. The importance of mediation in communication is here emphasised instead of immediacy. With certain means of audiovisual narration a distance necessary for encounter is maintained, as I have attempted to describe. For example, the characters’ modes of speech could be thought of as gestures that, according to Agamben, liberate means from ends and make them visible. A gesture is:

“communication of a communicability. It has precisely nothing to say because what it shows is the being-in-language of human beings as pure mediality.”<sup>445</sup>

For the girls in *If 6 Was 9* spoken language appears to be yet another layer of mediation they take on in order to be seen and heard. Yet, this is not only a matter of gaining voice and visibility but of making contact, bearing witness and calling for witnesses. Speech offers the mediation necessary for any relation. However, the notion of relation must be rethought here in terms of encounter that troubles the distinctions of immediacy and mediation as well as of proximity and distance. Calling for this reconsideration, Irigaray associates communication with touch:

“For there to be an exchange, it is essential that the other touch us, particularly through words. But we do not yet know this touching with words, except in a mode that reduces proximity to confusion, to fusion.”<sup>446</sup>

This implies a move away from the oppositions of visibility and tangibility, mind and body, separation and fusion, where touch is sided with the ideal lost plenitude as well as the feared loss of boundaries, ultimately in death.

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<sup>444</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>445</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without Ends: Notes on Politics* (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 57–59. This could be compared with performativity, when it is understood to emphasise inhabitation of language over its use as tools etc. See e.g. Butler: “We do things with language, produce effects with language, and we do things to language, but language is also the thing that we do.” Butler 1997, 8.

<sup>446</sup> Irigaray 2002, 18. In relation to the questions of mediation and communication, see also the problematics of “to”, as in speaking and listening to: “The “to” is the sign of non-immediacy, of mediation between us.” Irigaray 1996, 109.

Speech understood as tactile and sensible allows us to think of its operations and success not merely in terms of making sense, carrying meaning, but as mediation. Like the notion of contagion, amongst others, touch also implies a disturbance on the edges of the speaking subject and, moreover, locates communication on these borders – embodied, symbolic and other bounds. It can be understood, in Irigaray’s words, as “a call to co-exist, to act together and dialogue.”<sup>447</sup> Along similar lines Nancy focuses attention on a space implied in and by speech, the “with” that is “the closeness, the brushing up against or the coming across, the almost-there of distanced proximity.”<sup>448</sup> What is marked by the “with” is not a relation between this or that, in this or that way. It cannot be defined as taking place between two or more pre-existing entities or positions. Instead, it may emerge from the unbridgeable interval Irigaray writes about, the space-time of silence and speech referred to earlier.<sup>449</sup> The being-with that Nancy emphasises is not, in my understanding, a pre-existing essence, but arises from the “communication of the passion to be fellows”.<sup>450</sup> Speech does not merely aim towards, but happens with. This may be the very goal of its reach, its momentary fulfilment yet never closure or completion.

FINALLY: FOR

In *Consolation Service* the story of the divorcing couple unfolds on two adjacent screens. The distinct pictorial spaces reflect the different views and experiences of the man and the woman. They appear to speak from within different realms. The ideal of a perfect unity has not been achieved and their little baby seems to be the final proof of this. They thank each other for her – she has become a mediator between them.

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<sup>447</sup> Irigaray 1996, 125.

<sup>448</sup> Nancy 2000, 98. See also Nancy 2000, xvi: “language does not easily lend itself to showing the “with” as such, for it is itself the address and not what must be addressed”; and the discussion of speaking-with in terms of non-permanence and sharing. Nancy 2000, 87.

<sup>449</sup> Irigaray 2002, 66; Irigaray 1996, 117.

<sup>450</sup> Nancy 1991, 61.

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In the beginning of the work the narrator's voice describes the conclusive part of the story as a consolation service. In it the couple finally meet each other, in silence, bowing down before one another. The space between the two is no longer a void signifying failure and inadequacy, nor is it defined and filled by the product of their relationship, their baby.<sup>451</sup> Instead, the baby girl marks an unmarked space between them where to meet.<sup>452</sup> When one no longer knows how to address the other, how to open towards the other with one's speech, there still remains space for listening and looking in quiet.

With their bows the estranged couple witness each other – into being, on their own. In the end of the work the voice of another neighbour, not the previous narrator, orders his dog: "Quiet! No barking. Now quiet! Quiet!" The silence opens up into a space also for the viewers, for us.

The space that opens or even calls for me is what I have been trying to map out here. Furthermore, with a focus on the notion of witnessing I have been attempting to grasp what happens in this space of speech and silence, of address and listening. So, how do I witness? Do I bear witness, respond to the address with my thoughts and speak in this writing, in the silence offered? Referring back to Dori Laub's distinction of different levels of

<sup>451</sup> Irigaray refers often to the child in her critical rethinking of the relation, difference and space between the sexes. See e.g. Irigaray 1993a.

<sup>452</sup> See also discussion of mediation in the end of the Part 2, *The Girl*.

listening taking place in secondary witnessing,<sup>453</sup> is this where my self-awareness, journeying with the other(s) and reflection on the process is transformed from witnessing to bearing witness?

Witnessing and silence are rethought here as having also another kind of urgency alongside that associated with making visible and giving voice to what has been repressed or unrecognised. Here I am not aiming to trivialise or abstract these terms from, for example, the discourse of trauma but appropriate them to another context, that of everyday viewership. Witnessing appears then as a mode of response and of taking responsibility for one's encounters as a viewer, as an addressee. It is no longer linked to truth or to the possession of knowledge but to the possibility and challenge of allowing knowledge to emerge in dialogue. Silence, then again, refers to an insistence on making space and listening out for that which refuses to or cannot be articulated within modes of communication geared towards understanding or fixed positions. Both are simultaneously potential responses to an address and addresses in themselves as they are oriented outward and toward.

The notion of a modest witness presented by Donna Haraway in *Modest\_Witness@Second\_Millennium.FemaleMan@\_Meets\_OncoMouse*<sup>TM</sup> (1997) allows me to consider witnessing further in relation to not only viewership but also critical thought. Haraway takes the figure from the history of science, where it performs as an ideal of objective scientific practice, "the civic man of reason", who is a "self-invisible source of vision".<sup>454</sup> She examines this masculine figure revealing its exclusiveness and, furthermore, sets out to queer it in order to enable another kind of modest witness who is more corporeal, inflected, situated and finite. What emerges is a "mutated modest witness" for whom, according to Haraway:

"Witnessing is seeing; attesting; standing publicly accountable for, and psychically vulnerable to, one's visions and representations.

Witnessing is a collective, limited practice that depends on the constructed and never finished credibility of those who do it, all of

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<sup>453</sup> Felman & Laub 1992, 75-6.

<sup>454</sup> Haraway 1997, 24, 32.

whom are mortal, fallible, and fraught with the consequences of unconscious and disowned desires and fears.<sup>455</sup>

What do I see and hear, what do I respond to, what can and will I bear witness to, how do I witness, how and who do I address with my own account? These questions give the wavering yet necessary coordinates for my witnessing as well as guide the next question: What does my witnessing, or my witness account, in the end, allow for? Rosi Braidotti argues that the notion of modesty (neither of the masculine rational nor of the feminine bodily type) suggested by Haraway is a form of accountability and open-ended dialogue that aims at “witnessing, not at judging”. According to her this allows for a rethinking of critical practice in terms of empathy and affinity:

“The ‘modest witness’ is neither detached nor uncaring, but a border-crossing figure who attempts to recontextualize his/her own practice within fast-changing social horizons.”<sup>456</sup>

This mutated modest witness takes also part in the production of knowledge, but insisting on partiality and locatedness unlike the objective and transparent scientist. Witnessing could, then, be understood to open towards the other, recognising one’s always limited and limiting position yet attempting to hold back one’s own preconceptions and presuppositions in the encounter. In contrast to judging it would not be focused on achieving closure, discovering truths or mastering knowledge about something. It is a practice that aims to allow something yet undefined to emerge in a dialogue. What could be said to be at stake in my engagement with Ahtila’s works and their narratives here is, thus, not suspension of disbelief but suspension of judgement, to borrow Mieke Bal’s words.<sup>457</sup>

Bal suggests elsewhere that when secondary witnessing is understood as mediation it can offer us a model for critical reading.<sup>458</sup> For my argument here

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<sup>455</sup> Ibid., 267.

<sup>456</sup> Braidotti 2006, 206.

<sup>457</sup> Bal 2006, 455.

<sup>458</sup> Bal 1999, x.

mediation has to be distinguished from operations such as interpretation that bridges a gap between, for example, experience and its narration. Instead, I approach it as inhabitation of this liminal space, as well as of the bounds of myself and my knowledge, whereby it is turned into a space of address and communication. This requires rethinking of witnessing not only as a critical practice in terms of reading, or, alternatively, reconsideration of what reading implies. Furthermore, witnessing is always for something, as Haraway argues.<sup>459</sup> If it is not aimed at truth, what is it for?<sup>460</sup> Some driving forces are always present in witnessing, but here the motives and goals are recognised as integral to the practice. As Haraway claims, “nurturing and acknowledging alliances with a lively array of others, who are like and unlike” is of central importance.<sup>461</sup> She calls for:

“models of solidarity and human unity and difference rooted in friendship, work, partially shared purposes, intractable collective pain, inescapable mortality, and persistent hope.”<sup>462</sup>

For me, this resonates with the notion of similarity that allows for contact as well as irreducible difference, as discussed earlier in relation to compassion. Solidarity and commonality do not have to be seen as contradictory to rupture. These affinities and affiliations are not necessarily something pre-existing the event of witnessing, but may emerge in and from it: Who do I speak to? Who or what do I speak for? What I am for, as much as who and how I am, keeps on being readjusted in the process of witnessing.

Both Haraway and Braidotti emphasise here accountability. How could this be understood in relation to the irresponsibility stressed by Agamben? If irresponsibility is associated with the intimacy of being-with or being-in-common, as suggested earlier, then accountability could be seen as

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<sup>459</sup> This connects with the question of situatedness, as Haraway writes here also: “Location is also partial in the sense of being for some worlds and not others.” Haraway 1997, 37.

<sup>460</sup> See Yomi Braester’s argument about Chinese writing of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century that it is against history, not aimed at providing evidence or demonstrating the significance of events etc. Braester 2003, x. Defining what bearing witness is against he, however, leaves open the question of what it is for.

<sup>461</sup> Haraway 1997, 269.

<sup>462</sup> *Ibid.*, 265.

recognition of those affiliations that guide our witnessing and come out of it. It is not a matter of pre-existing laws and obligations, but of a “we” that cannot be predefined yet I can be open and attuned to.<sup>463</sup> It is about being situated, and unsettled, and repositioned again.

This leads me back to the question of knowledge production that Haraway’s mutated modest witness appears to take part in. As argued earlier, testimony does not transport messages or make meaning. Like speech that reaches towards the other, bearing witness allows for something to be born. It urges communication into being. What emerges is “we” and this very “we” is meaning, as I earlier quoted Nancy.<sup>464</sup> The situated knowledge that is achieved is also closely entwined with this always momentary community. It comes out of unknowing, and never forms into a product as such, as it exists only in its event.

What kind of communication do I take part in and what kind of a community is given rise to in my witnessing? I need to return here to the impossibility that Agamben locates at the heart of witnessing and which he claims makes communication possible. Neither inside nor outside their stories, Ahtila’s characters bare witness to themselves. As a viewer I may have to do the same as Ahtila’s characters, to speak without a clear-cut position as a speaking subject, while making space for another emergent mode(s) of communicating, in and through my speech. This may suggest an impossibility to ever fully see and speak for others, on behalf of them – or even for themselves, as the case of Ahtila’s characters indicates. It may also refer to an impossibility to see and to speak when closed within one’s secure

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<sup>463</sup> This can be compared with Judith Butler’s notion of responsibility as rooted in the citationality of language: it is also about a recognition of a community of speakers one always takes part in and gives further shape to in one’s speech. Butler 1997, 27, 41. As argued in the *Introduction*, the potential opened up by citationality may be thought beyond questions of signification: it concerns modes of communication, not simply the limits of what can be said. See also Wendy Hui Kyong Chun on witnessing and citationality: she writes about the citation of similar events that can forge links while insisting on singularity of each one, and sees this as integral to the establishment of a community through the speech acts of testimony and, furthermore, to a politics of listening that is not based on understanding. Chun 2002. These ideas on repetition in the service of production of community and communication instead of re-signification, deserve further in depth examination but remain beyond the scope of my research here.

<sup>464</sup> Nancy 2000, 1.

boundaries. When something calls for me it draws me outward, to the edges, from where seeing and speaking can take place. From this impossible position communication becomes possible. Communication and impossibility have to be, then, thought away from the opposition of, for example, linguistic and non-linguistic communication, or signification and senselessness, that has been discussed in depth earlier.<sup>465</sup> Here it is not a matter of representing those without their own voice, but of compassion that is not based on identification. It is about the ability to be-in-common despite, or even thanks to, the irreducible differences that entwined with the similarities address me. This is of crucial importance in terms of, for example, the ethics of sustainability and ecology that appear as questions not merely of responsibility but of community, or of an expanded sense of community that emerges from the emphasis by Haraway and Braidotti on affiliations and affinities that may exist not only between humans.<sup>466</sup>

What is this writing, my testimony, for then? I see yet-undefined and indefinable modes of being and of affiliations emerging from the narratives or witness accounts of the characters in Ahtila's works. They address me and as I respond I hope to write for them. Nancy observes that: "To write for others means in reality to write because of others."<sup>467</sup> This emphasises how writing for others is an address, not an attempt to speak on their behalf. Witnessing for entwines with an orientation towards. It is not driven solely by

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<sup>465</sup> See here also Agamben's thought that the inability to speak and to see addresses in its inhumanity the human. This humanity drawn forth by impossibility may be the fundamental commonality, the co-existence Nancy writes about or the being-in-language Agamben discusses. The notion of humanity calls for some further critical attention in relation to the intricate tie woven between language, communication and belonging here. As Agamben suggests a move aside from content, he nevertheless holds onto the significance of language. This may prove problematic when considering the expanded notion of community put forward by Haraway and Braidotti, and discussed here shortly. Agamben 1999, 54; Nancy 2000; Haraway 1997; Braidotti 2006b. See also discussion of the senseless, as not the opposite of signification, such as materiality, in the chapter 3a. *Thinking Aloud*.

<sup>466</sup> E.g. Haraway questions models of solidarity, unity and difference rooted in kinship, Haraway 1997, 8, 265; Braidotti 2006a, 270-271; Braidotti 2006b, 199-200, 205. The problematics of "expanded community" connect intricately with my investigation here, e.g. with the senselessness of speech and similarity, as well as resonate with the reoccurrence of and references to pet animals in Ahtila's works (e.g. *Consolation Service*, *Love is a Treasure*, *The Hour of Prayer*). This calls for further critical consideration that, nonetheless, falls beyond the scope of this thesis.

<sup>467</sup> Nancy 1997, 67.

some desire of my own but also by their call for me. I could not give them voice, but I can listen to them. Our encounter is what I aim to write here.

My account is, thus, not simply about what I have witnessed with/in Ahtila's works. Through this account I hope to reflect on my experience as a witness to the manifold narratives, documentary and other, that call for my attention and response on a daily basis. What does my implication as a witness demand, what does it promise? According to Haraway the discourse on science maintained with its exclusions a critical boundary between watching and witnessing, popular culture and scientific fact.<sup>468</sup> In my rethinking of witnessing this distinction has to be unsettled: active engagement as a viewer of audiovisual culture is not dependent on who is watching or what is being watched, but how one watch. This means that the so-called art works are not in any privileged position in relation to the more popular products of audiovisual culture. I would, nevertheless, claim that video installations such as Ahtila's works challenge and encourage the viewer to break out of the habitual positions and to search for different modes of watching than the mainstream cinema and TV usually do. The works by Ahtila, like those of many contemporary artists working with the moving image, challenge the viewer to actively search for a position in relation to what they witness. My argument here is that these works draw our attention to how speech and various modes of address operate in different audiovisual media.<sup>469</sup> They call for a critical practice of situated viewing, or witnessing. Therefore, they can be seen to continue a critical tradition in video art, which was founded amongst others on the belief in the potential of the medium as a two-way communication tool that, however, has not been developed to its full interactive potential due to various economic and political interests.<sup>470</sup>

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<sup>468</sup> Haraway 1997, 33.

<sup>469</sup> I am here particularly thinking about the wide range of moving image installations, which appropriate in different ways numerous modes and genres of narration.

<sup>470</sup> See e.g. Douglas Davis, "Video in the Mid-70's: Prelude to an End/Future", in Ira Schneider & Beryl Korot, ed. *Video Art. An Anthology* (New York & London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 196-199; Martha Rosler, "Video: Shedding the Utopian Moment", in Doug Hall & Sally Jo Fifer, ed. *Illuminating Video: an Essential Guide to Video Art* (New York: Aperture & Bay Area Video Coalition, 1990).

The above considerations about witnessing that my engagement with the works has allowed for can be applied to the viewership of all audiovisual culture. This is one of the things I have here written for. As a partial, situated witness of news reportage as well as everything from nature documentaries to the everyday banalities of reality-TV dramas, I search as well as aim to allow for affinities and affiliations I did not previously have, or was unaware of. The limits of what I can be, see and hear, become porous, as I am touched, moved by what I witness. Witnessing, like thought, keeps me on the edge. Bearing witness and thinking aloud, such as in this writing, I may succeed in not only unveiling but inhabiting these bounds. Since, according Nancy:

“writing is the act that obeys the sole necessity of exposing the limit: not the limit of communication, *but the limit upon which communication takes place.*”<sup>471</sup>

This chapter has attempted to address the rupture of compassion and exposure that takes place on my boundaries. I have aimed to map it out in the writing with the support of the thought of others while remaining in close dialogue with Ahtila’s works. The works have prompted me to engage with the notion of witnessing in the first place with their mode of address or, to be precise, through my response to their address, which always already implicates me. They have also persistently disallowed me the comfort of descriptive definitions of witness positions or modes of bearing witness. The works call me to witness yet they touch me, draw me to my edges only fleetingly. They could be seen to explore the rupture inherent in witnessing alongside the theoretical investigations I have turned to. The works, the texts and my writing may all be driven by the concern about how to inhabit this space of encounter without becoming overwhelmed by emotion or paralysed by the threat of this collapse of boundaries.

The question of silence, not as an imposition but as an act, is of crucial importance here. The characters in Ahtila’s works appear to be unable and,

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<sup>471</sup> Nancy 1991, 67.

notably, unwilling to occupy single embodied voices or clear-cut speaking positions. This insists on the impossibility located at the heart of witnessing, which allows for communication. It may underline the impossibility to speak ruptures of being-with or the contagion of compassion, to capture them in words and to make sense of them. What does this imply in terms of my witnessing? Witnessing carries with it responsibility to transgress solitude and to address others. Does my witnessing only become dialogic once I bear witness, transcend my solitary experience? Yet, can I also insist in my witness account on silence, on the impossibility, and on the space of address opened up by not only speech but also silence? Bearing witness may not be dependent on a language that captures coherently, transparently, either the witnessed event or the rupture that this witnessing causes. Its potential may lie in how it calls for further witnessing, how it addresses with urgency yet without answers, and how it allows for further communication and contagion, further affiliations and (com)passion to be-with.<sup>472</sup>

Compassion is, for me, intrinsically linked to an urge to act. It is not based on identification, sameness, but on a sense of being-in-common or being-with that ruptures me, draws me to my edges. This is where (ir)responsibility also arises from, as a response to the rupture. Responsibility, like being-in-common, no longer refers to the past but takes place in and for the present and the future. It denies the existence of a readily available space or a community of dialogue, where witnessing takes place.<sup>473</sup> It urges me to share, to step from solitary experience towards communication. Yet this does not necessarily imply speech, but also listening – silence that makes space for communication, for the emergence of different modes of communication. Not necessarily space for new languages or new significations, nor for visibility or

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<sup>472</sup> See e.g. Irene Kacandes on narrative-witnessing, and on how openness calls for further narrative-witnessing. Kacandes 1999, 67.

<sup>473</sup> See Yomi Braester's argument about a "crisis of testimony" in China that "challenges the notion of a space of discussion that sustains critical witness" and allows for the formation of functional yet imaginary communities. Braester 2003, xi-xii. Braester's critical claim focuses on the lack of available public space for and culture of discussion in the particular context of 20<sup>th</sup> Century China. Yet, I also want to problematise the assumption of a pre-existing space of dialogue in my rethinking of what communication implies and, furthermore, the necessity of this for witnessing. Instead, in my view this space is created in and through witnessing itself.

voice, but simply for encounter. Encounter gives rise to thought. Thinking, seeing, listening, witnessing all act, even if in silence – they draw me to my edges and open me to a dialogue from within, outward and forward. They already address by responding to an address and, therefore, not simply act but co-act.

What differentiates writing, as thinking aloud or bearing witness, from these acts is its call for further encounters. This does not imply a withdrawal to a reflective stage from self-awareness and journeying-with within the levels of witnessing. Their entwinement, their coexistence that denies me a centred unified position and draws me to my bounds, is what allows for witnessing to take place as an address. In the encounters, which are called for in bearing witness as well as allow for it in the first place, I am exposed together with the encountered. Exposure does not bring into visibility or inform. Rather, it can be understood as an encounter that takes place on the edges – as an opening on the bounds of knowledge and of ourselves. It is a matter of communication, but not of communication as transferral of information. It is about coming together. As I am exposed, my implication and affiliations as a witness are made tangible: a sense of community is momentarily established. This is what I am called for as a witness, this is what my witnessing and writing is for – for the communication of this being-with. It is not for making it visible or speaking it out as such, but for making space for further ruptures. What emerges in the critical practice of witnessing is the urgency of communication and the need to (co)act. This gives rise to as well as requires situated knowledge that has to be kept in constant process together with my own position and affiliations as a viewer, a witness. What am I for, now?

## **4. CONCLUSION**

**EIJA-LIISA AHTILA *WHERE IS WHERE?* (2008)**

When entering the space of the installation the viewer is faced with a projected drawing of a clock spinning time fast. Around the corner four walls of a square room are covered floor to ceiling with projections on which the main narrative unfolds. The staged scenes are interrupted at times with painted or animated images and with documentary footage from Algerian war. On leaving the space the viewer encounters one more projection, a short loop of black and white documentary footage of dead bodies.

The narrative is woven around a female character, a poet. As she sends her sons to school a male figure, who is greeted as death, enters her house and asks for words. From then on the poet's space-time gets more and more entangled with the past and an elsewhere of a village (identified towards the end of the work as a site of an infamous raid, where French soldiers killed dozens of villagers). First a staged village is shown, yet later characters dressed as French soldiers and Algerian civilians enter the rooms of the writer's house. Cut in between the scenes with the poet another story unfolds, that of two young Algerian boys who kill their French friend. When interrogated, at the end of the work, the boys can only explain this deed as the single contribution they could make into the ongoing battle.



#### 4. CONCLUSION: NOW HERE

In *Where is Where?* (2008) the poet turns to god, to religion, as she attempts to give words to death. The poems she writes and performs in the work, as a kind of a narration to the events, are at first descriptive. Quickly, however, they transform into reflections on the confusion of temporal and spatial coordinates.



EIJA-LIISA AHTILA *WHERE IS WHERE?* (2008)

The poet's words do not make sense of death. Neither can the staged events communicate the gravity, the permanence of it. Death remains incomprehensible, ungraspable. What is there to understand in it? Where is the where that death takes us? Lost, the poet rejects an attempt by a priest to offer her god's forgiveness. She questions how could she be forgiven for what has happened to others. If everything is forgiven, she argues, this leads to disinterestedness. Knowledge or understanding is not an answer to death's challenge, nor is forgiveness. The poet calls for another mode of involvement, where words do not capture but always start anew, and fail again. Or, can this be called a failure any longer if words are liberated from the service of signification and the task of transferring meaning?

This conclusion gathers together strands of thought woven through the thesis on what it may mean to be implicated in that which haunts or that which is witnessed and written. Not only does it offer a last glance at the key threads

that hold the argument together, such as the concepts of silence, similarity, not-knowing and empathy. It draws with them also into focus a set of questions that have gained urgency during the research: How to face the plight of others, the global suffering and joy, that is told and pictured in visual culture? How to act in these daily encounters and in response to them? And how to critically examine the affect on and the implication of the viewer when the problematics of representation no longer appear sufficient – as both the witnessed and the experience of witnessing point out the very limits of representation?

These questions cannot be addressed without a reconsideration of my engagement with Eija-Liisa Ahtila's works, which has guided the argument yet also set it certain bounds. This has to do with my implication as a viewer, witness, writer. Ahtila's work can be described as a point of departure here. In my research the work has offered a material albeit moving ground from which to leap with thought. Notably it has also acted as a partner in conversation that has time after time demanded rethinking and inspired another leap, yet again. Now at the end of this particular journey, however, the work ushers me on as it can no longer sustain my investigation into the questions that our dialogue has led to.

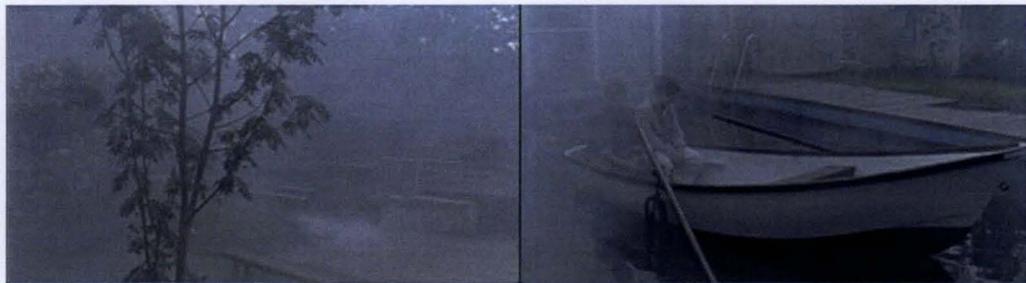
Arising from dialogue these concerns cannot be contained simply by the work. They may well be suggested by the work but with their focus on the viewer's implication they point always already beyond it. These questions break the otherwise rather closed, hermetic even, relationship between my thought and Ahtila's work in this thesis and reach outward calling for further dialogue and encounters. Moreover, the key shifts mapped out here reflect the changes of approach and emphasis away from the discourse on representation that have taken place in the field of visual culture, as argued in the *Introduction*. Urgencies have shifted ground, in Ahtila's body of work over about 15 years and a decade of my research, as well as in my relationship with the work and with the world in general.

The main shift in this thesis has been to the problematics of the address. This has demanded a change of focus from the content of the works and the narrative strategies employed in them. It has also required undoing the mastered tools of interpretation and deconstructive analysis. The close engagement with the works that provides the platform for the argument appears to be, thus, in a tension with the critical concerns that have risen out of this very dialogue. Yet, as argued in the beginning, the method of close reading and the associated notion of writing with, not about, aim to answer the challenge posed by the problematics of the address. Moreover, the process of thinking and writing with the works can be described as haunted by that which can neither be contained by the work nor directly addressed or captured in the dialogue. The limits laid out by the persistent focus on only one artist's body of work has, therefore, created a productive strain that has made the key moves in this project possible.

The brief discussion of the work *Where is Where?* at the very beginning of the thesis posed the question whether the encounter with fictional narratives differs necessarily from the engagement with, for example, documentary imagery and associated forms of narration. With Ahtila's work my attention has lied on the inner turmoil of fictive characters rather than on documentary material and collective tragedies. Focus on fiction encourages a shift from certain questions of representation, such as those of veracity and exposure (as unveiling). Yet, I argue that the concept of the address defies the demand of such differentiations with its step aside from the problematics of representation. Moreover, it also bypasses these distinctions as it allows for the rethinking of spectatorship beyond the binary alternatives of reception and reading, as well as the implied modes of knowledge distribution and production.

Aiming not only to think but also to perform viewership beyond the problematics of representation and in the spirit of the address has been a balancing act. Methods of close reading and writing with have both been responses to this challenge. As defined in the *Introduction* the process of writing with is a dialogue where the works urge critical enquiries on, while the

theoretical discussion places the works in contact with questions not usually associated with them. This echoes what I claim close reading has allowed me to achieve, i.e. bringing together a number of theoretical approaches and critical concerns that arguably have urgency in current cultural debates. It has, amongst others, led to the unexpected liaison between Ahtila's narrative works and the questions mainly associated with documentary material and its spectatorship. Furthermore, close reading aims to operate here as an address in itself that makes space for dialogue. As such it also hopes to serve as a response to a call for a mode of critical engagement that neither relies on an analytical distance nor illustrates theory with the works, yet is not immersed or descriptive, i.e. led by the work, either. Thus, it has to do with proximity that is associated with the address in my argument. The closeness to detail is an ongoing negotiation in-between analytical reading and literal appropriation, detachment and fusion, as my thought intimately intertwines with the examined aspects of the works. It nears possession, yet neither quite capturing the work nor being engulfed by it. It takes place on the shared bounds of my thought and the works.



EIJA-LIISA AHTILA *WHERE IS WHERE?* (2008)

Take, for example, the boat that appears in *Where is Where?*. In one narrative sequence a boat with two of the work's central characters, the Algerian boys, is shown floating in a pool. The poet asks: "What brought the boat to this private swimming pool passing thousands of kilometres, ignoring borders and immigration laws?" This leads me back to the work *The House* (2002), where the female protagonist speaks about a ship bringing refugees to every port. Slightly agitated she describes how people enter and press against her body. Her boundaries do not hold and she is occupied by others.

She may be possessed, yet this can be understood in terms of empathic rupture and exposure. She appears affected by the narratives and fates of others, as if haunted by her co-existence with the dispossessed and the displaced of the global world.



EIJA-LIISA AHTILA *THE HOUSE* (2002)

The boat is a much-used metaphor of global circulation and dispossession that has been often employed as a bridge between specific locatable tragedies and the wider critical issues.<sup>474</sup> Here, in particular, it is a point that supports my thought in its leap from the interior states of subjects, such as the psychosis of the woman in *The House*, to global political concerns. It acts as a site of contact between the fictional narratives of individuals and the lived experiences of the multitude. It allows me to consider the entanglement of the unsettled boundaries of subjects with the troubled territorial and economic borders. The position of the viewer who is addressed by a fictive character entwines, thus, with the implication of the witness to current affairs.

The boat has taken me to the haunted border zones – in what is witnessed and what it is to witness. In my argument both haunting and possession has appeared as turmoil on the boundaries. This is not a matter of fusion together with or being taken over by others. It is about being touched, moved on and to one's edges, by a call for something to be done. What there is to be done does not necessarily concern correcting the past in the present or breaking beyond the surface, unveiling something hidden. The loss of clear boundaries can be understood as a reach towards the others, which carries a

<sup>474</sup> Numerous recent art works have used thus the figure of the boat, weaving together in various ways specific historical tragedies and wider concerns regarding borders, migration etc. This detail in Ahtila's works, alongside many others, would allow for further dialogic connections not just with critical thought and political issues but also with visual culture of the moment. This remains, however, beyond the scope of the thesis.

sense of urgency that unsettles the distinction of the individual and the collective. Haunting, as an encounter, is an event on our bounds. As Avery Gordon argues, it is to touch:

“the ghostly matter of things: the ambiguities, the complexities of power and personhood, the violence and the hope, the looming and receding actualities, the shadows of our selves and our society.”<sup>475</sup>

How can one open towards the others, towards the huge scale of human disaster and suffering that is beyond the limits of one’s experience and comprehension yet in which one is also implicated? How to do this without risking total loss of oneself? How to gain here, instead of losing, one’s potential to act?

#### IN SILENCE

While working on the chapter on witnessing I attended a workshop titled *Eyewitness*<sup>476</sup>, initially slightly concerned about what I would come to witness there. In the end, however, I was not confronted with many troubling images, but mainly with readings of visual documents and analysis of how they can be understood to operate as witnesses, testimonies, or evidence. There was hardly any reflection on our roles as witnesses: How do we, as speakers and other participants in the workshop, act as so-called secondary witnesses to the visual witness accounts? Or, how do we testify, bear witness to the encounters within the workshop itself, in the form of papers or contributions to the discussions or otherwise?

What emerged in the workshop was a tangible shift away from questions of veracity and towards a focus on the performative nature and transformative potential of the visual in the processes of bearing witness. The role of the visual as informative was explicitly problematised. Exposure was no longer

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<sup>475</sup> Gordon 1997, 134.

<sup>476</sup> *Eyewitness. A Leverhulme Workshop on the Documentary Turn in Law and Visual Culture*, University of London, London, 7-8.3.2008.

seen as of intrinsic value in itself in the operations of documentary material. Critical attention was geared instead towards the context and the use of the visual in witnessing. However, for me this called for a rethinking of exposure, not as revelation but as rupture.

Silence appeared as a bridge between my thoughts on witnessing and the workshop discussions. Silence was the term chosen by Nicole Wolf to discuss a refusal to visualise events or to give voice to victims according to the available means of, for example, documentary film making.<sup>477</sup> This refusal to take part in the prevailing politics and economies of the visual, and to produce visual narratives predetermined by this frame, was approached as not simply reactive. It carries disruptive potential as it points out the need for another not-yet-available language, Wolf argued.<sup>478</sup> Notably, this silence does not imply turning away. Instead, it opens a space of looking and listening. It made me ask how to refuse to engage according to the available critical means, how to allow for the potential of other modes of response to emerge, for example, in the context of the workshop? How to engage with the question of the visual in relation to witnessing no longer analytically, through practices of reading?

I remained a silent witness to the event of the workshop, aware of my own inability to speak in this context, or maybe at all, about how the documentaries as well as fictions that I saw and listened to affected me. I claim that this is not simply due to my emphatic responses being based on identification and, thus, denying analytical distance. Instead, perhaps, there is no language yet for my own practice of witnessing, for responses to the exposure and compassion that ruptures my position and bounds as a viewer, writer, thinker. Or, maybe this response demands not another means of expression but a different mode of communication altogether, no longer geared towards articulation and knowledge.

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<sup>477</sup> Nicole Wolf, "I Prefer Not To": Documentary filmmakers after the genocide in Gujarat", an unpublished article, at *Eyewitness. A Leverhulme Workshop on the Documentary Turn in Law and Visual Culture*. London: University of London, 2008.

<sup>478</sup> Ibid.

Insistence on silence, on listening and thought, that refuses to make sense or to give voice, makes space for communication where words do not capture. This is to be distinguished from a lack of voice within a prevailing order. It is rather a suspension of one's privileged position and ability to speak on behalf of those silenced or unheard. It is a call for another mode of encounter with them. Like in the work *Where is Where?* words are then no longer simply those of the speakers such as the poet. They arise from her contact with the world and entangle her with it while they serve as paths towards the others. The senselessness of words, referring here to another operation than that of assigning signification or of transporting messages, appears as a rather sensible response to the senselessness of war and death.

This has to do with the encounter of that which haunts – including that which cannot be contained in the art works discussed here and in this very dialogue with them. Haunting, like invisibility and silence, demands awareness of something that resists capture. Something beyond my knowledge, beyond my ability to see or hear, i.e. something invisible or silent to me. To notice this persistence of invisibility or silence is to not-know, to face the unknowability that insists in everything encountered. It does not invite me to overcome it, to make it visible or to give it voice. If it demands to be reckoned with, as Avery Gordon argues in relation to haunting, this reckoning may be another mode of engagement.<sup>479</sup>

"One must see, at first sight, what does not let itself be seen. And this is invisibility itself. For what first sight misses is the invisible."<sup>480</sup>

This may imply treasuring invisibility and silence, lingering in the first sight emphasised by Jacques Derrida in the above quote. It may mean holding onto wonder that precedes any attempts at understanding, as Luce Irigaray claims.<sup>481</sup> Like invisibility silence becomes, thus, a space between or a distance that allows for communication instead of hindering it. It no longer

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<sup>479</sup> Gordon 1997, 183.

<sup>480</sup> Derrida 1994, 149.

<sup>481</sup> Irigaray 1993a, 12-13, 72-82. See also the chapter 3b. *Witnessing*.

refers to repression but to a possibility of an encounter. The viewer is challenged to respond to the address of the invisible and the silent. This means to address, in turn, with the silence of witnessing and thought.

As argued in this thesis, the unmarked also addresses in silence or in its invisibility. An unmarked figure that does not figure, i.e. the Girl, drew initially the attention here to surfaces and shifted focus from suppression and exclusion to an outward and forward orientation. "In the riots of sound language produces, the unmarked can be heard as silence"<sup>482</sup>, Peggy Phelan claims. Silence addresses. Silence in listening and silence as the unmarked both offer space where something may emerge. Yet, the event itself counts, undetermined by what it gives rise to. Furthermore, the event needs to be thought as excessive of binary logic. This is what an encounter with a ghost points towards, Derrida argues.<sup>483</sup> This implies a necessity to undo the oppositions that have been troubled throughout this thesis, such as those of interior and exterior, depth and surface, matter and meaning. Invisibility and silence have to be similarly liberated from their place as negatives of, and defined by, what is seen or heard. In the event of encounter they operate otherwise. Listening and speaking, witnessing and bearing witness, no longer appear as opposites, as passive and active positions. Silence, of thought and of listening, moves outwards and towards the future, not unlike speech, instead of remaining locked in the past or turned inwards.

#### SIMILARITY

At the heart of my research journey has been a shift from resemblance and its strategic appropriation in mimesis as not the same, to similarity that addresses and mediates. It allows for communication and a sense of being-in-common. Like affinities and affiliations, or the rupturing sense of being-with, similarity is not only something pre-existing encounters, but it arises

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<sup>482</sup> Phelan 1993, 27.

<sup>483</sup> Derrida 1994, 63.

from these events. It addresses yet it also emerges in the response, in communication. The focus has been drawn, thus, onto the surfaces, to resemblances without the fixity of some core, or reliance on any immutable, predefined positions. Not unlike haunting, this has to do with touching the not-quite, the not-yet or the no-more, the shadows that trouble the assumed immediacy and clarity of the here and now. Therefore similarity carries with it a risk, and a potential, of contagion through contact.



EIJA-LIISA AHTILA *THE WIND* (2002)

In *The Wind* (2002) the main protagonist, Susanna, mentions how the newspapers stain her hands. She also talks about the staining effect of “lots of us” – the polluted, the dangerous. Is it the others who stain, such as the Third World, that she refers to? Is she becoming stained, implicated, and staining herself? In this contact, contagion, it is no longer self-evident who stains. Susanna gestures here towards a similarity between herself and the others – or, “us”. This “us” is not necessarily predetermined, but something arising out of contacts and, possibly, empathy. If empathy is thought, as I have argued, in terms of similarity and possession, it has to be considered distinct from identification. It no longer has to do with “having-in-common”, but “being-in-common”, to borrow Irit Rogoff’s words. Furthermore, Rogoff argues that this has to do with performative enactments, not reliance on and reproduction of some pre-existing sense of the shared.<sup>484</sup> The emerging “we” not only ruptures my position but also questions any existing definitions and criteria of commonality. It demands and allows for an open sense of community that may be expanded beyond the prevailing bounds of, for example, people, territory, or even the human and the organic.

<sup>484</sup> Rogoff 2003, 127, 130. Rogoff critiques thus empathic viewing, associating it with identification and identity politics, yet at the heart of my argument is a claim that empathy can be rethought in those very “participatory” terms that Rogoff calls for as an alternative. See also chapter 3b. *Witnessing*.

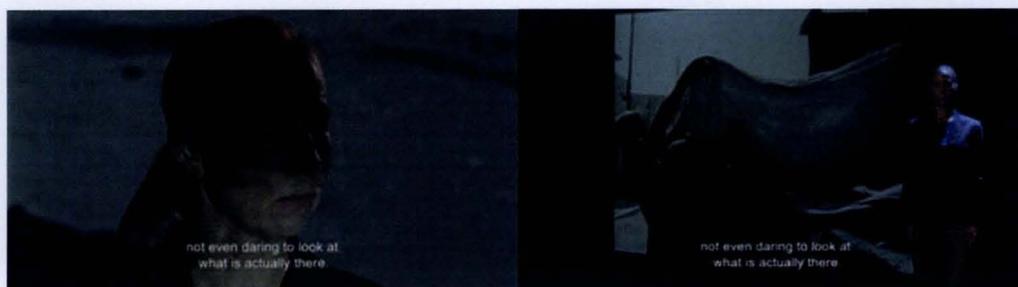
What does this mean in terms of the viewer's involvement? Mieke Bal writes about "rhetorical contamination", where the viewer's place is similar to the positions of some in an image. This may suggest, for example, something morally questionable such as voyeurism, as in Bal's example.<sup>485</sup> For the argument here, however, what is noteworthy beyond the positions themselves is the implied potential shift from identification to implication through contagion. This may happen between the viewer and the various perspectives built into or pictured in an image. A difference and a distance is sustained. This allows and calls for a response as the positions in question open outward and forward in the address of similarity.

In a way, my encounter with the poet in Ahtila's *Where is Where?* has been contagious in this way. On seeing the work for the first time I was struck by what I perceived as our similarity. To be precise, there appeared to be remarkable similarity between the questions that arose from the work and those that my research had led to, as I was then just about to finish the part on the address. This could be down to zeitgeist, the shared here and now – and, unquestionably, in part to the particular perspective of my enquiry. What matters, however, is what this sense of resemblance allows for, not where it originates. It arises from my dialogue with the work of Ahtila but gestures towards other affinities, beyond this engagement, such as resonances within the wider field of visual culture and critical thought. It also gives another insight into the central role of similarity in my research and the shifts within it. The method of close reading has appropriated resemblance in its attention to detail, which through descriptive accounts opens them into points of myriad connections. Yet similarity is at play in the shifts in my argument and position with the works as well. The unintentional mimetic adoption of a red shirt during my investigation of the figure of the Girl differs considerably from what I have recognised as a contagious affair with the poet. This is marked by a move from hovering uneasily between the poles of identification and deconstructive analysis in my engagement with and investments in the Girl to a critical inhabitation of this very in-between, the space of proximity. In the

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<sup>485</sup> Bal 2001, 103.

encounter with the poet I am no longer possessed by the work, nor simply analysing the dynamics of mimicry taking place between the work and myself. Rather I meet the poet in this space of mediation, the space of the stain through which we are constituted and differentiated, together. Haunting has, thus, called for witnessing, for a further transformative contact.



EIJA-LIISA AHTILA *WHERE IS WHERE?* (2008)

The poet in *Where is Where?* has now helped me, as a viewer and a writer, to wrap up this thesis. What I have perceived as our similarity has guided the thoughts on my role as a witness. Moreover, contagion not only takes place here between two writers and witnesses, i.e. the fictional poet and myself. Both witnessing and writing appear also as modes of such engagement with the witnessed. The viewer, like the poet, bears witness to archival documentary material and a historical tragedy in the work, yet writing does not reproduce or revisit an original event as much as weaves it together with the present, the moment and the place of writing. The perspective and the voice of the writer gets entangled, lost, and has to find itself anew in co-existence with the witnessed. This is not a return and it does not take place through assimilation, description or other attempt at capture. It demands, and allows for, entry into the space of address, where the reach of words and the sense of being-with keep an interval between us open. This is where communication can happen, as contagion that does not lead to the reduction of the space distinguishing the witness from the witnessed, or myself from the poet. The “we” that may emerge here does not compromise this distance implied in similarity but is founded on it.

What does openness to this emergence, through similarity and contagion, require of the viewer in the event of encounter? If event is to be considered in non-binary terms as earlier suggested, viewing and thought do not need writing or speech in order to act. Writing does not causally follow from or activate viewing. Witnessing does not have to lead to a witness account that tells the experience in order for it to transgress solitude and become a mode of sharing. Like thought and speech they are entangled, simultaneous processes of engagement with/in the world. Witnessing – listening and looking – is a mode of address. Not dissimilar to thought it acts as it opens out to the world. Lingering in the encounter, in wonder, it is active orientation towards the others without an attempt at closure or capture. Witnessing is, thus, a response to the address of similarity, the alike yet never the same. It does not simply lay ground for communication but is contagion already in itself.

#### NOT-KNOWING

“How far can you enter into someone to understand them?”<sup>486</sup>



EIJA-LIISA AHTILA *WHERE IS WHERE?* (2008)

The above question asked by the poet in *Where is Where?* suggests that understanding has to do with the negotiation of boundaries distinguishing us. It is a delicate balancing act. It is, thus, not possession of or by the other but transformative contact. Understanding entwines with a move towards the other and a reach across our shared bounds. In terms of the viewer's

<sup>486</sup> Eija-Liisa Ahtila, *Where is Where?*, 2008.

position this gestures towards another approach than either immersion and identification or interpretation at a distance. It also questions what it is to understand, and what is the meaning of the viewed, the witnessed. As the method of writing with art works instead of about them implies, the meaning of the work is not determined by any of the parties of the encounter, according to Irit Rogoff.<sup>487</sup> When the emphasis shifts onto the engagement between them, I have argued that meaning no longer has to be approached as signification – whether as grounded, given or produced. Rather it appears as a sense of being-with, or simply “us”, as Jean-Luc Nancy claims.<sup>488</sup> It is the “we” that emerges and exists in the event of communication, contagion and rupture.

Understanding is, therefore, an event geared outward, toward and forward. It is not an end, or a result, but what allows for something to be done. It has to be rethought as much in terms of not-knowing as knowing. It is given rise to and driven by not-knowing, yet not aimed at overcoming this. Rather it strives towards further not-knowing that makes space for yet more encounters. Not-knowing is associated with thought by Nancy and, as such, with a passage and a movement toward. It has to do with the address. Thought is not geared towards knowledge but further not-knowing that keeps thought on the move and opened outward. Moreover, it is aimed at making a difference in its engagement with/in the world. Thinking is out of order, as Hannah Arendt claims.<sup>489</sup> It is action. It has to be dissociated from mere means in the service of search and production of knowledge. This calls for a reconsideration of knowledge as well, no longer in terms of an end in itself but as an event. Not-knowing appears, thus, as not simply an opposite to knowing. Knowledge also entwines with action and engagement with/in the world that constantly reworks my place as a viewer. Knowledge is then not simply something gathered or gained by the viewer-witness as either a goal in itself or as a tool and ground for action. Rather, in order to overcome the frustration and detachment in the face of the vast amounts of information and exposure, it

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<sup>487</sup> Rogoff 1998, 26. More on the notion of “writing with” see the *Introduction*.

<sup>488</sup> Nancy 2000, 1. See the chapter 3b. *Witnessing*.

<sup>489</sup> Arendt 1971, 197. See also the chapter 3a. *Thinking Aloud*.

has to be thought of in terms of the viewer's implication and empowerment in its very event.

When implicated in the event of knowledge that which is beyond my comprehension together with the awareness of not-knowing urges my thought on, never satisfying the desire for mastery. As one is implicated in, for example, the senseless and needless death of others, elsewhere, neither the events nor the viewer's implication can be explained away with knowledge of the historically and culturally specific circumstances that led to them. It is not a matter of understanding in this sense of containment and closure. Rather, not-knowing drives one ceaselessly towards further knowledge and comprehension, not only of what has been but also of what can be. The viewer's implication happens in the event of encounter and not only due to some prior entanglement, such as shared histories, economies etc. It has not got to do with personal or collective guilt that can be forgiven. Neither is the urge to act, which is here associated with it, driven by obligation. As a witness one becomes involved in the here and now. This calls for acts in the present and poses questions of urgency: How do the events resonate in the present and towards the future? What can be done to prevent other utterly pointless deaths and suffering similar to that witnessed – i.e. how to turn them meaningful after all, in and for the future?

Situated knowledge can be approached in these terms of orientation, reach and constant process in the present.<sup>490</sup> It is guided by affinities and affiliations while geared towards further contacts and connections. Here situatedness does not refer to a position that grounds. Rather it happens. The move aside in this thesis from subject and other positions, their foundation and unsettlement, production and re-establishment, has not aimed at denying the significance of positions for our potential to act. The focus on the address has, instead, demanded consideration of location, belonging and boundaries

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<sup>490</sup> In addition to Braidotti's recent thought, my understanding of situated knowledge has been shaped by the feminist discussions following Donna Haraway's article "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective". Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Free Association, 1991), 183-201.

as processes entangled in the acts. As argued, the notion of thought as action does not do away with, for example, interiority in its emphasis on the outward reach, but places dialogue at the core of the thinking being.<sup>491</sup> As observed in Ahtila's works, what appear as inner monologues and turmoil of the characters reflect their various kinds of relationships. Dialogue within the subject is inseparable from interactions with/in the world. Likewise, when turning outward, in and as a response to an address of the works, the viewer is exposed as not-one in the encounters. This calls for situated and accountable critical practice(s), as Rosi Braidotti stresses.<sup>492</sup> She refers to this as a method that denies the strict opposition of involvement and distance.<sup>493</sup> This resonates with what I have earlier called distanced proximity or mediated immediacy.<sup>494</sup> Situated practices appear, thus, integral to the creation and inhabitation of the space of address.

One of the key questions driving the argument in this thesis has concerned this very possibility of making space in-between the viewer and the viewed, which allows for thinking and communication, i.e. action, in the encounter with visual culture. As argued here, this space is opened up by an address that calls for response while it situates that which addresses (the image, event, or other) as distinct from the viewer-addressee. This space implies distance but not detachment. It is mediation, but as such it does not necessarily turn death, for example, into something that merely happens to others and can be consumed as a spectacle or objectively analysed. It defies also the possibility of identification and the reduction of the other's experience to what is already known or knowable by the viewer, as well as helps to avoid immersion where the viewer is engulfed by emotion that leaves room for neither critical thought nor reciprocal acts. It has to do with similarity and proximity, empathy and exposure.

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<sup>491</sup> See the chapter 3a. *Thinking Aloud*, and e.g. Arendt 1971, 185.

<sup>492</sup> I am indebted to Braidotti's critical understanding of situated practice that underlies her most recent discussions of "the nomadic subject". However, as emphasised here, my argument focuses on the practices instead of the possible alternative positions they may imply. See Braidotti 2006b; See also the chapter 3b. *Witnessing*.

<sup>493</sup> Braidotti 2006b, 93.

<sup>494</sup> See the chapter 3a. *Thinking Aloud* on mediation and the space of address, and e.g. Nancy 2000, 98.

Being situated is a ceaseless process that does not imply, necessarily, re-centring. Yet it defies complete loss of position that would mean not only lack of agency but also of responsibility. It opens outward and forward, requiring recognition of affinities and interdependences that guide the further contacts and relations to be forged. Considered in terms of situated practice, empathy appears no longer to be based on recognition or identification, but affinities and desire for a sustainable future. The rupture that, according to my argument, is integral to compassion arises from interrelations while giving rise to further affiliations and, therefore, future. Witnessing is associated, by Braidotti, with the containment of the pain, and joy I would add, of others that allows for affirmative bonding.<sup>495</sup> Containment or possession is not fusion but rather, like compassion, it implies exposure, an event on our bounds. Future-orientation does not, then, mean denial of all existing positions or a turn away from the past. It has to do with a different dynamic relation to what is and has been that does not ground as such but opens up the yet-to-come, here and now.

#### THINKING ALOUD, IN THE PRESENT

My writing, or thinking aloud, takes place in a charged present. It is allowed for yet driven to move on from the past tense of the *Introduction*, the reflective mapping of my research journey. It happens through the chapters and, finally, aims to leap toward a future present here, in the end that I hope acts as another beginning.

The past tense of the *Introduction* does not ground, nor is the journey something unearthed there. Or, it could be argued that the shifts outlined in the *Introduction* have indeed haunted the process of research and writing. As such they have both taken place and been unveiled in the thesis. Whatever has haunted the process has not demanded to be dealt with in order to able my thought to move on. The whole project of my research, i.e. the journey it

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<sup>495</sup> Braidotti 2006b, 88.

entails, has arguably a haunted nature. It is, for example, haunted by the questions that have not and cannot be contained in the works or in my dialogue with them. Therefore, the thesis could be said to call for witnessing. Witnessing does not, however, here imply revealing what has haunted, what has driven the process, what has persisted in between the lines and in the shadows, what has never been directly addressed. If haunting is no longer understood in terms of repression, the unseen or the unheard, but as an address, haunting appears as something to be insisted on instead of overcome. Witnessing, in turn, is a mode of addressing haunting. My work may be haunted by wordly contacts, as Avery Gordon argues about haunting,<sup>496</sup> as well as by questions concerning them. Thus, it also calls for further contacts and responses.

My work has been urged on by haunting, and the rupturing encounters – of compassion, contagion, communication. The importance of these disruptions does not lie in themselves, but in their mobilising effects. My writing cannot be, thus, simply a mapping of the encounters. It has to be, in itself, oriented outward and towards the future. Thinking aloud is thought in action, and action speaks volumes. It has weight of its own. In this writing, as thinking aloud, the emphasis should therefore lie as much on the act of speech, its movement and address, as on what is said. How does my thought, and writing, act in the world? What does it do, here and now as well as in the future present tense? Like Ahtila's work, which can also be approached as a mode of thinking aloud as discussed in the *Introduction*, it is an address, a call for dialogue, and an opening towards unexpected connections.

What do I write for? Does this thesis relocate me following the ruptures that have made up the research journey? How can I be situated here without giving my journey a closure? Perhaps this thesis allows for a temporary position, from which to reach out and call for further encounters. It may be a mode of exposure, both taking place and focusing attention on the edges, the boundaries as thresholds. It has certainly unveiled a multitude of affiliations,

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<sup>496</sup> Gordon 1997, 197.

responded to perceived similarities, as well as forged new connections en route. It has revealed a series of choices and pondered upon their effects. Yet, does it also remain oriented forward, outward, for something else?

Ruptures and contagions, such as empathy, have effects on writing. This calls for a kind of writing that does not follow any available models or methods, as Dominick LaCapra argues.<sup>497</sup> Like thought in action this writing cannot be simply referred back to previous writing and thought. It happens, acts, as a reach. Therefore the mode of close reading that has carried the argument forward here has aimed to operate as a way of writing and thinking with art – as a method and an event not of capture but of exposure. It is a site of entanglement of the works, my thinking, the thought of others, and a set of critical concerns. Close reading is, thus, an address and as such not geared towards reinstating any particular positions.<sup>498</sup> Rather, it opens a space of mediation, of the future-oriented present. This emergence, of the space of being and becoming with, is the very act and aim of my thinking aloud.

The thesis does not make claims for Ahtila's work but rather for the potential of encounters with art works to give rise to questions that are not, or even cannot be, directly addressed in the works themselves. Furthermore, it argues for the potential of these engagements to undo the viewer's habitual positions and to open possibilities for re-assessing the viewer's role in relation to how one is addressed and what is witnessed in visual culture. The emphasis is not on particular questions here but on the space and the act of address in general – not on what the viewer is called to respond to but on the call itself and its implications. This has come into focus hand in hand with the shift from figures, such as the Girl, to the engagement with them and to their

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<sup>497</sup> LaCapra 2001, 40. See also chapter 3b. *Witnessing* on empathy.

<sup>498</sup> At the heart of this thesis is the thinking of the address in terms of becoming instead of being, and in terms of sharing instead of subjectivity. My argument does not distinguish particular types of writing or speech as outward and forward oriented modes of address, but focuses on the fundamentally dialogic and open-ended nature of the address. See e.g. Claire Colebrook's association of the so-called direct address with being and indirect with becoming, in Claire Colebrook, "A Grammar of Becoming: Strategy, Subjectivism, and Style", in Elizabeth Grosz, ed. *Becomings: Explorations in Time, Memory, and Futures* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1999).

mobilising effect. Thus, for example the girl from *If 6 Was 9* (1995-6) mentioned here shortly acts as unmarked, yet her impact is no longer as a figure that does not figure. Rather with her uncertain position and mode of address she encourages reconsideration of my place and project in terms of an indeterminate present.

What does this, together with future-orientation, imply for the viewer's involvement and potential to act? How to act not against, for example, repressive representations but for something else – whether in relation to the figure of the Girl or the suffering witnessed daily in the mass media? Artists may, amongst other things, insist on the unmarked and explore its potential, troubling not simply prevailing representations but also our reading and viewing habits. How could the viewer act correspondingly? The question remains unanswered here. I suspect that now it is time to move on to address these issues that have been increasingly haunting my dialogue with Ahtila's works. The future exploration may engage in a dialogue with an array of visual culture. With its focus on the viewer's implication and the address it will bridge over distinctions such as fiction and documentary. This ongoing enquiry also aims to weave further links from the concerns and approaches of feminism to other questions of critical and ethical urgency, such as sustainability and human rights. Furthermore, it examines not only the potential of spectatorship but also of curating in these terms.<sup>499</sup> Alongside this research I have already engaged with a number of these concerns in my curatorial practice as well as in other modes of creative writing on art and in teaching.<sup>500</sup> Yet I need to now end this particular research project in order to be able to go on, elsewhere and otherwise.

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<sup>499</sup> Inspiration for this is e.g. the work by Ariella Azoulay on the "civil contract" of photography. Ariella Azoulay, *Civil Contract of Photography* (New York: Zone Books, 2008).

<sup>500</sup> In dialogue with artists, I have examined questions concerning e.g. sustainability and the expanded notion of community (as the co-curator of *Lofoten International Art Festival 2008*), as well as tested the possibilities of viewers' implication and the potential of critical discussion and collaboration in site-specific art projects and process-based working groups (e.g. as the curator of *Centrifugal*, an ongoing research and exhibition project between Belfast, Helsinki and Zagreb).

EIJALIISA AHTILA *If 6 Was 9* (1995-6)

Here at the end I thus return to the beginning in order to conclude. Instead of closing my argument in a circle, I aim to collapse the line of progress that this narrative of my research journey has sketched out. The first and the last work of Ahtila's that I have encountered come together now, not only as points of reference but in terms of what they allow for my thought. So, with a focus on the here and now I return to *If 6 Was 9*, which I initially came across in an exhibition *NowHere* (1996). One of the girls in it claims that she has been returned back to girlhood after wanting too much as a woman. The linearity of time is disrupted by a possibility of reversal, while girlhood is still presented as predetermined as a to-be-woman. This determined future appears, furthermore, as a certain kind of socially constructed womanhood. The girl's insistence on not becoming that woman points towards a possibility of resistance. There may be potential to imagine and to will something else into being. What the future holds may not be rooted solidly in a specific, already-defined past as its ground. Both the past, the girlhood, and where it leads to remain unmarked by the girl's refusal to take part in a particular culturally determined line of development. This suggests that not only the past but also the future may emerge otherwise, in the present.

"The present is always the future present: it will have made a positive difference in the world. Only the yearning for sustainable futures can construct a liveable present."<sup>501</sup>

The notion of the present, as suggested by Rosi Braidotti here, is oriented towards the future. This does not imply, in my view, progress. Future-

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<sup>501</sup> Braidotti 2006a, 206.

orientation is not determined by the past. Yet neither is the reach forward a trajectory towards a specific goal in the future or a leap from the present. It takes place in the present. Furthermore, if the future is approached as open-ended this deems also the present indeterminate, as Elizabeth Grosz argues.<sup>502</sup> Future-orientation resonates, thus, with the notion of thought that emphasises action in the here and now over a model of thought as indebted to and building on previous thinking while geared towards an end, such as knowledge. Thought as action highlights its entwinement with, rise from and orientation towards the world. It demands a break from the established modes of critical approach, such as interpretation, that rely on what is already known and knowable. It has to do with the silence that marks a refusal to take part in the prevailing economies of production of knowledge. It insists on a lack of closure. This is what my writing aims at as well, not as an overcoming of silence but as a mode of thinking aloud or thought in action. Urged on by rupturing encounters and kept on the move by a desire for a sustainable future – a further sense of being-with – it aims to act as an address in the present. The sense of being-in-common that may arise from this wavering present is then a mode of becoming-with.

The shifts central to this thesis have been made possible by an intense sense of the present that I have discovered in Eija-Liisa Ahtila's works, both in terms of the viewer's engagement with the works and the frame within which the narratives unfold. The speech of the characters occupies the present, addressing the viewers and as if making observations in the here and now even when referring to past events. The lack of drama, even a matter-of-factness usual in Ahtila's works, defies attempts at immersion into the narrative as well as questions any sense of factuality, as in terms of revelation of information or production of knowledge. What seems to matter is the moment of encounter. This resonates with the moves in my argument towards a growing emphasis on the present and the future over the past – from reactions against what is and has been, from the discourse on

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<sup>502</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, "Thinking the New: Of Futures Yet Unthought", in Elizabeth Grosz, ed. *Becomings: Explorations in Time, Memory, and Futures* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1999), 18.

representation and the strategies of deconstruction to the problematics of the address, from what is engaged with to the event of interaction itself.

There are no answers as to why things have happened, one of the Algerian boys appears to stress at the end of *Where is Where?*, when demanded reasons for the killing of their French friend. There is nothing to be understood. This does not imply that the past irreversible deeds no longer matter. Yet the weight is on the present, on what can be done and on the implication of all of us in this narrative, in this moment. The boy throws the ball back to the analyst and the other characters questioning him – and to us viewers: “Now, you do what you have to do”. It is up to us to act, here and now.



EIJA-LIISA AHTILA *WHERE IS WHERE?* (2008)

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