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**Dis/Orienting the Border:
The Poetics of Disorientation
in Avant-Garde Accented Narratives**

“Two prisoners whose cells adjoin communicate with each other by knocking on the wall. The wall is the thing which separates them but it is also their means of communication. Every separation is a link.” Simone Weil

Abstract: As products of “dual postcolonial displacement and postmodern or late scattering,” accented filmmakers experience migration “not only as a movement in space, but essentially a movement in time” (Naficy 11, Köhn 109). This paper uses Robert Throop’s four forms of temporal orientation to address the ways in which the migrant’s spatiotemporal movement—one that characterises the migrant’s subjectivity—is manifested in the poetics of disorientation that undergird the works of Chantal Akerman and Mona Hatoum. The poetics of disorientation that embed the aesthetics and narratives of Akerman’s avant-garde film, *News from Home* (1977), and Hatoum’s uncharacteristically autobiographical video installation, *Measures of Distance* (1988) blur the demarcated lines of national, generic and stylistic boundaries. This paper furthermore highlights the function of autobiographical content in decoding the screen as a canvas of the exile’s liminal space – one which oscillates between the imaginary homeland of the past and the host country of the present. Autobiographical landscaping, together with the avant-garde aesthetics in each of these works, function to critique how dominant cinema, in its representations of migration, eschews the spatio-temporal complexities of migration. In appropriating avant-garde aesthetics, these films allow for the spectator to make sense of, and to experience the migrant’s spatio-temporal disorientation, while at the same time unmake the

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boundaries of the Orient/Occident, past/present, there/here, private/public, self/Other which are no longer seen as lines of demarcation, but instead points of contact.

Keywords: film studies, migration, accented cinema, aesthetics.

Introduction: “Every separation is a link”

In *Mediating Mobility* Steffen Köhn asserts that migration is “not only a movement in space, but essentially a movement in time” (109). When one moves from one place to another, they must reconfigure their temporal orientation in both a literal sense – adjusting to a new time zone – and, in a metaphysical sense. The migrant’s orientation of past, present, and future is no longer experienced in a linear fashion, as the borders that distinguish the past, present, and future are blurred. Upon discovering traces of their past in their present, migrants are teleported to the past through their senses. The scent of burning joss sticks and incense can trigger memories of living in a cramped 450 square foot apartment located nearby a Buddhist temple. A whiff of freshly baked bread can bring back memories of the *gai daan zhai*,¹ one used to buy on the way back home from elementary school. The sense of familiarity upon hearing one’s local dialect in a foreign place can take one back to a place that they have chosen, or had no other choice but to leave behind. The migrant’s past bleeds into the lived realities of their present, which in turn affect the way they envision their future.

Belonging, in Ranajit Guha’s formulation, is “nothing other than temporality acted upon and thought – and generally speaking, lived – as being with others in shared time” (4-5). If belonging is temporal, then in which temporal configuration does the migrant find themselves? What are the different configurations of time that exist? Is it possible to speak of a temporal configuration wherein the past, present, and future coalesce into a single stream of temporality? Robert Throop, in his study of phenomenological approaches to anthropology, builds upon Heidegger’s notion of memory’s ‘deep temporality’² to propose four forms of temporal orientation that structure the experience of self and the world:

- (1) an orientation to the present moment that consists of unfulfilled protentions as open anticipations toward an indeterminate future; (2) an explicit future orientation that consists of imaginal anticipations of a determinate future that are predicated upon residues of past experience that emerge, as [Cheryl] Mattingly points out (155), ‘even in the midst of action’; (3) a retrospective glance that entails the plotting of beginnings, middles and ends over the already elapsed span of a delimited field of experience; and (4) the subjunctive casting of possible futures and even possible pasts, across the ‘fluid space between a past and a future’.
- (Throop 234)

Throop’s proposal, which serves as the major theoretical impetus of this paper, puts forward a configuration of time as heterogeneous³. It is worthwhile to examine the ways in

which these multiple streams of temporality offer insight into how our existence as humans is structured. Particularly how these streams of temporality are simultaneously embodied in the experience of the migrant. How then, is this heterogenous account of time represented in contemporary narratives of migration?

Accented filmmakers, according to Hamid Naficy, as products of “dual postcolonial displacement and postmodern or late scattering,” use interstitial modes of production to critique dominant Hollywood industries, and are thus able to encode the resulting “tensions of marginality and difference” through their appropriation of various film styles and genres (11). In re-claiming the means of reproduction, the accented filmmaker’s liminal position in both society and the film industry are imprinted onto the cinematic texture of their films. Chantal Akerman’s *News from Home* (1977) and Mona Hatoum’s *Measures of Distance* (1988) exemplify this. Akerman, a Belgian filmmaker who moved to New York in the 1970s, is known for her idiosyncratic approach to cinema. Influenced by European art cinema, her works critique Hollywood’s fixation on plot by focusing instead on elements such as visual syntax. Like Akerman, Hatoum migrated in the mid-1970s, however her decision to leave her hometown in Beirut, Lebanon was not out of choice. She was already studying in London at the Byam Shaw School of Art when she decided to settle down there knowing she could no longer return home in the midst of the Lebanese civil war.

Akerman and Hatoum’s distinct experiences of dislocation clearly undergird the narratives and aesthetic features of their works. Film scholars have discussed how Akerman’s *News from Home* offered insight into the feminine desire and relationships (Cerne 2002, Walsh 2004), urban space and psychogeographic mapping in film studies (Barker 2003; Wasielewski 2009; White 2010), minimalism as an avant-garde aesthetic (Marguiles 1996), and even on mourning (Pucill 2006). *Measures of Distance* has also garnered critical response from feminist scholars (Kamm 2004; Morra 2007; Kiani 2018) as well as migration scholars and postcolonial theorists (Said 2000, Jabri 2001, Westmoreland 2009). While much research has been done on these films individually, there is a lack of critical scholarship on how these films exemplify what Jonathan Rosenbaum posits is the phenomenon of “global synchronicity,”⁴ that is “the simultaneous appearance of the same apparent taste, styles and/or themes in separate parts of the world, without any signs of these common and synchronous traits having influenced one another – all of which suggest a common global experience that has not been adequately identified” (61). In this case, the global experience Rosenbaum describes is the “asynchronous, transversal flows” of migration that have replaced the unidirectional, linear movement of migration marked by the dislocation from a place of origin, and eventual settlement in a host country. At this point it becomes important to consider how their stories are able to live beyond their immediate moment through artistic representation. How can the liminal experiences of accented filmmakers be captured in a way that strikes a balance between cultural production that is not rooted to

broader socio-historical realities – war, xenophobic immigration policies, and the like – and its over-historicization?

Dis/orienting Borders through Avant-garde

Embedded in their liminality is a nostalgia for a particular space and time of the past which they find themselves unable to return to, given the exigencies of the present. This nostalgic yearning constitutes what Naficy refers to as the “accented structures of feeling,”⁵ which are rooted in Akerman, Hatoum, and by and large accented filmmakers’ “profound experiences of deterritorialization” (26-27). Within each of the films in question, exists a multiplicity of languages, cultures, spaces, and times. Akerman’s film and Hatoum’s video installation, through their self-reflexive juxtaposition of multiple languages, cultures, spaces, and times are able to capture the multisitedness and heterogeneity of time that problematizes realist representations of the migrant experience. In their films, the referent of the homeland is at once present and absent, reflecting an unwillingness to return, on part of Akerman; and an impossibility to return, on part of Hatoum. A dialectic of fear and desire in relation to recapturing the homeland emerges from these structures of feeling, reminiscent of what Fred Pfeil notes on the experience of postmodern art wherein there exists: “a very unstable play between a primal delight and primal fear, between two simultaneous versions of the primary aggressive impulse, that which seeks to incorporate the world into itself and that which struggles to prevent its own engulfment. This dialectic is the postmodern ‘structure of feeling’” (386).

There exists within these filmic texts, elements of this postmodern play of signification vis-à-vis the homeland as that which is at once present and absent. Through their avant-gardist experimentation of form Akerman and Hatoum eschew dominant cinema’s problematic depictions of migration that are typically presented in binaries. The postmodern play of signification, as well as their distinct uses of intertextuality and voice-over destabilise migration’s linear timeline of deciding to leave, the movement out of an original homeland, and subsequent settlement. By appropriating aspects of both the avant-garde and postmodern traditions, the processes of signification in Akerman and Hatoum are “opened up... to questioning, [and] reflection” on the problematic binaries of migration produced in mainstream narratives (Turim 5). Their works propose instead an asynchronous, out-of-sync⁶ movement that is incompatible with the linear timeline of migration that is structured by a departure from a place of origin, and the subsequent settlement in a host country.

Avant-garde allows the subaltern not only to speak, or to be heard, as per Hamid Naficy’s re-conceptualisation of the Spivakian question, but moreover reflect on its own liminality. Jeffrey Skoller points to how avant-garde “aesthetics of film form, style, genre, and their conventions are an effect of historically determined social processes,” in this case, migration, which produces dislocatory structures of feeling particularly that of a nostalgia

that marks a loss of home (547). This paper puts forward the ways in which avant-garde bears the burden of representation in its mediation of an out-of-sync movement. *News from Home* and *Measures of Distance*, in their ability to capture the disorienting spatio-temporal limbo migrants find themselves trapped in, provide antidotes to dominant cinema's "toxin of routine," and in so doing, dis/orients the complexities of migration (Vertov 20).

Avant-garde, as discussed throughout this paper, transforms representation into a site of questioning by blurring demarcated boundaries of style, narrative and genre. Like many interrelated movements of the 1920s within but not limited to film, art, and literature, there has been much dispute amongst scholars regarding the definition and scope of avant-garde cinema. A good place to begin would be with the French impressionists of the 1920s – Abel Gance, Germain Dulac, and Louis Delluc, to name a few – whose main preoccupation was to make film an art form. Typically associated with the emergence of an infrastructure that promoted film criticism, through the creation of "cine-clubs, film journals, [and] critics," these filmmakers were also seen as the first to explore "film as a means of representation and not simply as a medium of storytelling" (O'Pray 10). At the heart of my argument lies the question: how does avant-garde's emphasis on film as a means of representation – as opposed to simply being a reaction to, or fundamentally opposed to Hollywood narrative cinema – compel audiences to reflect and be complicit in the construction of meaning? Recalling Simone Weil's description of two prisoners communicating through a wall which separates them, avant-garde is that which conceptualises every separation as a link. In mirroring the migrant's spatio-temporal disorientation on the cinematic screen, these avant-garde films invite the audience to decode the screen as a canvas of the filmmakers' liminality. The films thus become engaged in a deconstruction, a sort of unmapping, wherein the demarcated borders between the past/present, there/here, private/public, self/Other are transformed into points of contact, signifying a shared time, space, and experience.

As avant-garde accented films Akerman's *News from Home* and Hatoum's *Measures of Distance* act as distinct translations⁷ – as opposed to representations – of the same experience: a spatio-temporal disorientation as a result of dislocation. In appropriating avant-garde aesthetics, these films allow for the spectator to make sense of, and to experience the migrant's spatio-temporal disorientation, while at the same time unmake the boundaries of the Orient/Occident, past/present, there/here, private/public, self/Other. These boundaries are no longer seen as lines of demarcation, but instead points of contact. The migrant's liminality is established through visual markers of their dislocation. These visual markers demonstrate the impact of dislocation on the fabric of these film's narratives which are driven by competing forces of the desire to "recapture the homeland" and the fear of accepting one's inability to return to it. Despite the dominance of vision in cinema, attention should also be given to non-visual aspects of cinema of which just as poignantly translate the experience of spatio-temporal dislocation. The non-visual elements of the films

in question, specifically the combination of intertextuality and voice-over, are pronounced by the fear/desire dialectic, a manifestation of a three-fold nostalgic longing: on part of the diegetic characters who reflect that of the filmmakers' longing, and finally, the spectator who experiences the yearning as a result of projecting themselves onto the diegesis. The sense of disorientation engendered as a result of the avant-garde accented aesthetics in Akerman's film and Hatoum's video installation, allow for a cinematic representation of the liminality of dislocation thus crystallising, in a Deleuzian sense the complex spatio-temporal experience of dislocation.

Visual markers of dislocation: Film Syntax

The filmmakers' liminality is established through the film's visual markers of their dislocation. These visual markers embody the effects of dislocation on the fabric of the film's narratives which are driven by competing forces of desire and fear – the desire to “recapture the homeland” and the accompanying fear of accepting one's inability to return to it. It is these competing forces which constitute Naficy's accented structures of feeling, rooted in the experience of deterritorialisation. To fully understand the ways in which this liminal space of deterritorialisation allows for the avant-gardist negotiation of the boundaries of genre and style, it is necessary to decode the screen as a canvas of liminal space which oscillates between the imaginary homeland of the past and the host country of the present. This spatio-temporal configuration echoes Mikhail Bakhtin's chronotope⁸ which, when applied to accented cinema, allow us to understand how films encode transitional sites that “link the inherited space-time of the homeland to the constructed space-time” of deterritorialisation (Naficy 152). Madina Tlostanova adds another layer of understanding to the Bakhtinian border chronotope by suggesting it is seen through the lens of Quijano's coloniality of power. In doing so, she argues that there exists a condition of transcultural subjectivity

that of that of restless non-belonging and a specific double consciousness, which generate complex relations with time and space and work for the creation of imperial/colonial chronotope ... characterized by in-between-ness, ... the constant state of transit, non-finality, parallel deterritorialization and dehistoricization (i.e. falling out of space and time) – in short, by everything that Salman Rushdie called ‘being elsewhere.’ (406)

This transcultural subjectivity which is in this case reflective of the filmmakers' liminality, manifests in the narratives of longing and nostalgia in the films' narrative fabric.

Reminiscent of a travelogue, *News from Home* engages in a cinematic mapping of what Ivone Marguiles calls the “hyperrealist everyday” that embodies the dual impulse of desire and fear characteristic of accented structures of feeling. Throughout the film, the camera acts as a modern-day flâneur, capturing everyday street scenes through mobile framing and its static shots of New York's pavements, subway stations and streets filmed in transport. In its

mapping of the city, the camera blurs the boundaries between private and public memories, as a voice-over which is evidently her own, reads out letters from her mother accompanies the visual track. Dwelling in the silence, the film creates a sense of the nondramatic, eschewing dramatic pauses typical of Hollywood films. One of the sequences wherein the accented structures of feeling are most poignantly depicted is the static shot taken inside a subway train (Figure 1). The camera is placed in the middle of the cabin, facing towards the head of the train, capturing passengers seated on the left and the right.

Figure 1. Chantal Akerman, *News From Home*, 1977.

Upon realising that they are being filmed, not simply by anyone, but by an outsider, passengers react with discomfort. While some continue to stare, others leave the subway car. The passengers gaze scornfully back into the camera, revealing Akerman's ambiguous relationship with New York. Akerman is indeed a stranger in New York, and her failed attempts to assimilate into a city that will never acknowledge her as its own underscores the confusion, loneliness and longing that undergirds the experience of dislocation.

Akerman's appropriation of a slow cinema aesthetic, encoded in the film's *mise-en-scène*, constitutes what Naficy refers to as the "open" cinematic form. This combination situates Akerman and her mother within the setting, enabling the spectator to become aware of the migrant's temporal dislocation. A striking instance of such is the final ten-minute tracking shot of New York, wherein the camera is placed on the Staten Island Ferry. It gazes into the concrete jungle which, after a few minutes materialises into New York's cityscape, then slowly fades away into the mist (Figure 2).

The ten-minute tracking shot demonstrates avant-garde's ability to represent the temporal complexities of migration. A few seconds into the tracking shot, the camera does

Figure 2. Chantal Akerman, *News From Home*, 1977.

not cut to a new scene, but lingers with its gaze fixed upon the city's fading skyline until the end of the film. This appropriation of slow cinema aesthetics is Akerman's way of sculpting in time, allowing spectators to project themselves into the diegesis and bask in "a present that passes and a past that is preserved," what Deleuze refers to as time appearing in itself (85). Deleuze singles out this specific operation of time in modern cinema as the crystal image. Building upon Bergson's understanding of pure duration, which is how "[t]ime splits itself, in every future moment, into the actual (the pure, immediate perception), and the virtual (memory or imagination)," he argues that the crystal image is when the actual image and the virtual image coalesce

... the crystal constantly exchanges the two distinct images which constitute it, the actual image of the present which passes and the virtual image of the past which is preserved: distinct and yet indiscernible, and all the more indiscernible because distinct, because we do not know which is one and which is the other. This is unequal exchange, or the point of indiscernibility, the mutual image. The crystal always lives at the limit, it is itself the vanishing limit between the immediate past which is already no longer and the immediate future which is not yet... (85).

In capturing the present and the past that is slipping away through this crystal-image, Akerman allows spectators to engage in a suturing of multiple temporal worlds to experience "the present retroactively by means of a nostalgically reconstructed past" (Naficy 153). However, as spectators are sutured into the narrative, they discover that attempting to synchronise the multiple temporal worlds of the migrant's past and present is futile. Even though they are given the opportunity to re-negotiate the liminal spaces of deterritorialisation through the shared gaze of the camera, they are forced to experience the

disorientation engendered by a migrant's seeming inability to belong to the hostland, or to return to the imaginary homeland. Avant-garde's compatibility in expressing the spatio-temporal configuration of deterritorialisation – an experience likened to the Bergsonian *durée* wherein the “past and the present are constantly ... coalescing,” arguably render it an appropriate response to the “rupture” of displacement and a reaction to migration understood in binaries of migration and settlement (Gbazoul).

The insurmountable distance between the exile and their imaginary homeland is what undergirds the fear/desire dialectic – engendered as a result of one's inability to return home – that is imbued in the accented structures of feeling Hatoum's *Measures of Distance*. Like Akerman, Hatoum conceives this insurmountable distance by using the screen to embody multiple layers of time. Throughout the film, intimate photographs of Hatoum's mother, which were taken during a brief visit to Beirut in the midst of the civil war, fade into each other. At the beginning of the film, it is unclear what the photographs depict because of the low-lighting. As each photograph fades into the next, the composition captures what appears to be a close-up of several body parts until eventually, the naked body of Hatoum's mother becomes visible (Figure 3 and 4).

These still photographs of Hatoum's mother are what Laura Marks refers to as “recollection objects” which embody fragments of a past that is only accessible through memories (81). As cathected images of the past articulated in the present, these photographs encapsulate the conflict between what Werner Sollors has termed “descent relations” which emphasise “bloodline and ethnicity,” and “consent relations, [which] [stress] self-made ... affiliations (qtd. in Naficy 15). In the act of remembering a past that is constantly slipping away from her, Hatoum blurs the boundaries between being/becoming. While the film may be seen as an attempt to recover her Palestinian roots through the cathected image of her mother, the sense of disorientation that it engenders through its streams of temporality can also be understood as an attempt to capture the accented filmmaker's process of becoming. As a result of the Lebanese Civil War, Hatoum settled down in London in 1975, the prospect of her returning home in the midst of war being bleak. The disorienting experience of watching *Measures of Distance* makes sense vis-a-vis the aforementioned diegetic information. It thus becomes evident through this disorientation how Hatoum, and by and large accented filmmakers are “subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power” (Hall 35). Apart from images of her mother's naked body, the superimposition of Arabic script serves as another layer of time that marks Hatoum's spatio-temporal displacement from Beirut, and beyond that, her Palestinian roots.

Superimposed onto the images of her mother is what appears to be a handwritten Arabic on paper. Even without extradiegetic information, it is logical for the spectator to assume that the handwritten Arabic constitutes different parts of the letters her mother has written to her. This corresponds to the spoken Arabic as well as Hatoum's translations of that which

Figure 3. Mona Hatoum, *Measures of Distance*, 1998.

Figure 4. Mona Hatoum, *Measures of Distance*, 1998.

is heard in the voice-over. The written Arabic is comparable to the photographs which are trapped in the eternal realm of the past. Moreover, when layered onto the intimate images of her mother, the Arabic script acts as a layer of linguistic resistance against the orientalist gaze. By superimposing and serialising photographs and handwritten letters which, individually, preserve moments in the past, and by migrating them to a cinematic screen, these objects are

given a momentum that mimics the Bergsonian *durée*. The effect of the superimposition is two-fold: as the photographs and handwritten Arabic fade into each other all throughout the entirety of the film, spectators experience the sensation of, to reiterate Deleuze's assertion, a present that is passing and a past that is being preserved (82). However, within this configuration of time, a sense of disorientation is further engendered, one that encapsulates the dialectic of fear and desire. Vivian Sobchack, in her discussion of the ontological nature of the photograph argues how it, in

its conquest of temporality and its conversion of time's dynamism into a static and essential moment ... constructs a space one can hold and look at, but in its conversion to an object to behold that space becomes paradoxically thin, insubstantial, and opaque. It keeps the lived body out even as it may imaginatively catalyze – in the parallel but dynamically temporalized space of memory or desire – an animated drama. [...] it is irrevocably filled 'with loss, with pastness, and with death, its meanings and value intimately bound within the structure and aesthetic and ethical investments of nostalgia (144).

What undergirds the superimposed text and images is the longing and nostalgia for a home one is unable to return to. Despite the presence of the past that is continuously actualised through this thread of images delicately woven into each other, Hatoum's work cannot be inhabited in the present. The photographs and handwritten script are therefore the visual markers which measure the distance between Hatoum and the homeland she has lost.

Tactile Optics in the Accented Avant-Garde

Despite the dominance of vision in cinema, attention should also be given to non-visual aspects of cinema which just as poignantly translate the experience of spatio-temporal dislocation. The non-visual elements of the films in question, specifically the combination of intertextuality and narrative voice-over, are pronounced by the fear/desire dialectic, a manifestation of a three-fold nostalgic longing: on part of the diegetic characters who reflect that of the filmmakers' longing, and finally, the spectator who experiences the yearning as a result of projecting themselves onto the diegesis. To understand how non-visual elements of avant-garde accented cinema are able to translate the complex spatio-temporal experience of dislocation, it is important to first and foremost establish how spectators are able to engage and therefore experience with ... as it is presented to them. Our senses act as "vehicles of memory," through which feelings of dislocation and displacement can be intensified (Marks 201). Naficy explains how even the smallest "tactile visions" are able to transport us to a different time and space:

"A particular fragrance on a hillside, a stolen glance in a restaurant, a body brush in a crowded street, a particular posture by a passenger in an elevator, a flash of memory during daily conversations, the sound of familiar words in one's native

tongue heard from an adjoining car at a red traffic light—each of these sensory reports activates private memories and intensifies the feeling of displacement...” (28)

These tactile visions of the past, which signify the memories, faces, and places one has left behind, are contemplated in the present on the cinematic screen, what Naficy calls a film’s “tactile optics.” In Akerman and Hatoum’s works, the tactile optics constitute the combined use of intertextuality – in a sense that they both incorporate letters written from their mothers – and narrative voice-over, which effectively juxtapose multiple spaces, times, voices, and narratives. This juxtaposition allows filmmakers to project their experience of dislocation onto the cinematic surface, while activating what Marks calls the private sense memories of spectators, allowing them to recall not only the sights, but the sounds of places and times that they are dislocated from. Moreover, their use of autobiographical landscaping establishes a link between the filmmakers’ liminal subjectivity and the space around them. To fully understand how autobiographical content is manifested in Akerman and Hatoum’s works, it is necessary to decode the screen as a canvas of liminal space, which oscillates between the imaginary homeland of the past and the host country of the present. Film critic Ivàn Álvarez, builds upon Antonio Weinrichter’s argument that filmmakers, particularly “the documentary maker[s] set [themselves] up as a character, as well as an active annunciator,” asserting that autobiographical landscaping entails a double movement: “first inwards, to the filmmaker’s personality and identity, and then outwards, to his or her historical context.” (89). Through the epistolary structure and elliptical narrative in *News from Home* and *Measures of Distance*, Akerman and Hatoum set themselves up as both characters and active enunciators, echoing Álvarez’s double movement.

The soundtrack of *News from Home* constitutes an intermittent voice-over of letters from her mother in Belgium against the ambient sounds of the New York cityscape. Based on extradiegetic information, these letters are read aloud by Akerman in French. From the moment spectators hear the narrator’s voice-over, they are already made aware of the film’s linguistic accent which builds a bridge between the American routes she has chosen and her Belgian roots. Building upon Taghi Modarressi’s poignant explanation of what it is to write with an accent, Akerman’s decision to read in her mother tongue loads the cinematic surface with “messages from [her] cultural heritage,” that create a sense of familiarity for spectators who are unfamiliar with Akerman’s background (9). The film’s visual surface, which is predominantly what drives Hollywood narratives forward, moves to the background, while the auditory surface is brought to the foreground. The voice-over narration highlights two things: firstly, the film’s non-linearity; and secondly, through the epistolary structure of the film’s soundtrack, the multiple layers of time embedded in the cinematic surface. Four streams of temporality can be identified throughout the film: the past wherein Akerman’s mother writes her the letters, the past wherein Akerman receives them, the past wherein she records her voice-over narration of those letters and wherein she captures shots of 1976 New

York, and finally the cinematic present wherein spectators watch the film. These streams of temporality endow the film with a heteroglossic quality. Another aspect that contributes to the film's heteroglossia is its omission of the narrator's identity. Without access to extradiegetic information, spectators are left to speculate the identity of the narrator. This omission creates a slippage between speaker and voice, thus disorienting dominant cinema's strict alignment of speaker and voice. Through this disorientation, spectators are made aware of the plurality of voices, and therefore of different times and spaces neatly interwoven into the film's narrative fabric. As Akerman reads aloud her mother's letters, her mother's presence is materialised in the present. It is these mundane events her mother reports to her, these "shards of memory" that constitute the *news from home*, that are endowed with the "numinous qualities," required for her to reconstruct her present through her past, as well as her past through her present (Rushdie 12).

The juxtaposition moreover allows her to paint a self-portrait of her life in New York as a response to her mother's letters. Painfully mundane, the letters addressed to Akerman are composed of trivial accounts of her family's day-to-day experiences, advice from her mother, and questions about her life in New York. Akerman's detached reading of her mother's letters is often drowned by the mellow rumbling of the NYC subway, or the subtle noises of midday traffic. The discord between these two soundtracks evokes the rupture of Akerman from her mother, who signifies her Belgian roots, as well as the disconnect between Akerman and New York city. It elicits nostalgia for a place left behind, capturing the experience of being trapped in a spatiotemporal limbo, where one's sense of belonging hinges on the border between displacement and emplacement. As part of the second generation of Auschwitz, Akerman expresses in a 2010 interview how she is "in exile all the time" (Adams). This permanent sense of displacement is brought to light through the physical absence of Akerman and her mother in the film. Not only does this engender a sense of disorientation that hinders the spectator from identifying with the speaker, but moreover it embodies the accented filmmaker's fragmented subjectivity. Dislocation has an effect on the way the human body experiences reality, that manifests in a disunity between both sides of the phenomenology divide. In her article, "Toward a phenomenology of nonfictional film experience," Sobchack argues how the human body is experienced externally and internally. The former, via "photography, film, and the way other people react," whereas the latter through "our own vision, organs of balance and proprioception" (qtd. in Naficy 28). The disorientation experienced by spectators as a result of the slippage between speaker and voice, as well as their inability to identify with the speaker, mirrors Akerman's out-of-sync subjectivity and her inability to merge the spatio-temporal worlds of her Belgian past and American present into one. The letters become a cathected image of a home she can never truly return to, signifying an impossibility to return to Belgium and at the same time, a fear associated with the impossibility of finding home in New York.

Although Hatoum's *Measures of Distance* bears striking similarities with the epistolary structure of Akerman's film, the effects of its multivocality and voice-over narration manifest in different ways as a result of the distinct experiences. Originally from Beirut, Lebanon, Hatoum was born into a Palestinian family. In pursuit of a career in arts, Hatoum visited London in 1975, the same year the Lebanese civil war broke out, inadvertently forcing her into exile. Like *News from Home*, Hatoum's video installation features her own discontinuous reading of letters from her mother who lives in Beirut. As opposed to the letters Akerman receives from her mother, the letters Hatoum receives highlights the experience of exile as it addresses her mother's "deep yearning for the [civil] war to end" so that their family could return to the "good old days" (Hatoum). Her mother's words engender a strong undercurrent of nostalgia for a home they can no longer return to, an imaginary homeland. It is possible at this point to question whether the imaginary home is pre-war Beirut, or somewhere else. One of the last few letters answers this question, in which her mother recalls her personal experience of displacement from Palestine, which she describes as "being stripped naked of [her] very soul" (Hatoum). Hatoum's inclusion of this letter enables spectators to understand how the corporeal wounds of dislocation can potentially scar the fabric of one's soul which directly has an impact on the accented filmmaker's subjectivity. Her mother's words paint a portrait of the experience of a second generation exile. By reading her mother's words aloud, Hatoum is recounting memories and emotions trapped in the realm of the past, and in doing so reflects on her own liminal subjectivity. The inhospitable nature of the host countries Hatoum, her mother, and those of the Palestinian diaspora have fled to contrast starkly to the "prosperous land ... that many Palestinians ... remember ... the Palestine before the creation of Israel," the homeland upon which their identity as Palestinians are constructed (Naficy 167). In actualising her mother's words, she conjures the presence of her mother in the present moment. This multiplicity of temporalities creates a sense of disorientation for the spectator whose configuration of time cannot be synchronised with the out-of-sync temporal configurations of the diegetic characters and Hatoum herself. The act of spectatorship is hence transformed as spectators are now forced to experience time in a nonlinear fashion and dwell in the liminality of deterritorialisation.

Unlike in Akerman's film wherein the voice-over narrator reads out the letters in French, the original language her mother has written them in, the voice-over narration in Hatoum's video installation consists of her reading out an English translation of the original Arabic script, as well as a recorded track of the original Arabic. Once again, there is no explicit mention of whether the narrator speaking in Arabic is her mother reading aloud the letters, but it is logical for spectators to assume so. Here, the multilinguality functions to signify the loss of her assumed mother tongue. Although the Arabic calligraphic script remains physically present throughout the film, it only occupies a liminal space, as it is superimposed onto the photographs of her mother. Moreover, the voice-over track of the letters read in

their original Arabic are often drowned out by Hatoum's English translation. This echoes Naficy's assertion that the "gradual deterioration" or "potential loss" of language is "one of the greatest deprivation of exile," as it is that which "shapes not only individual identity but also regional and national identities prior to displacement" (24). In layering still photographs of Hatoum's mother with the calligraphic Arabic text and the recorded reading of the Arabic original that is slightly drowned out by a narration of an English translation of the letters, the screen effectively embodies different layers of time. Hatoum is therefore able to crystallise the accented filmmaker's asynchronous experience of the present, which is always perceived in retrospection. Hence, engendering a disorientating sense of hopelessness in face of the insurmountable distance between the exile and their imaginary homeland.

Conclusion

Dudley Andrew's conceptualisation of world cinema as that which "brings us precisely to the Earth, on which many worlds are lived and perceived concurrently" ties together what this paper attempts to address, that is, the counter-hegemonic nature of Akerman's film and Hatoum's video installation, and by and large, avant-garde accented films (21). Through their avant-garde experimentation with form, *News from Home* and *Measures of Distance* participate in a type of autobiographical landscaping that establishes a link between the liminal space they occupy in their host countries—as well as in the industry – and the space around them. Moreover, the accented structures of feeling that engender the fear/desire dialectic conjure up a sense of nostalgia, rooted in the hopelessness of the impossibility of return to a homeland trapped in the realm of the past, as well as a desire to somehow recapture it in the lived moments of their present. In *News from Home*, these accented structures of feeling come to light in the cinematic depiction of the hyperrealist everyday and her appropriation of slow cinema aesthetics. On the other hand, Hatoum's layering of the Arabic script of her mother's letters, the intimate photographs of her mother that exude a sense of vulnerability, a reading of the letter in both Arabic and English in the voice-over narration embody the heterogeneity of time which the migrant experiences.

What all this unravels is a portrait of life that transcends the individual experience of migration. It offers a portrait of life that takes into consideration the complex experience of migration that is entrenched in global socio-political realities of imperialism, capitalism and globalization. In a world where politics has adopted an increasingly anti-migrant rhetoric, it is important to see how these films give a voice to the otherwise disenfranchised. Avant-garde accented cinema invites audiences to reflect, together with Akerman and Hatoum on how the migrant's liminal subjectivity comes into being. Hence, their works function as crystals of time, allowing spectators to dis/orient boundaries by seeing through the migrant's fragmentary vision, and to experience, through the lens of the camera, the asynchronous spatio-temporal configuration of migration. In doing so, avant-garde accented films dismantle

mainstream media's metanarratives that present the migrant's experience as one-dimensional and linear.

End Notes

1. Hong Kong egg waffles.
2. Influenced by Husserl's discourse on the phenomenology of time as dynamic, as a successive 'series of now points'.
3. See also Bal 211 for a thorough discussion into the heterogeneity of time.
4. Appadurai's notion of the mediascape complements Rosenbaum's hypothesis. See Appadurai 35.
5. Building upon Raymond William's notion of structures of feeling, Naficy argues that "these private social experiences" are saliently expressed in these films' "chronotopical configurations of the homeland as utopian ... and of exile as dystopian" (Naficy 26).
6. See Hernández-Navarro for more on the "out-of-sync" experience in relation to video art.
7. Naficy cites Hicks' understanding of 'border writing' in his formulation of border films which to him are characterised by "multifocality, multilinguality, asynchronicity, critical distance, fragmented/multiple subjectivity, and transborder amphibolic characters or 'shifters'" (32).
8. Chronotopes understood here as the places where "the knots of narrative are tied and untied" (Bakhtin 250).

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