

Duration in Vain

How time complicates meaning in the video art of Keren Cytter

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The manipulation of time is a critical component in the video art of Keren Cytter (b. 1977). Traditional, linear representations of time in cinema employ rules and structures that allow the viewer to assemble story and meaning. Cytter's domestic melodramas upend those structures by utilizing repeated dialog, looped events that continually recur in altered states, and deliberate chronological confusion. By changing our experience of time, Cytter questions the meaning ordinarily contained in language and interaction. This essay considers the reciprocal relationship between the structure of time and the assignment of meaning in two of Cytter's videos: *Something Happened*, 2007, and *Four Seasons*, 2009.

The cyclical renderings of time presented in Cytter's videos resemble the philosophical concept of eternal return. In the modern era, it was Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) who most notably expanded and considered this idea. Nietzsche considered how the conceptual weight and meaning of events is affected by imagining their endless repetition, the possibility of their infinite duration. Interspersed throughout the body of this essay are three segments that examine Nietzsche's theory of eternal return as an analogy for Cytter's artistic methods and their consequences.

Prelude: A roll of the dice

Who has not experienced a tragedy, an embarrassing social misstep, or even a foolish choice of words? The memories become tolerable over time as they fade into the past. Our lives run a course. They begin somewhere, they become what they become, and, ultimately, they end. This way of explaining time is a format: the customary, linear narrative. It is directional. Cinema often replicates this forward direction of time to establish a knowable relationship between events. One thing leads to another. Viewers understand the behavior of characters and the decisions they make based on the linear context of their existence. We assume a beginning, a becoming, and an ending. The linear trajectory of our experience of time largely dictates how meaning is constructed. If the trajectory of our experience were to change, would its meaning change as well?

Nietzsche's notebooks include a peppering of thoughts on a peculiar subject throughout the 1880s. He called it "eternal recurrence" or "eternal return." Imagine that time is infinite. In this infinity, all possibility of new events would have already been exhausted. All possible events would have already occurred in the infinite past. All events will occur again in the infinite future. Time is infinite, while possibility is finite. To illustrate this logic, Nietzsche uses the example of a dice game, likening events in time to a dice game that never ends.¹ There are a finite number of possibilities that will arise from a casting of the die. If that dice game never ended, not only would every combination be realized, but every combination of combination would recur over and over again. This, for Nietzsche, is a picture of reality we are unable to know due to our limited view of the actual infinite.

What if all the negative things that have happened to us – tragedies, embarrassments, missteps – were not set in the distance of a past? What if they recurred throughout infinite time? To be jilted by the same lover, again and again. To commit the same shameful crime,

1 Nietzsche 1880-1888, 549.

over and over. What would this thinking do to corresponding judgments of ourselves? What would become of regret or pride? What would become of legitimacy or authenticity?

This rethinking of the structure of time, if nothing else, ultimately yields a requisite rethinking of the characteristics of the things that time structures – events and relationships. As Milan Kundera puts it, “the idea of eternal return implies a perspective from which things appear other than as we know them: they appear without the mitigating circumstance of their transitory nature. This mitigating circumstance prevents us from coming to a verdict. For how can we condemn something that is ephemeral, in transit?”²

1. Consistent disagreement

It begins, something happens, it ends. The plot of *Something Happened* is simple: a man and a woman conduct an argument that ends in their deaths. Disagreement, thematic and textual, is at the heart of *Something Happened*, and it is a tool Cytter uses to deliberately complicate the viewer’s ability to interpret. The opening text plate of the video includes fitting examples of the types of disagreements that dominate *Something Happened*:

I told him “tell me the truth,” and he said “what truth?” and drew something hastily in his pad and showed me: a long, long train with a dark, thick cloudy smoke. And he is peeping out and waving goodbye with his handkerchief. I shot him between the eyes. He told me to prepare him the thermos for travel. I went to the kitchen and prepared the tea; I added the milk and the sugar and spilled it into the thermos. I screwed the cap on well. And later I came back to the working room. And then he showed me the drawing, and I took the gun from the drawer in his desk and shot him. I shot him between the eyes.³

First, the scene describes two people who are personally disagreeing with one another. Second, the text describes a disagreement that is verbal, linguistic, but indicative of a larger philosophical misunderstanding: “I told him ‘tell me the truth,’ and he said ‘what truth?’...” Finally, the characters repeat the text of the scene, but the second

2 Kundera 1984, 4.

3 Cytter 2007, 390.

version is different from the first. It's a disagreement the viewer only recognizes because of the repetition.

As the video begins, there is an argument taking place. Like many arguments which take place between intimate friends or lovers, perspective, point of view and intention take a prominent place at the center of whatever the driving issue of the particular argument might be. Viewers are figuratively and literally seeing from the man's perspective for a good part of this video. The camera is behind his shoulder, and we are hearing his voice. During this narration, the woman's voice is "not heard." As the man speaks, we see that the woman is moving her lips but she is mute. Yet, according to the Man, she is the one who is not listening:

Man: And if there is a chance that she does exist, and I'm not imagining her, maybe there's a chance that someone sees me. She was as scared as a sheep when she entered the room ... (Woman enters; she speaks but her voice is not heard) ... her words were more bitter than whiskey. I told her: "I will be with you all the time," but she didn't listen. Blind as a bat, she kept on wasting my time.⁴

What we see, what we hear, from whom we hear it, whose narration matches which visual perspective – all of these elements collide in overt disagreement. This disagreement challenges what is said and who says it, criteria which we typically use to verify intent and meaning.

Initially, Cytter creates confusion between personal and objective perspectives using small technical errors as well as classic cinematic devices like point of view. The technical confusions are poetic. Jacob Fabricius, in his introduction to the collection of scripts, "The Worst of Keren Cytter," identifies these small technical disagreements as one the most significant methods Cytter uses to deconstruct traditional narrative time. She "disrupts the compatibility between characters, image, and sound."⁵ Simply put, things fall out of sync.

About two minutes into the video, the woman says "Now start," and the first full repetition occurs.⁶ One sequence of events, the one

4 Cytter 2007, 390.

5 Fabricius 2015, 3.

6 Cytter 2007, 391.

favoring the man's perspective, has ended. The woman begins speaking through the fourth wall, as if from the director's point of view. By saying, "Now start," she emphasizes her exertion of control over the very progression of time. Our understanding of the emotional and psychological perspectives of these characters is inexorably tied to our understanding of their chronological perspectives, which Cytter shows are in stark disagreement.

The characters speak about roles and desire for an audience. They talk about themselves as if this exchange weren't real — as if it were a rehearsal for the real event, or a discussion of the script that they are in.

Man: Now, here I confess ... (He gets up, walks towards the window.) ... when she entered the room ... now enter to four.

Woman: One. Two. Three. Four...

Man: Her moves were like dancing, and her words seemed like singing, and her beauty was nature...and my nature was as cold as the gun she's holding.

Hand reaching into the drawer for gun.

Woman pointing gun at Man's back.

Woman: The stupid control. You once thought you had it. You lost it completely. You lost any part of this role.

Man: You looked so frustrated when I looked at you. I hope someone is watching us now.⁷

The deliberately restrained actors and their deadpan performances are critical. It is necessary that we recognize the characters' ineptitude so that we cultivate disbelief and begin to think outside of the story and into its modes of production. It is as much about the story as it is about the creation and fabrication of story and meaning. Every time we risk losing sight of that, cultivating our disbelief, it seems Cytter restarts the narrative or removes us from our involvement.

In *Something Happened*, there is clearly a syncopation issue between the timelines of video tracks and audio tracks — only occasionally do they line up. Likewise, there is a scripting issue. A disembodied voice

7 Cytter 2007: 392.

narrates and then becomes the speech of the actor, and then the actor's speech narrates or gives stage directions, like counting down to a mark. These words, associated with the distance of cinema, the distance that separates the action and the direction, are heard mingled with the conversation. All the while, jump cuts and lags interrupt viewers and keep them from being absorbed into the action of the scene.

The question becomes, which words are genuine? Which are artificial? Is there a difference? Cytter presents incompatibility as juxtaposition, as disagreement. How they direct one another becomes as poignant as a barbed retort. How they jab at one another becomes as removed as a stage direction. Furthermore, by calling the viewer's attention to the many levels of performance and production involved in the creation of the video, Cytter instigates a kind of metacognition. The subject, disagreement, becomes the method and the moral.

2. More than one dance

Cytter frequently structures time in a non-linear fashion that is both rhythmic and self-aware, and in doing so, complicates interpretation. These methods seem to reference dance as a point of artistic inspiration. In fact, thinking about Cytter's organization of time as a dance is very instructive. On a micro level, the repartee is a dance. On a macro level, the visual and auditory exchange of dominance is languid, oscillating. The actors, the cameras, the time progression all have a certain choreography, in that it is apparent that there is a cohesive and deliberate aesthetic moving rhythmically. In an interview with *Sleek Magazine*, Cytter cites a couple of minor influences that have relevance here: the works of Samuel Beckett and Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*.⁸

In *Something Happened*, the woman speaks often about control, which is certainly relevant to the practice of dance. It also has a lot to do with perspective. There's even a hook, a scene to which we

8 Perlson 2012.

return like a catchy chorus. She enters the door. She reaches for the gun. Rather than moving forward, time does a do-si-do. We circle and hook, expand and contract, always returning to certain points. She enters the door. She reaches for the gun.

This kind of directional movement happens in a very overt way in Beckett's play for television, *Quad I & II*, first broadcast as *Quadrat I & II* by the Süddeutscher Rundfunk in Germany on October 8, 1981. Several characters, distinguishable only by their colored robes, move about a square stage in an odd routine. They circle around, they come to the center, they return to the periphery, they reverse direction, and so on, all to frenetic, vaguely melodic percussion. In the second act, the mood is changed but the movement is the same. Only the sound of shuffling feet plays and the characters all wear colorless robes. Notably, Beckett reportedly said during rehearsals that 100,000 years pass between Acts I and II.⁹

The work is first remarkable in this context because of the nature of the movement of the dancers. It is cyclical, repetitive, and driven by time as well as place. One could say the same about the structure of *Something Happened*.¹⁰ The point would be to indicate, as I have, that the cyclical structure of time in *Something Happened* translates to a point of view on the content: namely, that the way in which events affect lives is inherently repetitive and mundane. The apparent relationship between Cytter's methods and motives relates directly to Beckett's artistic objectives in making his teleplays in the 1980s. He sought to use the structure of theater to "bore one hole after another" into language, revealing "something or nothing," it truly did not matter.¹¹ Hans Hiebel wrote that *Quadrat I & II*:

9 Herren 2000, 46.

10 What happens on small degree in *Something Happened* is developed further in a later work with a more obvious lineage to Beckett, Cytter's stage performance *Show Real Drama*, in which her characters move around a square almost exactly in the fashion of Beckett's in *Quadrat I & II*.

11 As quoted in Herren 2000, 43.

is built on the view that life consists of continuous repetitions of the same compulsive activities, and that we deceive ourselves if we believe in freedom of will, individuality, spontaneity, etc. All human beings are alike, all human activities resemble one another, everything is done "un-consciously"—for generations, for centuries.¹²

The score of *Something Happened* is Sergei Rachmaninov's "Piano Concerto #2." The early work of Rachmaninov was influenced by Tchaikovsky. The romantic, Romantic works of both composers lend themselves to the kind of immersive emotional experience that Cytter is referencing in *Something Happened*. In fact, in some ways she is overtly criticizing the fantastical narrative associated with such music by way of deconstruction, suggesting rather that narrative itself is a fantasy.

Not by coincidence, Rachmaninov's "Piano Concerto #2" features prominently in Billy Wilder's *Seven Year Itch* (1955). In the film, Richard Sherman, played by Tom Ewell, is weary of his marriage and falls for a woman whose name is unknown, played by Marilyn Monroe. Monroe's character is called The Girl in the script, just as Ruth Rosenfeld's character in *Something Happened* is called Woman. Similarities do not end there. Rachmaninov plays when Richard fantasizes about The Girl sauntering down a staircase and coming through a door into an apartment in *Seven Year Itch*, just as the woman enters the doorway of an apartment in *Something Happened*, initially to the man's narration and point of view.

By featuring Rachmaninov in *Something Happened*, Cytter is creating an intertextual dialog between the subjects and motivations of her characters and those featured in *Seven Year Itch*. This dialog is related to the fantasy conjured by the music. Likewise, Cytter is creating an inter-historical dialog. Classical music is, in a way, timeless, and altogether at odds with the aesthetics of her medium, video, the purpose of which is often to make images inexpensively and quickly. Not only that, but Cytter's video dances around outdated rituals of romance and relationships that are still in place today. Who is Cytter's Man if he is not a hopeless romantic when he gazes out his apartment window and recites poetry?

12 Hiebel 1993, 341.

3. The stupid delay

Near the end of *Something Happened*, the actors' fourth wall commentary on the production and pacing of the video proceeds from acknowledgement to a kind of criticism. The woman remarks on "the stupid delay:"

Woman: Look at us. Talking to tension, the circles, the delay, yes ... delay. (Man gets up from the chair and walks towards the window. Woman follows, pointing the gun.) ... The stupid delay, it's all not related to us. The moves lost their meaning, and these words are not mine.¹³

What is the stupid delay? What does it accomplish? The stupid delay, she says later, "separates actions from thoughts." The story is getting out of control. "You once thought you had it, you lost it completely."¹⁴ The woman's voice is falling literally out of sync. The voices are falling out of compatibility. Nothing really fits together at all anymore. This once tightly circling narrative, this disagreement between the characters, this chronological disagreement between the story and the stage directions, all starts to collapse. The stupid delay is emblematic of a hallmark of Cytter's practice: the depiction of high philosophical ideas using methods discordant in the concreteness of their realization.

The stupid delay here is a delay that "separates." The stupid delay creates and draws attention to a space of time. Who has never acted before thinking, or thought for far too long before acting on something? Cytter calls upon this disconnect between actions and thoughts. It is reflected in the timing of the video. The stupid delay is a lag in the time of the video, when some things move too quickly, and as a consequence other things have to play out-of-sync to catch up. It is a tongue-in-cheek acknowledgement of artificial elements in this conversation – the performance itself and the performance inherent in communicating. That artifice, as expressed through the delay, functions as a metaphor. The actual space of time between actions in *Something Happened* also points to a figurative space of time, a stupid delay that "separates actions from thoughts."

13 Cytter 2007, 393.

14 Cytter 2007, 392.

The stupid delay has a broader dimension as well. Throughout the video, the woman laments the circling and cycling of time, but does so most pointedly near the end.

Woman: I looked at the pasta and time ran back ... (Hand reaches in drawer for gun.) ... and then stopped. Time went back and forward and then stopped ... stopped. Yes, it looked like time had never stopped running ... except a delay, a tiny delay that separates actions from words ... now quiet.¹⁵

Here we have a crucial interpretation. All this looping of time never progresses beyond a certain point. It went back and forward and stopped. But stopping, it seems, according to the woman, might be a poor choice of words. Time, in fact, never stopped running, even though we were seeing the events repeat. The entire duration of what we have seen was perhaps just a tiny delay separating words from an action.

One interpretation could be that this cycling of time that we've witnessed was representative of a kind of mental action, a feverish, anxious analysis of serious events occurring entirely in the tiny delay before the end. The woman points the gun to her head and pulls the trigger. It clicks, the music stops, and she continues speaking, saying, "Now quiet. Now listen. These words are delaying my death..."¹⁶ At this point, the gun explodes and blood sprays on the wall. The protracted mental time was what we observed, disconnected from the instant of bodily time it took to pull the trigger. All we saw was, perhaps, a kind of processing.

This ending segment is testament to the importance of time in Cytter's work. When the woman stops rhapsodizing poetically about her past, she is reunited with her words. When we see her speaking and the words come out of her mouth, the separation is gone; we are present to her present. When her words and the time frames come together at the end, nostalgia transforms into clarity and the incompatibility is resolved. She acknowledges that the words, the thoughts were delaying her death. The personal narrative dominated the time

15 Cytter 2007, 394.

16 Cytter 2007, 396.

frame to such a degree that the final actions are subjected to an altogether unrealistic delay – and for what? What was accomplished in this dance-like extraction of the events that led to the woman’s death? No lessons were learned, no mistakes averted. The stupid delay is duration in vain.

Interlude: Sameness in difference

When Nietzsche wrote about eternal return, finality was an impossibility. His logic was that if time stretched infinitely, every state that could have been reached would have already been reached. Therefore, since there is currently no equilibrium, no final state, it has never been achieved, will never be achieved, and is impossible. Finality and totality are in opposition with the infinite. For Cytter, finality and totality are likewise suspicious. Repetition, elaboration, and exposition all prolong or transcend what should be finite or final. Time does not begin, happen, and end. Time moves backwards and forwards.

On June 10, 1887, Nietzsche sat down to his notebook and wrote, “One interpretation has collapsed; but because it was considered *the* interpretation it now seems as if there were no meaning at all in existence, as if everything were in vain.”¹⁷ Watching the man and the woman playact their perspectives in *Something Happened* creates something akin to Nietzsche’s sentiments. Hot passions, blandly delivered, over and over again from all possible angles don’t seem to suggest any kind of egalitarian principle in which all interpretation and points of view are rich and valuable. Rather, such things, such extreme positions, are greeted by their antithesis. Through repetition, difference becomes sameness. All was in vain. Elaboration only demonstrated limitation. This succession of opposites, for Nietzsche, creates distrust in meaning altogether.

Throughout Cytter’s body of work, a lofty philosophical understanding of the movement of people and time finds its successive

17 Nietzsche 1880–1888, 35.

opposite in her shockingly mundane subjects. When Nietzsche imagined eternal return, he paired duration without end, a cripplingly huge thought, with a kind of triviality. There is no crescendo in Nietzsche's eternal return. No punch line to be found. It is simply "existence as it is, without meaning or aim."¹⁸ Even though Cytter's videos are spiced with the high drama of death and action, the poignancy of their reception is rendered inert by their presentation – in the company of the ordinary and, to borrow a phrase from Nietzsche, "yet recurring inevitably without any finale of nothingness."¹⁹ According to Nietzsche, in eternal return, ideas are inevitably indistinguishable from their antithesis, and consequently, he critiques distinction.

4. Spaces of time

The presentation of time affects how language, interaction, and relationships are received. Time affects meaning, even if it is a persistent repetition promising antithesis. Our understanding of events is connected to their order, their frequency, the times at which we think about them, and the objects surrounding us when we do. In *Something Happened*, the woman "looked at the pasta and time ran back..." Pasta was a trigger. Pasta, smell, food, connected to memory, divulged it. Memory and time in our relationships are related. Another of Cytter's videos, *Four Seasons*, likewise elaborates on the structures of space and time that are capable of converting and adjusting how words and people communicate, and how value and meaning are constructed and dismantled.

Four Seasons is a much more complicated work than *Something Happened*. That becomes apparent very early. It begins with themes we might expect given the previous video. A woman enters a house, a room. There are indicators of violence, smoke, blood, and there is, of course, confusion. A man calls Lucy, named so in the script, by

18 Nietzsche 1880-1888, 35.

19 Nietzsche 1880-1888, 35.

another name, Stella. Cytter uses some of the same methods of deconstructing linear time and of blurring the distinction between the past, present, and future. In *Four Seasons*, Cytter abstracts time with architectural space (and the psychological residue often associated with it) by directly referencing Jorge Luis Borges, whose work exhibits similar themes.

Early in the video, a voiceover begins speaking about some foreboding and fantastical architecture. In the first few voiceovers, a man simply describes these structures: four walls equal in length and width, and “only God knows whether a ceiling connects them, or whether they stand bare, subject to the mercy of the heavens,” a hanging staircase with no end, whose steps grow so large they become floors.²⁰ Then, he proceeds to connect these architectural features to psychological ones, and makes a key reference to the people who created them, the “immortals.” Later, it enters the conversation between the man and Lucy:

Lucy: Please explain.

Man: There is nothing to explain. It was very clear to me last night, as it is clear today. They created structures...

Lucy: Who’s they?

Man: With no reason or meaning, out of boredom, they had no reason for shelter.²¹

Cytter’s inclusion of the “Immortals” is a reference to Borges’ 1949 short story *The Immortal*. It opens with a character speaking a slurry of languages, which is a feature of many of Cytter’s own films. After hearing from the multilingual, the narrator, Marcus Flaminius Rufus, sets out searching for a fabled river from which drinking grants immortality. This river supposedly flows near a city built and populated by the Immortals. After some unfortunate events leading to his capture, he escapes, followed closely by his captors, and ends up finding a city he presumes to be the Immortal City. He describes it in the text. The City is built on a stone plateau with “precipitous sides,” and

20 Cytter 2009, 194.

21 Cytter 2009, 199.

a black foundation with “not the slightest irregularity.” The walls were “invariant” and without a single door. He is “not certain how many chambers were there; [his] misery and anxiety multiplied them.”²²

Throughout the video, Lucy and the man move throughout rooms, up and down staircases. The architectural becomes the psychological, much like in Borges’ short story. Where in Borges writing we have an inescapable labyrinth, in Cytter’s video we have rooms that seem altogether of different times in the narrative of this couple, whatever it may be. The rooms, apparently laden with objects and memories of other times, circulate with the characters: a Christmas tree, a birthday dinner, a snowstorm. Where Marcus Rufus’ quest for immortality led him to a horrible maze with no possible end, the characters in *Four Seasons* seem to search for their identities within a surreal apartment which repeats the scenes that played out inside. There is a kind of immortality in *Four Seasons* too, immortality as inevitability, the inevitability that the events in the characters’ lives will define them, regardless of their present location in time.

The Garden of Forking Paths (1941) is another short story by Borges that has relevance to, if not the themes in *Four Seasons*, then Cytter’s approach to structuring time in the video. Set in the midst of a thrilling chase, Doctor Tsun, the pursued, eventually arrives at the residence of Doctor Albert, a scholar who studied the work of one of Tsun’s distinguished ancestors. The ancestor, Ts’ui Pên, is known for endeavoring to create two works, a vast and intricate labyrinth and a likewise vast and intricate book. Until the events of the *Garden of Forking Paths*, Tsun had known the book to be incoherent, and the labyrinth to be still undiscovered. Doctor Albert, however, is responsible for an integral realization. The labyrinth, the so-called garden of forking paths, was in fact the impenetrable text. The two works thought to be separate were one in the same.

Doctor Albert had entertained the idea of an infinite work of fiction prior to his epiphany. He imagined it in a cyclical fashion. Using the example of “1001 Nights,” he imagined that a never-ending text would be one that ends exactly where it began. Ts’ui Pên, however, imagined infinity differently in his masterwork. Doctor Albert explains a passage he discovered that proved key to his new understanding:

I lingered, naturally, on the sentence: *I leave to the various futures (not to all) my garden of forking paths*. Almost instantly, I understood: ‘the garden of forking paths’ was the chaotic novel: the phrase ‘the various futures (not to all)’ suggested to me the forking in time, not in space. A broad rereading of the work confirmed the theory. In all fictional works, each time a man is confronted with several alternatives, he chooses one and eliminates the others; in the fiction of the almost unfathomable Ts’ui Pên, he chooses – simultaneously – all of them. *He creates*, in this way, diverse futures, diverse times which themselves also proliferate and fork ... In the work of Ts’ui Pên, all possible outcomes occur ...²³

In such a work, it is worth mentioning, as Doctor Albert does, that no picture of the universe is outright false. It is merely incomplete, an incomplete picture of an actual infinity. In *Four Seasons*, the impression is exactly that. The “various futures” or various pasts of this structure seem to be presented to us in a surreal jumble to be sorted out and solved. How is such work possible when, alongside celebratory wine, we also see blood? When amidst a statement of love, we hear of indiscriminate violence?

5. Identity as a problem

Identity is a mystery that plays out over the course of *Four Seasons*. It begins with the confusion over whether the woman is Lucy or Stella, the neighbor or the lover, and continues throughout the video in the pair’s inscrutable and often contradictory conversations. As a result, we are bombarded with irreconcilable oppositions: kindness and cruelty, comfort and anxiety, truth and lies, intimacy and enmity, blood and wine, artifice and authenticity, even life and death. Each of these oppositions collapse because we witness them in concert with one

23 Borges 1941, 59.

another, interchangeably, as if Cytter knows no such differences, or as if the characters are having two different conversations.

At one point, the man tells Lucy, over the dinner table, about having loved her. In the same conversation, Lucy recounts to him the story of how he abused her so severely that she died.

Lucy and Man face each other over a table
with a cake between them.

Lucy: Stella, my name is ...
 Man: Stella, I have pain for ...
 Lucy: You told it to me before ...
 Man: I loved you then, and I love you ...
 Lucy: Now you pushed me ... head hit the floor so hard, and my skull cracked wide open ...²⁴

No one can be who they say they are in such a conversation. She is not a stranger, even if she's not Stella. He is not a lover if he could beat her so savagely and forget it. Those kinds of contradictions gain momentum in Cytter's unknowable time frame. How can we tell who someone is, how do we decipher truth from lies if we cannot distinguish the future from the past?

The non-linear time we are presented in *Four Seasons* creates a tension in the relationship between the characters. We are not just experiencing a chopped up timeline, but the characters seem to dwell within times which are clearly not the present. Alternate scenarios conjoin to create a portrait of their life that is not an outright fallacy, but each moment, each fragment is unavoidably incomplete.

One conclusion to be reached along this line of logic is that the idea of identity as a portrait made in a medium like video is likewise fragmented and incomplete. In addition, the very expansiveness of possibility, as indicated by the near constant presentation of irreconcilable juxtapositions in *Four Seasons*, necessitates that identity itself be viewed as a contradiction. Time, conjoined and confused, com-

24 Cytter 2009, 196.

municates meaning as such. Methods of attributing meaning are contingent upon a picture that is abstracted by linear time, not clarified by it, since linear time neglects the multitudes of possibility and actuality coexisting in each moment.

6. The direction of forgetting

Throughout *Four Seasons*, chronological ambiguity is reinforced through an oddly simple device – forgetting. Listing the occasions of forgetfulness could go on and on. Lucy insists in the beginning that she is not Stella, but his neighbor, and yet she knows where his towel is stored because she put it there. She forgets where her lighter is twice. It is in her hand. She recounts her states of being as if she’s discovering them with us: she’s a shell of what she used to be, now she’s hungry, now she’s shocked. She’s shocked to find herself and the man at the bottom of the stairs, the man who she supposedly does not know, in a house that she confesses is hers, a house to which she previously only came to complain.

The connection between memory and time is significant. Time, as a linear progression, has a logic of distance. The past is separated from the present by this distance, and not without psychological import. There is a joy in forgetting, as embodied in clichés like “time heals all wounds” and “ignorance is bliss.” Time heals all wounds because the distance of the past allows for some forgetting of the pain, which amounts to a kind of healing. Ignorance, on the other hand, is like forgetting in reverse. Ignorance refuses to know in the future like forgetting refuses to know the past. The characters in *Four Seasons* have lines that initially seem indicative of memory problems, a coincidental but unshared amnesia. Since Cytter has created a chronology that is unknowable in the linear sense of the term, these memory lapses fall somewhat provocatively between forgetfulness and ignorance. It is as if presence of mind is likewise lost somewhere in time.

Lucy's lighter is her foil. It's a trivial thing to forget, but it consistently stumps her and leads her to question more profound conclusions she's drawn about herself and about the man. At the beginning of the video, we are introduced to Lucy as a corrective to the man's confusion. She tells him he's wrong about who she is. This continues throughout the video, but gradually Lucy's own forgetfulness is introduced, undermining any possibility of an objective perspective upon which the viewers can latch to interpret the scene. Lucy's forgetting of the lighter happens repeatedly. She can't even remember that she remembered the lighter. The first time the man calls her attention to its location, she has a discordantly deep revelation about herself:

Lucy: Do you have a lighter?

Man: It's in your hand.

Lucy: Now I'm a shell of what I used to be, a ghost of my own. Here let me help you.²⁵

The second time the man needs to remind her, she rethinks the nature of their relationship while again, with authority, reminding him of his fundamental misunderstanding of who she is.

Lucy: I need a lighter before.

Man: It's in your hand.

Lucy: Yes, my hand.

Man: Your shoes, Stella ...

Lucy: (She is lighting candles.) No it's Lucy. My name is Lucy, man. I'm not dead or I'm dying ... I came to complain.

Man: (He is dipping his fingers in blood and letting it drop.) The music will appear to the count of ten ...

Lucy: It's more than attraction, I guess.²⁶

Foresight and hindsight are connected in *Four Seasons*. These scenes seem to upend the direction of knowledge. When the characters are able to remember the past, their personal versions of that past are in dramatic contradiction, as if the past were as unpredictable and open

25 Cytter 2009, 196

26 Cytter 2009, 197.

to change as the future. About as often as they are able to recall the past, they make matter-of-fact statements about the future, as if that is the only objective place from which they can speak – a feature ordinarily attributed to a fixed past. The present, most of all, is surprising and baffling to them. As if no stretch of time, future or past, as effectively prepared them for their current moment.

Forgetting is prevalent in *Something Happened* as well – the man, when the conversation gets heated, forgets his lines. This forgetting is important to the interpretation of the videos. It presents to us, very candidly, another collapsed distinction – the distinction between reality and fiction. The repetitive recitation of his lines fails for the man in *Something Happened*. It is as if, in spite of its utter redundancy, he cannot suppress the emotional involvement lingering behind his performance. Rather than a respite or resolution from the mystery of the dialog, rather than a revelation that gives us clarity, our confusion and lack of knowledge is mirrored and reinforced by the performers. Nonetheless, these scenes make, in their utterly transparent fraudulence, an encounter with something real. In *Four Seasons*, the characters' forgetfulness confronts the viewer with his or her own confusion.

Postlude: The heaviest of burdens

In Nietzsche's writings on eternal return, among his expansions meant to elucidate the concept, he remarks on the consequences of his theory for a person behaving in the world. To do so, he imagines a demon delivering this news to the reader in a particularly devious fashion ("The eternal hourglass of existence is turned upside down again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!"). Afterward, Nietzsche wonders,

If this thought gained possession of you, it would change you as you are or perhaps crush you. The question in each and every thing, "Do you desire this once more and innumerable times more?" would lie upon your actions as the greatest weight.²⁷

27 Nietzsche 1887, 274.

After calling eternal return the “hardest idea,” Nietzsche supposes a means of “enduring it,” which is nothing short of “the revaluation of all values.”²⁸

What if all the negative things that have happened to us – tragedies, embarrassments, missteps – were not set in the distance of a past? What if they recurred throughout infinite time? Nietzsche would have seen it as a mistake to consider such things as universal and eternal truths because they are repeated infinitely.²⁹ The weight of which he speaks is not the weight trivial actions gain when they inherit the power of metaphor. If anything, it is the weight of dread in having lost the rules by which we assign such order, or the weight of responsibility in knowing that we cannot explain occurrences with the ease of convention. However, this feeling of weight is also greeted with its antithesis in his writing on the topic. Nietzsche, in an utterly appropriate self-contradiction, also attributes a “voluptuous delight” and “joy of concord” to the acceptance of such a world.³⁰

Time, as an element, is subordinate to a great many other themes that circulate throughout Cytter’s body of work – the efficacy of language, the complexities of relationships, and everyday life to name a few. Cytter uses the manipulation of time as a device to help her complicate otherwise simple interactions and meanings. She uses it to question, exaggerate, deflate, and interrogate these altogether ordinary themes. Eternal return supposes a structure of time contrary to how it is ordinarily perceived. This is the relationship between time, our experience of it, and the production of meaning. Nietzsche thought the very idea of eternal return was the heaviest of burdens. Likewise, manipulations in time as presented to us in Cytter’s videos complicate the very fundamentals of interpretation. Changing time changes how we understand language and events. It is a challenge

28 Nietzsche 1880–1888, 545.

29 “We have some notion of the nature of the organic; and we should not reinterpret the exceedingly derivative, late, rare, accidental, that we perceive only on the crust of the earth and make of it something essential, universal, and eternal ...” Nietzsche 1887, 167.

30 Nietzsche 1880–1888, 550.

not just to our faculties of perception, but more importantly to the ethics of our choices and the logic of our values.

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