Melodrama as a genre sits uncomfortably within the contemporary art world, which along its length and breadth (except only in the most conservative or outdated institutions) is thoroughly Foucauldian, including the fey Foucauldianism of the commercial sector. The Foucauldian critique asks whose interests are being served, what epistemological, political and social systems are being confirmed, indeed instantiated, by the discourses being articulated and their forms of expression? Armed with these critiques we ask whose interests are served through the presentation of such tropes as the virtuous victim or heroic retribution or if not the tropes then the pure sensation and intensity of the form. And further ask if through intensities melodrama conceals a legitimation of violent state power by moralising its actions.

Ahtila’s drawing from this problematic art form at least appears anachronistic and it is therefore most telling that it is defended by leading women writers, artists and educators who share an interest in artists’ film and video. Maeve Connolly brings attention to the potential of storytelling to speak of the woman, in a way that “knits together the economic, familial and fantastical in the recalling of cinema that is strongly informed by a critique of narrative form.” This critique of sterility and abstraction is part of “a critical tradition of feminist artists” which defends the integrity of storytelling capable of portraying an individual’s struggle and personal victory — or indeed failure. A struggle that is embedded in affective and symbolic webs of connection that ripple through embodied experience and, as such, act as
counter-weights to the grand gestures of patriarchal culture. This, as Philbrick relays, is a melodrama of bodies that “signify boundaries of selfhood in flux, and family milieus of interchanging relations and identities.”

Philbrick also notes how Ahtila’s videos both echo something of the earliest radical political intentions of the first melodramatic critiques of the Ancien Régime and can also be situated in relation to the Hollywood melodramas of the 1940s and 1950s, which “became a lens through which the critical community investigated culture at large, examining issues of gender, representation and voice.” However, following the work of Kaja Silverman and Laura Mulvey, it is clear that women were invariably “hystericised,” “blank,” and their subjectivity erased in these classic Hollywood films. By contrast, Ahtila’s melodramatic form has become a vehicle to express woman’s resistance to overbearing male authority and resistance to patriarchal discourse:

In these films, the physical and/or mental malady of a suffering heroine confounds the (presumed) greater expertise of a (male) ministering medic. The protagonist’s “hysterical body” defies definition by the man, becoming instead “an unreadable text,” even to the woman herself.

This is all well and good but Ahtila’s narrative is too fluid an affair to be represented on the single screen. The widely accepted reading of Ahtila’s work is that her use of multiple screens and fragmented multilayered narratives, of unstable subject positions and multiple assemblages of enunciation (the hysteric/the spirit/the psychoanalyst/the statement/the irrational), produces an embodied experience in which the internally externalised, dispersed, fragmented and socially constructed subject finds its form.
The features of this reading need to be disassembled. We start with narrative. Maria Walsh draws our attention to how narrative can be redeemed from the formalist critique of its operation. For her, *radical film theory* tended towards a deconstruction of the imaginary identifications of the dream/screen, a critique that “occluded content in favour of abstraction and/or a cognitive approach to narrative patterns.”

Structuralist/materialist filmmaking and radical film theory, sewn together by Lacanian film theory and structuralism, sought to wrestle the viewer away from the closures and passivities of the dream/screen which led to the viewer being “hypnotically seduced by the narratives of cause and effect that terminate in closure and to be without the capacity to deviate and perform his/her own wanderings and digressions.” However, this led to a privileging of the modes of construction and reception of film at the expense of content.

Against “literalism,” Walsh seeks to reclaim narrative as a transformative and deconstructive potential in its own right. In the first place, a multiplicitous narrative is, in and of itself, capable of delivering the alienated and critical effects much lauded by the deconstructionists. Walsh prompts us to bear in mind that the idea of the viewer lulled into a state of unconscious delirium by the seductions and immobilisation of the dream/screen is not necessarily an accurate reflection of the viewer’s rather obviously active mode of reception as he or she abstains or invests, distances from or melds with, registers or misses, and in turn remembers and reviews (critically or affirmatively) what has taken place on the screen. Secondly, in an age where the *modus operandi* of the Society of Control, where consumerism and spectacle is used to enforce specific and highly alienating narratives (the “survival of the fittest”), the potential of narrative to tell stories that need to be told (of the dispossessed, the migrant, and so on) perhaps becomes more urgent, and, most
importantly, new narrative forms allow for the creation of “new narratives on the part of the viewer.”

This implicit anti-structuralism echoes a Deleuzian approach that, regardless of the art form, does not regard negation as a primary ontological value, but regards negation/reduction/abstraction as various tropes to be used in fashioning a plane of composition:

Critical distance is not a meter, it is a rhythm. But the rhythm, precisely, is caught up in a becoming that sweeps up the distances between characters, making them rhythmic characters that are themselves more or less distant, more or less combinable (intervals).

The structuralist or materialist filmmaker’s (unacknowledged) plane of composition contains within it, then, only the illusion of a type of transcendence through specific discourses (Althusser/Lacan) and processes (dialectics/negation), and through this eludes what it really is. Indeed, if these discourses and processes are used as self-authoring techniques the Deleuzian response is that: “There is only a single plane in the sense that art includes no other plane than that of aesthetic composition: in fact, the technical plane is necessarily covered up or absorbed by the aesthetic plane of composition.”

For Deleuze negation is a power of affirmation, “it expresses affirmation and becoming active as the power of affirmation” or as we see it in Ahitla a form of refraction, one of intense potential and not something that can be hypostatised as a principle sufficient unto itself. Structuralist/materialist film criticism has always sought to cast itself in the role of the legislator, determining the true and legitimate values pertaining to its form. But for Deleuze, “the point of critique is not justification but a different way of feeling: another sensibility.” Walsh cites Murray
Smith (1996) who disputes the claims made for the lodestone of radical film criticism, the “critical spectator”:

There is [...] something intrinsically self-defeating in the idea of “producing” a critical spectator. The project is self-defeating because the means by which the result is arrived at negates the difference between it and its supposed opposite, the naïve or incredulous spectator. The estranging text becomes simply a miniature “ideological apparatus,” eliciting a different set of ideological answers, but still through a process of interpellation.18

If critical detachment is seen as a component of the plane of consistency, rather than being true to origins, materials or effects, then film-making’s pleasures and effects can be more fully understood. Structuralist/materialist filmmaking sought to distance itself in equal measure from both the cinema and the gallery systems, which were considered naive to its own uneasy alliance between the values of post-structuralist critiques and empiricism. However, this left these schools without theoretical tools capable of accounting for their own creativity resulting in the avant-garde lacking a language of expression and imagination, of flows and transformation, that might describe what they did, which was to experiment and invent:

The value of art [...] consists in liberating what was present in art from its beginnings, but was hidden underneath aims and objects, even if aesthetic, and underneath recodings or axiomatics: the pure process that never ceases to reach fulfillment as it proceeds — art as “experimentation.”19

However, there is a risk here of creating a simplistic opposition between “literalists” (Maria Walsh) — or to use a less demeaning term, “formalists,” or perhaps better
still, “practitioners of the ‘already thought and perceived’” — conceived as bad, and narratologists or filmmakers of affect, creativity and the imagination, considered good. All simplistic hierarchies and binaries require dissembling, a point supported by Catherine Fowler’s view that there is a continuity between the work of Maya Deren and Ahtila insofar as they share many of the same intentions (to undercut linearity and progression), and both strive to achieve depth through a “verticality” (a poetics of felt experience) and a shared concern with “what is occurring” and “what it feels like and what it means.” Deren and Ahtila use different semiologies (of the cinema and installation) to implicate the viewer, break the confinement of time and space, disassemble the subject and most importantly elaborate a poetics of their respective languages.

However, it is not possible to argue that contemporary artist filmmakers are inheritors of a tradition because in the first place the self-proclaimed aim of structuralist/materialist filmmakers was to create a space for themselves outside of both the gallery and cinema and, secondly, there is no evidence that the likes of Douglas Gordon, Gillian Wearing, and Mark Wallinger associated themselves with either the theory or the practice. The attempts by A. L. Rees, David Curtis, Malcolm Le Grice et al. to champion experimental film and video and to find precursors for contemporary artists’ filmmaking practices in various “histories” in the creation of an orthodoxy has the flavour of Nietzschean ressentiment.

Notwithstanding this, Ahtila knowingly uses some of the best features of deconstructive filmmaking, and the theoretical tools bequeathed by radical film theory are directly admissible. The most explicit forms of this in Ahtila’s films include direct statements to camera made by the characters, which breaks up the immersive affect; the breaks and ruptures to flow that characterise her work, and the layering of seemingly incompatible languages (of fantasy, archive reportage discourse, first-person narration, disjunctive sound effects and so on). Of
considerable interest is Peggy Gales’ note that “the material properties of film and
the mechanics of cinema are exposed here in spatial terms.” However, it is the
installation space which, by alerting the viewer to the work’s own formal and
structural qualities, purports at one and the same time both to instantiate the active
critical viewer and to tell the story through a language of matter and its expressive
potential: affect. Waves of identification and discomfort, and most importantly the
pulsations of resolution and dispersal, provide the underlying rhythms by which
the viewer is contracted into the piece.

The central claim here is as follows: the installation format conflates the viewer
and the characters as they oscillate between their internal conflicts and the external
perpetrations that are not simply brought to bear on their positions but also
determine the content and form of what they say and what they do. The viewer
oscillates between screens and images unable to resolve the heterogeneity of
semiologies into which he or she is immersed, as well as the divergent subject and
speaking positions. The viewer, like the character, cannot in fact take it all in. In a
Deleuzian sense then, Ahtila layers irreconcilable “assemblages of enunciation” (the
priest, the State, the psychiatrist the child) that cannot be resolved either by the
character or the viewer in the adoption of a viewing position, or a narrative that
subsumes all of the parts. For example, whilst Ahtila uses an “existential” language
of extreme contraction, of ontological absurdity and collapse of meaning similar to
Beckett’s it is used as only one trope amongst others, and does not function as the
master discourse.

Bergson dismisses the hypostatisation of negation by explaining that there is no
great empty nothing behind being, no primordial non-being, there are only
contingent relationships and multiplicities. As Deleuze explains:
When we ask “why is there something rather than nothing?” or “why is there order rather than disorder?” or “why is there this rather than that (when that was equally possible)?” we fall into the same error: we mistake the more for the less, we behave as though nonbeing existed before being, disorder before order and the possible before existence. As though being came to fill in a void, order to organise a preceding disorder, the real to realise a primary possibility.  

Ahtila shows that it is possible to place negation on the surface as a text amongst other texts that have equal claims for truth. In this way, the language of the abyss can become something else and the hidden meanings (especially the implicit ontological and epistemological paradigms) open to transformation. A transformation activated in terms of both Ahtila’s form and content.

The claim not only of Ahtila’s work but also of the installation format more generally is that the viewer is forced to make choices and in this way is active and empowered and may become, at least in part, the protagonist. As Jane Philbrick observes:

Ahtila’s video installations and, less effectively, her split-image films require active viewer participation to synthesize the simultaneous multiplicity of images and sound. Blurring boundaries of narration and spectatorship, Ahtila forces the viewer to make choices. To make a choice is an act of will, a moral act.

There is something compelling in this, when the viewer is free to choose when to enter and leave, which screen to watch, which element is most compelling: the whole polyphony of attention is to a considerable extent given over to the viewer, and to a certain extent the artwork itself is contingent on the viewer’s actions. The
viewer can review the decisions/predilections/presuppositions which motivate her choices. Although expressed in another language, this sounds virtually identical to the critique of passivity that, in part, motivated the first experimental filmmakers such as Maya Deren — *Meshes in the Afternoon* (1943).

However, the idea that the gallery is less prone to illusionism, passivity and linearity is not without its critics. Marc Augé argues that multiple viewing positions and the lack of a central and authorized narrative construct, far from offering a mode of critical detachment, are little more than a repetition of the logics of supermodernity. He is worth quoting in full:

> The world that surrounds the artist and the period in which he lives reach him only as mediatised forms that are themselves effects, aspects and driving forces of the global system. That system serves as its own ideology; it functions like a set of instructions for use; it quite literally screens the reality for which it is substituting itself or rather whose place it is taking. The unease and disarray of artists confronted with this situation are also our own, and they tend to exacerbate those problems, and we may well wonder what we have to learn from them.²⁸

It is also possible to argue that the public arena of the cinema — which entailed rubbing shoulders with all classes and engaging in a ritualised communal experience of a shared popular culture — is now being replaced by a quasi-sanctified experience of forms of viewing accessible only to a specific class of self-selecting aesthetes, acculturated in the reading of multiple images, fragmented narratives and certain modes of legibility and metaphoricity. This is, however, not a reading that Jessica Morgan would support; for her the art gallery experience can “educate an audience in developing the skills necessary to scrutinize film, a
theoretical framework, perhaps for future experience.”

For his part, Peter Osborne argues that “the form of collective here is very far from the cinematic masses of Kracauer’s picture palaces; it is a privatized, serial, small group affair.” A criticism mirrored by Catherine Elwes who writes that far from creating a critical viewer, the viewer is offered a grander level of elevation:

In fact, dispensing with the television set, and replacing it with pure cinemascope illusionism elevates video and film to a kind of electronic mural painting in the grand manner, enveloped in the silence of the rarefied quasi-cathedrals of art that both commercial and public galleries have turned into. The ritualized, communal proletarian experience — the eating, drinking, smoking and necking that accompanied the theatrical display of cinema — is also lost.

Is it the case that the potential critical space of the art gallery has been subsumed by the logics of late capital and turned into another forum for satisfying distraction? Or is it possible that, with the demise of the public space, the gallery has become a new public space, wherein the audience becomes part of a considered and critical public united in a shared engagement with specific practices? Elwes thinks the latter:

Whilst many commentators have bemoaned the privatization of the media and decline of the public sphere, others note that publicly funded museums and galleries offer some respite (however illusionary) from commercialization, constituting a kind of “sacred space” or a space for public scrutiny and even self-scrutiny.

Osborne slides a blade into the complacencies of installation thinking. In choosing the following from Walter Benjamin as the epigram to his essay “Distracted
Reception: Time, Art and Technology,” his strategy of reading art through society and society through art, seeing both as part of the same logic, could not be clearer:

The sort of distraction that is provided by art represents a covert measure of the extent to which it has become possible to perform new tasks of apperception. Reception in distraction […] is the sort of reception which is increasingly noticeable in all areas of art and is a symptom of profound changes in apperception.33

Osborne follows Benjamin’s template in discerning that the structures through which we see and know the world and each other, the structures of consciousness, are the same structures with which the artist formulates his dialectical encounter with meaning. Thus, for Osborne, two essential facets of our age are entwined in the installation form, a (Bergsonian) multiple subjectively embedded in a palimpsest of durations and a social dialectic of attention and distraction, accordingly; “viewed through the prism of film and its successors, the metaphysical meaning of contemporary art appears in its articulation of time and subjectivity.”34

However, he takes Bergson’s critique of the spatialisation of time — “the trespassing of the idea of space upon the field of pure consciousness” — to imply that it is actual space that is isolated from cinema to make it into a subjective affair. But Osborne has here misread Bergson, for whom duration is not only subjective: life itself is comprised of multiple durations and only the human thinks of its duration as a privileged position from which to detemporalise other temporal processes — famously, to think duration is to think “beyond the human condition.”35 From this misconception, Osborne suggests that the installation re-spatialises and in so doing re-socialises the cinematic image by literally making it into an embodied physical space and this, in turn, reintroduces the social into the
purely subjective durational experience of cinema. The aspect of the social which is incorporated in this way (here Osborne employs Jonathan Crary) is,

an ongoing crisis of attentiveness, in which the changing configurations of capitalism continually push attention and distraction to new limits and thresholds, with an endless sequence of new products, sources of stimulation, and streams of information, and then respond with new methods of managing and regulating perception.\textsuperscript{36}

For Osborne then, this does not create a less immersed spectatorship capable of critical detachment, instead, the artwork is merely replicating an already existing dialectic between the subjectivism of individual experience and the wider logic of attraction and distraction as the viewer simply moves off, moves around, grazes and checks the time on his Moby. As Osborne says: “The ideology of ‘contemplative immersion’ in, or ‘absorption’ by, the artwork continues to regulate its reception, but distraction is deeply implicated in the demand for this special kind of attention.”\textsuperscript{37}

We might say that despite being wrong (about Bergson) Osborn is still right. Indeed, Morgan acknowledges these dangers when she identifies works which offer new strategies to undermine the conventionalization of the ‘immersive/distracted’ viewing experience, such as the works of Jeroen de Rijke and Willem de Rooij, \textit{Untitled} (2001), which have both start and end times and screens are used in such a way as to disrupt both the phenomenological theatricality of the minimalist gallery space and the demands of the image. Whilst these works adhere to the long tradition in film and fine art of “question[ing] the museum and viewing experience and the act of seeing itself,”\textsuperscript{38} they also offer a precise critique of the logic of attention/distraction, which according to Osborne conflates both the viewer with
the modernist flâneur and the consumerist logic of the windows of the Arcade with Microsoft windows.

The question that seems to emerge from this short review of contemporary debates around narrative, the legacy of structuralist materialist filmmaking and the installation form, is whether, in fact, other concepts provide a stronger measure of the work and can push forward the debates about form and content, cinema and installation, and also reconceive the Benjaminist isomorphism (presented by Osborne) between the film installations and the logics of society. There are two further reasons for this strategy: first, the subject of Where is Where? is self-consciously viewing as an event and an investigation of an ‘Event’ as a specific occurrence in history; and second, Ahtila’s practice is highly theorised both by herself and others, which leads Meike Bal to argue that her works can be called theoretical objects.  

Being such a senior figure in the world of cultural theory and criticism, it should come as no surprise that Meike Bal has provided the most sagacious and interesting account of artworks as theoretical objects. She looks in detail at the complex multilayered questioning performed by Ahtila’s work and how this can act as a “kind of model for the new language of criticism — in other words, I will take this work as a ‘theoretical object’. “ Bal looks upon Ahtila as a model for thinking through the bonds between art and life, psychosis, subjectivity, and events, and at how this is formulated in an “affective encounter” in the artwork. There are two further strategies contained in Bal’s “new language of criticism,” first, to bridge the gap between the intellect and affect; second, to pursue an art not of representation or the pleasures of identification, but of “commitment.”

However, with Deleuze we can think more intensively than even Meike Bal’s powerful and insightful approach. For the artist unimpeded by the disciplinary aesthetics of various vulgar Marxisms, structuralisms or materialisms, Deleuze’s
value comes from the creativity of his concepts and the poetry of his expression. Here Tom Conley draws out the essential Deleuze: “Thinking takes place in the interstices of visibility and discourse. When we think we cause lighting bolts to flash and ‘flicker within words and make us hear cries in visible things’.”

We ask then: do Ahtila’s works flicker to this type of thinking, where analysis and poetry are the same thing?

**SKETCH > WHERE IS WHERE?**

The hour-long video installation *Where is Where?*, installed at the Parasol Unit, 26 February – 25 April 2010, comprised of six floor-to-ceiling screens, four of which formed the dramatic focus of the work. The two other screens were in seamlessly adjoined rooms, one showing an animation and the other archive footage of dead bodies of victims of the 1956 Meftah massacre of 40 Algerians who were dragged from their beds and killed by French soldiers. In what was effectively a box of images the viewers were provided with a few small *poufs* as seating scattered around the room. There was no position from which all four screens could be viewed at once. In fact such was the scale and proximity of the screens only two could be viewed comfortably at the same time. Since I can neither add nor subtract anything, it seems appropriate to reproduce here the full synopsis written by Ahtila herself:

The theme of *Where Is Where?* is colonialism and the presence of two different cultures. Its starting point is a real event that took place in Algeria at the end of the 1950s. At that time, Algeria was still under French rule and was involved in a long struggle for independence from the mother country. The situation was
extremely violent, both because of recurrent assassination attempts by the resistance movement and because of the French government’s harsh countermeasures. As one consequence of and reaction to the barbarous acts committed by the French, two Algerian boys killed their friend, a French boy of the same age.

Although the film’s starting points are based in reality, at the heart of the story is the relationship this event has with today’s situation. The narrative starts from the present moment, which is gradually interwoven with what the boys did and the events in Algeria. Thus, the murder committed by the boys is seen, on the one hand, in the light of the current world situation and, on the other hand, in a way that attempts to put the conflicts between western and Arab cultures into historical perspective. The events are, nevertheless, approached from the viewpoint of an individual person and filtered through her.

The story has three main characters: Adel and Ismael, the Arab boys who committed the murder, and a European poet, a woman of about 40. The story opens with Death entering the woman’s house. The experience of death is compared to finding oneself in a new country and to a calling into question of existence and identity. The woman starts, with the aid of words from her profession of poet, to clarify what happened, while also running through elements involved in the event, such as the different religions, guilt and sameness, and a search for what they have in common. Gradually the focus shifts from the woman’s world to the boys’ reality. The murder is taken out of the time of its occurrence and brought into the present day. A mist clears from the back garden of the house to reveal a boat that has appeared in the swimming pool, in it sit Adel and Ismael. The poet is shifted to the background, and what the boys say and the inevitability of what they did — with its causes and consequences — take centre stage.
The events in the film take place in a constructed, fictive event reality within the film and in a theatre-like, self-referential set comprised of stages within stages giving way to further stages and thresholds. The point of this is both simply to inject life into the narrative, and to investigate the way the different levels of the fictive narrative function together. The film’s narrative mode is thus experiential; it attempts to provide information not just in a traditionally direct way with the aid of what happens on the screen, but also by intensifying the impact of the images and sounds. The aim is for the expressive elements in the moving image to work not just as subordinate to the story, but so that they will carry independent, sensory information (for example, a scene with Sufi dancers, landscapes in different countries, or singing scenes). The idea of this is to bring looseness, a personalness and emotionality to the story, and to break down traditional chronology, but without losing track of the plot. The idea of the actors’ presence also operates along the same lines: for example, in the dialogue between Death and the Poet, in addition to the information given by the words, the focus is on what happens in the face and body and the invisible exchanges of affect.32

AHTILA – THE EVENT

According to Deleuze, the Event is not fixed, ever. Not until the last word has been said on the subject, which is impossible, can a final meaning be discerned. All of life is a perpetual becoming, always in the middle, and is it impossible to fix becoming to a permanent present. Accordingly, the events of 1956 in Algeria can never be finally determined — a series of questions are left unanswered. Why did these boys kill another? What was France doing in Algeria? What, following Frantz Fanon,
whose *The Wretched of the Earth* provides theoretical context and some of the prose, shapes the consciousness of the colonised and coloniser? What do these events say to us today, and what does today say about the past? This does not imply a permanent state of relativism or vague indeterminacy; rather, these are the events in relation to which we attempt to bring clarity out of obscurity, but in a way that prevents clarity from obscuring the nature of the Event:

> With every event, there is indeed the present moment of its actualization, the moment in which the event is embodied in a state of affairs, an individual, or a person, the moment we designate by saying “*here the moment has come.*” The future and the past of the event are evaluated only with respect to this definitive present.\(^{43}\)

This is not a film that pretends that a single story can be told, as neither the actual events of the time, the presented events of the story, nor the event of the viewing are offered by way of a linear narrative, stable present or single subject position. The film has a leading protagonist and whilst her drama is the motivating force of the installation, she is the figure of contemporary generalised European consciousness (France, Finland and Algeria are conflated), and the drama unfolds through the events shown on the screens (archive footage, dramatic re-constructions, and Ahtila’s hallmark fantasies), rather than through her individual subjectivity. We do watch what she sees through her eyes yet, in a delicate balancing act, through the installations parodic, graphic, and comic stylizations we never fully identify with her struggle and are bequeathed a critical distance. In this regard, Ahtila’s signature “affectless subject” strongly militates against the tropes of psychodrama and imaginary identification, however; “the affect-less appearance and performance at the moments of heightened psychotic content do not deprive this work of affect.”\(^{44}\)
Rather than an individual story then, this installation reads as a presentation of an event of European consciousness that Alison Butler describes as “both a historically specific and isolated occurrence and an iteration of a process that continues on a global scale today.” In Where is Where? the characters are seemingly caught up within a world that is happening around and through them, and whilst their experience occasionally drives the drama forward, this is only one of many diachronic and extra-diachronic forces that propel the work. They are, to borrow a phrase from Deleuze’s *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation* “figures” (particularly Death), rather than actors, and their worlds are not governed by what they say or do but by the events in which they are immersed. If we accept that there are no grounds for conceiving a binary dualism between subject and object there is no need to use Alison Butler’s articulation of two modes of perception “exteroception and proprioception.” Instead, this work shows how singularities traverse stratifications as affects and percepts, images and refrains; each knowing nothing of the distinctions between subject and object or self and other.

There is no sense of the past as finished and detached from the present, as doors in suburban Helsinki open onto rooms in Algerian villages, as Algerian boys are found in the Poet’s pool. All distinctions between space and place are lost when archive footage, re-enacted scenarios from 1956 and present day scenes from Scandinavian forests are presented as pre-individual singularities and placed in conjunctive and disjunctive relations, which traverse the subject’s emotions and perceptions. As this installation presents a tragedy that continues to occupy a profound place in French and Algerian life, Deleuze’s framing of the wound appears germane:

“My wound existed before me, I was born to embody it.” It is a question of attaining this will that the event creates in us; of becoming the quasi-cause of
what is produced within us, the Operator; of producing surfaces and linings in which the event is reflected, finds itself again as incorporeal and manifests in us the neutral splendour which it possesses in itself in its impersonal and pre-individual nature, beyond the general and the particular, the collective and the private.48

The essential feature of the installation is not that it presents neither an unsolvable riddle nor an open and fragmented narrative that is sufficient to itself, but that it creates, both formally and thematically, something approximating the structure of the Event. The past, as the actual past shown in archive footage, and the historical events, are dramatised, particularly the invasion of villages and homes by French soldiers as well as the murder of the pied-noir by the two Algerian boys, which is represented in rather stylized form (using perhaps a Brechtian device of extenuating unreality to induce critical distance). In this way the event-structure of the past is not so much reconceived, or recapitulated, as re-instantiated in the experience of the installation. Moreover, the “critical viewer vs immersive environment” question is potentially resolved insofar as an immersive experience of the work provokes a type of thinking-through of its inherent affective, perceptual and cognitive strategies. This resolution is perhaps more that theoretically complete when we discern how the installation is animated by the dynamics of Aion and Chronos.

AION AND CHRONOS

Aion and Chronos are amongst Deleuze’s key concepts; they are borrowed from the Stoics and put to work most fully in one of his most originative texts The Logic of Sense. In brief, he argues that there are two sides to time. A corporeal time of matter
and bodies (Chronos) and an incorporeal time of sense and infinite speed (Aion).

This is Deleuze’s neatest encapsulation:

Time must be grasped twice, in two complementary though mutually exclusive
fashions. First it must be grasped entirely as the living present in bodies, which
act and are acted upon. Second, it must be grasped entirely as an entity
infinitely divisible into past and future.  

Chronos

As is well known, across his entire corpus Deleuze is determined to undo the
conventional idea of the present as a “here and now” seen as a type of
phenomenological fullness of experience of being present to ones’ self in, and of, the
world. By contrast the present of Chronos is thick, it is extended backwards and
forwards in time and we exist amongst an abundance of multiple thicknesses, some
of which are vast:

in accordance with Chronos only the present exists in time [...] whatever is
future or past [...] belongs to a more vast present which has a greater
extension or duration. There is always a more vast present which absorbs the
past and the future [...]. Chronos is the regulated movement of vast and
profound presents [...].

An example of the thickness of the present, to make things simpler than they merit,
is the Enclosure Acts, which exist in material and conscious experiences of divisions
in contemporary society that are projected far into the future in our thoughts of the
world yet to come. We should note that when Deleuze talks of materiality’s this
includes “matter” but also ideas, systems, rules and language. If we think of the
American Revolution or the Holocaust it is impossible to say that the past has ceased to be, as they still exist in material and immaterial forces and processes. And of these multiple corporeal durations we may think of vast geological time stretching back through eons, the shooting of JFK taking us back decades and 9/11 already existing far into the future.

Chronos, then, “measures the movement of bodies and depends on the matter which limits and fills it out,” and we are compelled by our corporality as it animates and forces us to live but is uncapturable, unknowable and indefinable.

The key to understanding Chronos is that Deleuze does not accept time as distinct from space and movement. All of these durations take place through the movements and actions of bodies that are quantitative (not qualitative) contractions and affectivities of being. Each of these thick presents (industries, species, collectivities and so forth), encapsulate orders of vibrations and transmissions of movements, each having its own arrhythmic pulse.

According to Deleuze, these pulsations interweave, cause frequencies and create individuations, haecceities, knowledges and transversal partial hybrid becomings. In short, instead of spatialised time, (the clock ticking) “Chronos is the number of movement,” and things, people, and bodies move in an infinite number of directions. It is a movement through, within and across all finitudes and infinitudes and at the same time, which create indeterminate determinate blocs of becoming.

Aion

It may appear that Chronos is conceptually abundant and by itself provides the grounds for overturning traditional conceptualizations of time.

Chronos, however, is only one half of Deleuze’s remodelling of time, our understanding of which is incomplete without addressing the concept of Aion:
[Chronos] measures the movement of bodies and depends on the matter which limits and fills it out; the other [Aion] is a pure straight line at the surface, incorporeal, unlimited, an empty form of time, independent of all matter.53

The relationship between Aion and Chronos is paradoxical: they have different laws, are “labyrinths,” “each one is complete and excludes the other,” yet they interact with each other. Neither Chronos nor Aion can be grasped without the other. They are neither opposites, dialectically opposed nor parallels: they are two sides of the same thing. In the manner of his theorisation of the continuity of the actual and virtual, both are objective.

Aion is the present instant divided into the future and past *ad infinitum*, “it is the instant without thickness and without extension, which subdivides each present into past and future”; the infinite divisibility of the instant. As time moves forward there is never a pure moment of the instant “now,” there is only an instantaneous passing from past to future. Hence, what exists in Aion is “always and at the same time something which has just happened and something about to happen; never something happening,” Aion is the time of the past and future with no present. Past and present have no real existence. A pure moment of an actual present would be the end of becoming which is impossible. This is one of the conundrums of living; on those occasions when we attempt to capture a stilled or stable subjectivity, a self that is, we find subjectivity is always becoming in a world that is equally in process.

Lacan’s subject famously oscillates; Deleuze’s oscillations are equal in intensity, but his subject’s displacements and deferrals are ontological rather than psychoanalytical. In place of the threat of castration, that Lacan for all his refinements never finally rescinds, we find that the threat has nothing to do with the
familial order. One threat of Chronos is that of the “becoming mad” of the depths, the feeling that outside of the present matrices of multiple becomings there lies an infinity of other durations we cannot possibly subsume under an identity, even the identity of the Lack. The second threat is the threat of Aion divided instantly into past and future, which annuls the possibility of presence across the infinite speed of surfaces.

Chronos is not only the folded present and past, it is also multiple, as heterogenic durations exist at once and are not at all subsumable under/by/within a single spatialised time. The durations within the installation are pulses, some diminutions, as fragments of houses or vistas are weaved within the plot, and others are staccatos as the videos beat to the rhythms of armed conflict and the trauma of occupation. Sometimes these pulsations express the slowness of the corporeal modifications that Chronos is heir to, as quarries reveal geological stratifications and historical scenes are made to seem timeless when shot in contemporary landscapes. Chronos is the measured and actualised time, a qualitative pulsation of matter flux that is represented by journeys across oceans, through war-torn villages, through the sense of embodied and palpable places; and yet the viewer experiences a particular amount of time, for a particular duration, such as the rhythms of the instruments of interrogation — when one of the boys is questioned — or the very different rhythms when the priestess talks to the poet. These palpitations are set in relation to other times, such as the time of Death’s embrace, and the present day need for witnessing and remembrance.57 In this way, Chronos is shown to be movement within and across the represented stratifications, and in the experience of the work itself, work and viewer are folded in a palimpsest of durations. But these pulsations also belong to Aion, which enables sense, including the sense of “to make sense of,” to be re-expressed in new ways, to be understood differently. To express this more or less simply; the corporeal events in Algeria happened, are palpable (in
Land, and Laws, and institutions), but what they express, their sense, is the incorporeal surface of Aion. It is the sense of the event, in it’s backwards and forwardness, its complex heterogenic, multifaceted meanings and expressions that are the subjects of this work and made equally palpable, not least in the words spoken by the poet:

in time’s both directions, [...] Face adrift, the two sides extending across each other. Held aloft upon time, will it hold? With the tiniest little breaths, Before the beginning, renewed, comes to meet you, through it, back with it, to the left, to the right, forwards, backwards, to those habits, to the beginning of something nameless, to a birth, a birth that could be my beginning, too.

It is in the time of Aion that we find the “reality of the virtual” (the effects on French post-colonial consciousness) that existed in the acts themselves and that are now actualized. Aion is the surface that allows for different senses to emerge through the inclusive disjunctions that these narratives and aesthetic strategies provoke. It is these dynamics, which catch the viewer between interstices (rather than the dynamics of personal expression, melodrama and empathy), and emotionality that lie behind Ahtila’s status as an artist of affect. Philbrick (as quoted earlier) rightly says that Ahtila is an artist of affect:

Part of a generation of Nordic artists Kim Levin identifies as “aim[ing] for a visceral and sensory, rather than a cerebral response … what Gilles Deleuze once called ‘the logic of sensation’.”

The inference is that this is not an aestheticisation of the political but an establishment of a sensible polity.
The installation thus creates new becomings out of fragments, out of the elided and repressed, and most importantly out of the idea — so central to Ahtila’s work — that these states are without anchor in Oedipus or normative subjectivity, but nor are they the disarrangements of the psychotic; they issue rather from a transformative and creative way of being in the world. Ahtila does not refer to schizoanalysis, but Deleuze and Guattari’s wrestling of the schizoid from the clutches of Oedipus is germane because the derèglement of the schizoid owes nothing to the family and everything to forging new “machinic” connections below the irrational cauterisations (“facts”) and sclerosis (molar identity) of our age:

There is no such thing as either man or nature now, only a process that produces the one within the other […]. Producing-machines, desiring machines everywhere, schizophrenic machines, all the species of life; the self and the non-self, outside and inside, no longer have any meaning whatsoever.  

This is a work that fundamentally disaffirms where thresholds are assigned in Western thought. Thresholds are commonly understood as existing within processes (air passes through the mouth and past the epiglottis into the lungs) and between things (windowless monads). In Where is Where? thresholds are certainly like this, but they are also radically and fundamentally recomposed. The screen acts as a threshold to another world, not a singular world, as in Algeria or the therapist’s office, but instead acts as pure threshold, without origin or order. The thresholds here are those between Mediterranean landscapes and the priest’s chapel, between the doctor’s surgery and the scene of the massacre. This has the flavour of the cinematic montage which enables any place whatever to be combined with another any place whatever, to create a new whole; but in Ahtila’s works thresholds are dynamic places of change and ambiguity when placed between the virtual and
actual or reality and fiction — resulting in heterogenic rhythms which are most
telling when the thresholds are the exchanges and interplays between the depths of
Chronos and the surfaces of Aion. If four images are played at once, in a sequence
that is irregularly regular, and the viewers’ perception is only one perception
amongst many others (the different perceptions of subjects and cameras, refracting
simultaneous yet differing points of view), then the thresholds are not so much
borders as indefinable entrances and exists, indeterminacies: “the only way to get
outside the dualisms, to be between, to pass between, the intermezzo.”\textsuperscript{61} For Taru
Elfving there is something of the feminine in this: “The feminine is repressed as the
condition of the logic of the same and therefore can only be discovered in the gaps
and silences, as incomprehensible excess that disrupts the binary logic and opens it
to change.”\textsuperscript{62}

However, it must be stressed that in common with all Ahtila’s works Where is
Where? is structured around a dynamic not of pure deterritorialisations or of chance
and indeterminacy but of careful planes, sections and orientations. These
orientations frame certain specific ideas that the work sets out to achieve: the
invagination of past and present, the nation state as a historical relation of violence
and oppression (Bal), the idea of a subject as both a political and historical effect,
and a potential for framing the (non-human and human) forces that transcend
subjectivity and populate the world.

It is more accurate to say that Ahtila assembles not fragments but ‘blocs of
becoming’ (the Strindbergian bleakness, a subjugated people, melodrama’s moral
framework) that emerge out of this extraordinary palate of molecular effects and
indeterminacies. There are two features to these blocs of becoming; on the one hand
they are multiplicities, insofar as their function is entirely dependent on the work
they do, what they actualise through the zone of indistinction that exists between
multiplicities, and yet they also need to draw into themselves an essential fabric, a
certain conatus that simply, intuitively, endures by opening up spaces where virtual possibilities can be actualized: “Each individual is a contraction of the world, a connection with all of the world. But it is individual through the way it connects by forgetting different perspectives on the world, by the way it selects a world.”

As we have discussed, this self-differentiation of pure difference is identical to its relative speed or slowness. Indeed, Ahtila’s installation is carefully constructed around two central durations, the duration of the Scandinavian poet and of the different speeds of events in Algeria. When these are brought into contrapuntal relations — they appear to be in one space, and in one time, using a single assemblage of enunciation — distances are resolved, as they become one melodic refrain on a plane of composition.

When the Algerian boys are found in the pool of the poet’s house, instead of showing history as a linear process consisting of transitions from one stage of life to another, a break is inserted, and through this rupture, history as one of the processes vital to subjectivation is undone. In being both extracted from narrative continuity and abstracted from the grid of intelligibility that history inflicts, the boys are thereby placed in the “out of timeness” that normally signifies the breakdown or the dissolution of self. However, instead of symbols of disintegration, the two boys become a figure of a new possibility for consciousness and, by virtue of this, of our understanding of the potential to create new subjectivities or new socialities or, at its furthest reaches, “a new earth” or “a people yet to come.”

Our suggestion regarding Ahtila is that she creates a series of refrains and new expressions of being by using already coded and clichéd materials. This is perhaps in keeping with Deleuze and Guattari’s circumspection about the idea of a pure ecstatic abandonment of self. If taken to its fullest extent, this absolute deterritorialisation, they caution, can be a form of suicide. They warn that it is better to work with strata, to find places within and between. Sure, create “diabolical
“packs” or become, in the language of Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation, an “anomalous.” But if art is to act as a transformative social agent it may more usefully do so by working with strata, as Ahtila does, using already coded materials and engaging with the actual social and political forces of this world, right here, right now.

CONCLUSION

In using the installation form as an arena to explore the material, formal and structural qualities of medium, Ahtila’s work explores with some precision and alacrity the concerns of experimental film and video, not least how film creates meaning and stages new relations between viewer and screen. Ahtila does this by employing the familiar devices of rupture, layering incompossable languages and by exposing the works’ formal and structural qualities, but, they are strategies, rather than ends in themselves, aligned to serve an altogether different purpose, one that thinks also through affective, perceptual and cognitive strategies.

This paper argues that Where is Where? moves the debates and practices of experimental and deconstructive film and video far beyond the introspective issues of screen, spectatorship and installation in the process of capturing both a specific event and the Event structure of time, which is an extraordinarily ambitious claim made principally through employing conceptual tools originally developed by Gilles Deleuze and rarely used in relation to artist’s film and video. We might expect the more familiar Deleuzian cinema concepts of Time and Movement Image, the Crystal or Affection Image to be profitably employed in relation to Ahtila’s work; instead other of his principal concepts, Aion and Chronos, are exploited to capture what is so remarkable about these works.
The central argument is that Where is Where? thinks intensively through sense, multiple durations, the materiality of Chronos, and the infinite divisibility of the instant in Aion to create a palpable sense of the Event. In a detailed analysis of structure, forms, images and spectatorship, we claim that the event structure of life, the installation as an Event and the conceptual apparatus are consubstantial. As we have already mentioned, “with every event, there is indeed the present moment of its actualisation, the moment in which the event is embodied in a state of affairs, individual or a person.” The paper argues that “this moment has come” twice; the Event of the French invasion of Algeria folded into the present so as to be still palpable in French and European consciousness and come again in the staging of the Event in the video Installation.

NOTES

1. Defined by Kate Mondloch as post-1990 works of art in which artists have “made claims upon cinema” within the institutional context of the visual arts. The writers to which this paper refers are either artists, writers who make significant contributions to this field, lecturer’s in Art Schools or, more likely, combinations of all. Mondloch, “Placing Artists’ Cinema,” Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media 52 (2010).
2. Maeve Connolly, The Place of Artists’ Cinema Space, Site and Screen (Bristol: Intellect, 2009), 93.
3. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
17. Ibid., 88.
26. This requires some clarification. There is no suggestion of “intertextuality” or Derridean deconstruction at work here, because for Deleuze texts are merely “small cog[s in an extra-textual practice […] it is a question of seeing to what use it has in the extra-textual practice that prolongs the text.” Deleuze, *Proust and Signs*, trans. R. Howard (London: Penguin, 1973), 186-87.
32. Ibid.
34. Osborne, “Distracted Reception,” 70.
40. Ibid.
47. Exteroception and proprioception are the “perception of external stimuli, through the sense, and the body’s perception of itself, its position and movement.” Butler, “This Must Be the Place,” 91.
49. Ibid., 7.
50. Ibid., 189.
51. Ibid., 73.
53. Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 73.
54. Ibid., 72.
55. Ibid., 188.
56. Ibid., 73.
58. Deleuze and Guattari, What is Philosophy?, 177.
60. Deleuze and Guattari, Anti-Oedipus, 2.
61. Deleuze and Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus, 276-77.