



The External Cause of the Image

by Marina Vishmidt



Transnational shipping routes traverse time zones invented to synchronize the sun's uneven impact on a globe girded by continuous capital flows. The world as calibrated in an electronic panel showing navigation or stock market data. The universality of exchange requires a homogeneous time. The principle of risk management is control of time; at the same time, entropy creates profits in a differentiated system. To dub this an abstract, rationalized time, and oppose to this a local and dense experience of lived time would be to misrecognize the abstract conditions of lived experience. Whether these conditions are thought of as the pure intuition of time as a blank medium for the human relation to the world or as the 'really' abstract time of capital, it is their claim to rationality which should be placed in dispute. Homogeneous and empty time puts us all to work, and whatever survives is the carcass of time. How to stop the state machinery of time? As Benjamin notes, it is by stepping out of the time of everyday experience that experience can again be possible. Because there is no reality outside time, changing time under-

lies all modern political and artistic attempts to transform reality, from revolutionary calendars and Communards shooting the clocks, to the malleable time of experimental cinema, to cut-up chronologies in the novel and the veritable agonies of durational performance. Robert Smithson's "humorous dimension of time" has some bearing here also, capable as it may be of bridging the utopian contretemps with time and postmodernism's elision of history, marked by gentle and homiletic ironies: it is this latter sensibility that informs today's rever- sions to modernism.

As always (perhaps), the most conclusive instances of a cultural thesis are the involuntary ones. The episode of cargo ships trapped in the Suez Canal for eight years, following the outbreak of a war that officially lasted just six days, does rather evoke a giant performance piece, read in its geopolitical and social context. Or a mythic time: the Egyptian blockade of the canal meant to halt the incursion of the Israeli army was not unlike casting a spell over the major navigation channel. It is baffling that the spell was so effective. What about the cargo? What about the profits? Where were the airlifts? It is hard to imagine such a lapse of efficiency in any global trade circuit, much less the high-churn, containerized shipping industry we know from today. In *The Short and the Long of It*, a project incorporating the video *Yellow Limbo* (named after the "Yellow Fleet" of fourteen ships marooned from 1967 to 1975), Uriel Orlow tries to re-imagine this little-known incident.

The question of realism is unavoidable in any artistic attempt to critically figure the structures and contingencies of the present as it passes, and it is the tropes of critical realism that chart a number of cultural representations

of the global shipping industry. Some frequently cited approaches here would be Andreas Gursky, et al. on containers, Allan Sekula's *Fish Story* and *The Lottery of the Sea*, Jason Massot's *Seafarers* or the Baltimore port storyline in *The Wire*. The "cognitive mapping" of capitalist abstraction, in tandem with more lyrical or generic concerns, cuts across this work no less than it defines the terms of the analysis which has accompanied it.

The Short and the Long of It, however, engages less on the critical than the allegorical side of realism. To the extent that it wants to register a historical event in an image, it is an image "anchored outside the event", an image that portrays its own conditions as found, fraught or made-up. It turns the discretely portioned time which makes for the veracity of a document into a discontinuity, pushing present and past in the very grain of the image until the material cannot be sourced to any time, and gives up its "second-order" documentary status to create some other spaces: the indexical space of the "found" document, and the "anatomic" space of a historical document that cannot be located in time because it is out of place. This fits because the historical referent here is that of a very long pause: dislocated in time due to being stuck in place. It should be noted, however, that the limbo was far from dispirited: the marooned sailors watched films, spent days in easy conviviality and theatrics, generated postage stamps and staged their own "Ships Olympics" in the Olympic year of 1968. All this can be seen in the installation. It would be interesting to know what kinds of "unworking" did occur in this extraordinary pause – what of shipboard hierarchies, how did the mariners negotiate their expulsion from time, from orders, from value? Some 8mm film shot by sailors was obtained from personal archives and is edited into the *Yellow Limbo* video,

but the quotidian features of such a social space remain more elusive, paradoxically, than the autonomy and "worklessness" of time on the ships. There may well have been a TAZ (temporary autonomous zone) on the marooned ships, but the work is less preoccupied by what happened than by how it was materially inscribed into history. This inscription is quite faint, after all; the anomaly of the "Yellow Fleet" is little known and less theorized. So there is a chance to splinter history into several constellations, told from the vantage of an abiding conflict that is at once the origin of the story and the present moment: the truly mythical time of limbo, or purgatory.

The different temporal rhythms encapsulated in the work can be discerned in its use of multiple forms of image presentation, and also the relationship of the captions in the slide projections to the images in the video: 1967-1975 was an eventful time elsewhere in the world, and the inmates of the ships detained in the Suez were stuck in a time warp as much as they were stuck in place. The captions list many of these events, as well as the titles of songs popular in this period. Viewed thus, the work registers its images' conditions within each image not only to emphasize reflexivity, but to draw a connection to the outside – both diachronically and outwards into the time of its own existence, the time of the viewer. Like in the case of the "imaginary breeze" that Georges Didi-Huberman, after Aby Warburg, locates within 15th-century Italian Renaissance painting, the image is animated by a force from the outside, a blowing wind, which is then incorporated as a motif into the image and its story, exposing and expressing the divide between formal and thematic energies in the painting. The breeze, writes Didi-Huberman, acts in at least four capacities: it moves through pictorial space, ruffling the leaves and draperies; it moves through time,

echoing the winds carved in the reliefs of antiquity; it moves the bodies and expressions of the characters in the painting, and finally it moves whoever is looking at the painting. *The Short and the Long of It*, a multi-modal assemblage – slides, video, drawings, photographs, ephemera – is clearly working with allegory in a different way than Botticelli or Ghirlandaio. Here, it is perhaps time which is the element active in both the recently taken and the archive footage, as its “imaginary breeze”. The ancient wind is replaced in these images by a total stillness: the hindered ships with hardly a sail ruffled in a warm, glittering sea. Yet water continues to flow, provisions continue to arrive, and the Lessepsian Migration (maritime species going from areas of higher to lower salinity between the Red and Mediterranean seas) enabled by the original opening of the Suez Canal is not affected by the forced immobility of the human. Politically though, water also solidifies into a boundary, an effect of state boundaries too fluid not to be violently contested. The smoke of an explosion from war footage billows forth, barely moving. Orlow slowed down the TV footage to this speed to enable the smoke to stay in place, as if it were many explosions superimposed. It’s an emblem of the intractability of the Israel-Palestine conflict, the stasis of permanent mobilization. The near-frozen quality of the image is belied by the much quicker current of water in the bottom half of the screen. This is one of the clearest depictions of how different temporalities not only pervade the work as an assemblage but are clearly imprinted on individual sequences and even single images. The external cause of the image, be it history, technology or the good fortune of unearthing archives, manifests as the tendency to spatialize or figure time, which is typical of the allegorical mode. The limbo of the “Yellow Fleet” is characterized by being apart from events and being a relative non-event itself: the little media coverage there was

eventually dried up, and hardly any analysis or documentation of it exists, apart from the archives of those directly involved. The idea of “anatotism” as a displacement in space suggests itself rather than “anachronism” as a displacement in time, yet both terms impute a spatiality to a linear time where things can get displaced or drift out of sync; the chronotope of *The Short and the Long of It* is more complex than exchanging a temporal figure for a spatial one if either comes down to two ways of thinking being in its place.

But with further consideration, this too starts to break apart. “Anatotism” signifies displacement in space rather than in time. It can be envisioned as the difference yielded in each repetition of the story, the processing of the footage, every change of perspective on an object also shifting. If anachronism is the disruptive evocation of one temporality in another which breaks the illusion of a homogeneous temporal sequence, as past, present and future mingle heedlessly, then anatotism would be the disruption of one space by another. A congruent example from fiction could be Adolfo Bioy Casares’ *The Invention of Morel*, where the always-on concealed projectors insert another slice of time and space into the deserted present of the island, but this slice is only the same space as it was some time earlier, repeated indefinitely.* There must have been a similar *Groundhog Day* quality to the experience of shipboard life in limbo. But the isolation also served as an exemption from heteronomy, which is the minimal condition for a heterotopia. An investigation of the possible links between anatotism as a means of reading the past,

*Heterotopias are most often linked to slices in time - which is to say that they open onto what might be termed, for the sake of symmetry, heterochronies. The heterotopia begins to function at full capacity when men arrive at a sort of absolute break with their traditional time.’ Michel Foucault, *Of Other Spaces*, 1967 at <http://foucault.info/documents/heteroTopia/foucault.heteroTopia.en.html>

and heterotopia as an “elsewhere” – not a perfectible non-place like utopia, simply an “other” place – where the present is opened to reinvention, could be apt here. Both thought figures operate with an intuition that spatializing time is a means to knock it out of its linear inevitability. For Foucault, its main theorist, heterotopia, or the “other space”, is exemplified by the ship, a self-contained world floating between national jurisdictions. The Suez Canal ships that fell outside of time were liminal with regard to the relations and imperatives that hold sway on land. And yet the “imaginary breeze” of time in the image connects it to other spaces, and carries these other spaces into the center of the image through the referent of time, exemplified by the lists of other events occurring in that period; some, like the sea life migrations, occurring just under the hull.

Raising time to the status of a motif in the image here means suspending the image’s location in time. The film regularly presents us with images whose provenance is impossible to establish by looking. This then opens up an elliptical idea of historical time as a displacement in space, not in time. The work’s allegorical power is hitched to the axis of these displacements. There are many displacements in the work – the ships are stuck, the sailors are stuck, shipboard objects and roles are detoured, sailors watch Westerns while shooting goes on all around. Subtitles refer to dramatic events over that period: the Tet Offensive, the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., the Stonewall riots.

There are many questions about this episode. Its murkiness gives fuel for speculation even if, as one of the titles has it, “the event is not what occurred”. The footage seems to give insight to a real, living heterotopia – did the

bosses go, leaving only the ordinary sailors to self-organize on board? Why did so many leave in the eight-year period, only to return, attracted by the high wages and the leisure of voluntary exile in the sealed canal? The six-day war distends into an eight-year maritime idyll, a permeable quarantine; sailors go and some come back. As time thickens, the complicity between time and labor starts to fray. Time goes from being a measuring device to being a milieu. In a similar way, time shifts from being an external referent (history) to being the external cause of the image which becomes the material of its construction. It becomes a container of currents, like the Suez Canal, a place where it is forbidden to film. Where do these images come from? The reference to labor here is apt, since the workless community of sailors seen in the archival footage has ceased to labor, but as image-documents they continue to perform: just like labor creates more value than it consumes, constantly pointing beyond itself to the self-expanding circuit of capital which subtends the utility of any task, so does the historical index point to something beyond the information it contains. This happens predominantly through the image: the materiality of the archival image is what shifts it from a representational register to an evocative one, which is where Benjamin’s writing on the archive connects to the “dreamwork” and “dialectical image” as devices capable of breaking chronology by condensing past, present and future into an open actuality. In this way, the co-presence of the historical image with us gives an equivocal cast to the operative idea of linear time. It is not only against but because of the techniques of abstraction, whether capital or digital reproduction, that we can finally see the present as an unresolved past.