**Fiona Tan:**

**Place After Place**

Thomas Elsaesser

*Face to Face*

Every thirty seconds or so another person looks at us, framed from the knees up. In the background metal railings, stretches of corridor, overhead strip lighting, glimpses of stairways, walls with a clock or a bulletin board. An institutional space, with a look and a feel distinctly American: a ‘correction facility’. Warders and inmates, men and women, young and not so young, black and white, looking serious or expressionless, concentrated or casual, trying to keep their posture in place while they are being filmed. The rhythm of the successive video portraits imposes itself, modulates expectations, and one begins to notice detail: badges, tattoos, a baton, a white overall apparently buttoned at the back, a security wristband, a walkie-talkie; distributed across these often broad expanses of body, the items both link the persons with each other and distinguish them, not always along the lines of keeper and kept. After a while, nothing seems to divide them, except their individuality – and the screen. They look at us, held and locked as our gaze is by the eye of the camera, itself fixed and mounted on a tripod. What is not seen is the surveillance apparatus, human and technological, that keeps an eye on both the camera and the subjects. It is reproduced in the set-up of the space, with a look and a feel distinctly American: a ‘correction facility’. Warders and inmates, men and women, young and not so young, black and white, looking serious or expressionless, concentrated or casual, trying to keep their posture in place while they are being filmed. The rhythm of the successive video portraits imposes itself, modulates expectations, and one begins to notice detail: badges, tattoos, a baton, a white overall apparently buttoned at the back, a security wristband, a walkie-talkie; distributed across these often broad expanses of body, the items both link the persons with each other and distinguish them, not always along the lines of keeper and kept. After a while, nothing seems to divide them, except their individuality – and the screen. They look at us, held and locked as our gaze is by the eye of the camera, itself fixed and mounted on a tripod. What is not seen is the surveillance apparatus, human and technological, that keeps an eye on both the camera and the subjects. It is reproduced in the set-up of the installation, faintly alluding to Bentham’s Panopticon.¹ The non-visible and its forms of communication. […] But our culture is being given a radically new direction – this time by film. […] The whole of mankind is now busy relearning the long-forgotten language of gestures and facial expressions. This language is not the substitute for words […], but the visual corollary of human souls immediately made flesh.²

Similarly, in France, Jean Epstein tried to designate what was unique to the cinema with the term *photogénie*, defining it as the ‘moral character of every face, the face-to-face and the close-up in cinema were among the first ways of defining the new medium of mechanical reproduction as an art-form in its own right: ‘In a truly artistic film the dramatic climax between two people will always be shown as a dialogue of facial expressions in close-up.’ The phrase is from Der sichtbare Mensch (1924), by the German-Hungarian screenwriter and theorist Béla Balázs.² Balázs was convinced that the cinema would bring a momentous turn in human evolution, delivering us from a mixed blessing—books. These had made people so focused on depth and interiority that they became deaf and blind to the surface language of bodies and faces: ‘The discovery of printing has gradually rendered the human face illegible. People have been able to glean so much from reading that they could afford to neglect other forms of communication. […] But our culture is being given a radically new direction – this time by film. […] The whole of mankind is now busy relearning the long-forgotten language of gestures and facial expressions. This language is not the substitute for words […], but the visual corollary of human souls immediately made flesh.²

¹ There is no critical edition of Béla Balázs’s *Visible Man* available in English. Extracts have been translated in Screen 48–1 (Spring 2007), pp. 46–60.

personal and mobile aspects of the world, beings or souls that are enhanced by filmic reproduction' and specifying the close-up of the face as its privileged instance. 2 Baláz's and Epstein's ideas became hugely popular—a kind of doxa— with Carl Theodor Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928). There, the story's drama seemed to rest entirely on the close-ups of the protagonists, and all the moral weight of the suffering world came together on the face of Maria Falconetti, who could still bring tears to the eyes of Anna Karina more than a generation later in Jean Luc Godard's *Five sa vie* (1962). Some years earlier, Roland Barthes had eulogised 'The Face of Garbo' in terms that echoed those of Baláz and Epstein: 'Garbo belongs to that moment in cinema when capturing the human face still plunged audiences into the deepest ecstasy, when one literally lost oneself in a human image [...], when the face represented a kind of absolute state of the flesh, which could be neither reached nor renounced.' 3

A decade later in the early 1970s, the face as mirror and the mirror as face saw another conceptual turn: no longer the mirror to another being's soul, in which I try to lose myself, the face on screen now directed attention to the mirror-function of the cinema as such, inviting the viewer to regress and catch his/her own idealised self-image, and project it on to the other, in the form of 'identification'. Taken from the writings of Jacques Lacan, and especially his 'mirror-stage as formative in the function of the ego', this notion of the screen itself as both mirror and face has in turn become a sort of...
challenges, opens up a different dimension of spectator engagement, something Tan is well aware of:

A filmed photograph stretches time, and in those often uncomfortable moments a lot happens. The viewer can see the embarrassment, bewilderment, and anger or the curiosity and shyness due to the confrontation with the camera.18

But it also ensures that her work is at the cusp of one of the most important transitions in the visual arts today, as in the days of chronophotography, we are able to recognise that a photograph has always been as much a ‘stilled’ image as a ‘still’ image, setting free the possibilities of an entirely different way of thinking not only about images in the present, or images of the past in the present, but of past images in the past.

The great inspiration for such a different approach to images, both moving and ‘still/stilled’, was the German historian Aby Warburg. His once very controversial holistic approach to all symbolic acts included images of whatever provenance, since Warburg made no a priori distinction between painting and sculpture, photography, cave-graffiti, caricature, or newspaper clippings. His famous ‘Warburg library’ was organised in ways that tried to represent in physical space as a single unity ‘image, word and action’: distinctions that are still with us. As is Aby Warburg’s other legacy: concepts such as Nachleben (the afterlife of images, their migration and morphing in other media, genres or contexts), Pathosformeln (the embodied nature of images, their ephemeral intensity as they capture a moment or store time for eternity), and his Mnemosyne Atlas (a multi-layered, polycentric inventory of images, philosophical ideas, rhetorical tropes, arranged in thematic-visual clusters around the idea of a memory-archive).15

Warburg’s achievement in this respect is that – while mainly collecting drawings, photographs or photographic reproductions of paintings and sculpture for his atlas – his thinking was directed towards locating the movement within the painting, sketch or sculpture, making him a precursor of the ‘stilled’ image, as opposed to the still image in art-history, but also for instance, in film semiology, in which the 1960s and 1970s proved unable to develop a pertinent approach to motion pictures beyond the single image as the unit of analysis.

As contemporary art and museums ever more seriously turn to film as a memory resource and to the history of the moving image as part of their curatorial mission, Warburg has become one of the ancestors to legitimate a loosening of the modernist insistence on medium specificity, embracing within a more anthropological perspective the active role of images in people’s lives, the different techniques of making images and the increasingly public place of private image memory in our culture. All of which suggests that today, images are less fixed in their original context or purpose, as products of artists, or destined for collections, and more ‘on the move’. In this respect, Warburg might have said about material images what Proust wrote about mental images: ‘The moments of the past do not remain still; they retain in our memory the motion which drew them toward the future.’12

Besides Warburg, it has been Gilles Deleuze who provided both the urgency and the concepts for rethinking the relation of stillness and motion, the instant and duration in the image, contrasting (in his two Cinema books) the ‘movement image’ and the ‘time image’, and cutting both loose from the problems of representation, the mirror-effects and the geometry of the subject, briefly discussed above.13 Not since Roland Barthes’ reflections on photography in La Chambre claire (developed by design only with the still image in mind) has there been such fertile thinking as Deleuze’s on the nature of the image as agent, movens and agency in its own right.14 Deleuze’s conjunction of moving image and the body, his implication of the motor-sensory apparatus in any act of viewing not only makes (conceptual) room for how we experience moving images in the museum, once the old divisions between cinema (moving image/mobile viewer) and museum (still image/mobile viewer) no longer apply, but he redistributes and recombines the linear sequential order of perception, affect, sensation, action, and allowing for a different ‘organisation’ of time, affect and perception. It is not surprising then, that Deleuze would turn to the face and the close-up, for proof of such a different interplay of perceptual energies and intensities. For Deleuze the face is not just an enigma, a surface to be ‘read’ either as the expression of some yet-to-be-revealed interiority, or for a language prior to and inaccessible to verbal language that needs to be deciphered like hieroglyphs, as it was for Balázs. The face can also be a pure phenomenal presence, an ‘entity’ in and of itself, presenting ‘a surface that is sensible and legible at the same time’.15 And, one might add, it animates the filmic image, lending it the power to communicate into the future, across past temporalities and those yet to become actual, in the act of being remembered, replayed or repurposed, while still retaining its moment of eternal present.

A good example of a Deleuzian flow of energies stored in time itself, that can be made to pass back and forth between viewer and face in archival footage, is Tan’s Facing Forward (1999). Culled from the Amsterdam Film Museum’s collection of Dutch East Indies moving image material, it features a series of very different faces, bodies and postures displayed before the camera: a line-up of white hunters seen with their indigenous servants, in a kind of trophy parade; a group

of tribal men and women, posed before the camera, their faces in medium close-up, inaudibly answering to the person behind or next to the camera; three unclothed figures in medium long shot, being ordered to turn around and present themselves from all sides. There are also shots of a cameraman turning the handle and smiling, as if to assure the viewer of his innocuous intent and to protest his innocence. Whether capturing moments of the colonists’ pride or documenting ethnographic ‘specimen’, the camera’s look now strikes us as obscene to the degree that it makes visible too many of the hidden motives that frame the colonial gaze. But the temporal gap between this look and us, looking through this look, also effects a reversal: those who were once looked at in such an objectifying way, now look back at us, inducing discomfort, shame. It is as if these faces take their revenge, precisely by looking at us the same way they did then, seemingly untouched by the knowledge we now have, and thus unable to either absolve us or to forgive. The faces that here look at us have a gaze so naked, almost as if such a face is more naked than a naked body. And faced by such unprotected looking and being looked at, it makes us more naked than these naked bodies ever were.

Concentrating so insistently on the face also gives Tan another pedigree and a lineage, this time putting her in the company of painters, photographers and filmmakers from her adopted country, the Netherlands. I would call it ‘the Dutch way of seeing the face’, and while it has many different facets, one very strong tradition is, famously, that of portraiture, from Frans Hals, Vermeer and Rembrandt in the 17th century to Van Gogh and Charley Toorop in the 19th and 20th centuries. Tan’s answer to Van der Keuken’s most famous film: Amsterdam Generational Faces (1988) show much the same ‘tender and cruel’ observational-confrontational realism with which Tan, with a combination of ethnographic dedication and aesthetic detachment, faces her subjects. Provenance’s subtitle might be Amsterdam Women and Children in Madras (1988) translate and mutate in their work into a provocation that is little short of physical: haptic, tactile and erotic.

A Lapse of Memory: Beckett, Borges in the Magic Kingdom?

Is it merely a touch of polemical perversity that makes me locate Fiona Tan in such a multi-layered and historically entangled ‘Dutch’ pedigree? After all, she is renowned, indeed world famous, for more or less the exact opposite: for being an artist who always questions identity and origins, who is in search of her roots, while at the same time doubting and even denouncing that very quest. With her almost picture-perfect multi-cultural biographical background of hybrid lineage and in-between patrimony, is she not something like the emblematic artist of the post-colonial? Many of her pieces are about the effort, but also the art, of ‘life-writing’ the hybrid and the in-between, in the medium of image, word and object: piecing together the material residues, the scraps of memory and the cast-offs of Europe’s Imperial history, across the found footage of family history and the surviving documents of a dubiously scientific colonialist ethnography. Likewise, many of her admirers praise her for just this deconstructive, self-interrogating intensity and focus.

Fiona Tan has achieved mastery of her selected means of expression: video, film, photography, text. (Her art asks questions): How has western colonialism affected contemporary understandings of identity and belonging? How can archival material be used to articulate the exotic? What is portraiture today? How can notions such as subjectivity and time be portrayed in still and moving images?

All this is surely true and has its place, both in her work and in the contemporary scene. But as I hinted earlier, my sense is that Tan is also in the process of extending herself further within this complex of themes, not by abandoning them or
disowning their relevance. On the contrary, she challenges some of the by now classical deconstructions of the post-colonial dilemma, by going deeper into the 'Orientalist gaze', as if she wanted to come out on ‘the other side’ of the fascination it stirs as well as the pain it causes. Following on from the face-to-face in so many of her pieces, she has begun to frame not just the images, but the imaginary and fantasies that sustain the long history of ‘East meets West’, and ‘West conquers East’, in a broader historical, but also more unsuspected contemporary context.

It makes one of Tan’s recent protagonists, Henry (Johan Leyssen) – the hero of A Lapse of Memory (2007) – such a mysterious, contradictory and remarkable figure, and the setting of his solitary wanderings – the Royal Pavilion in Brighton – such a startling, yet wholly appropriate location. Her largely autobiographical 1997 film May You Live in Interesting Times enacted quite literally this East-West journey back and forth, from Amsterdam back to Australia, which she had left ten years earlier and where her mother came from; to Indonesia, where she was born and where her father came from; to Cologne in Germany, where some of her cousins and relatives had settled, and from Europe to a village in Southern China, where all the families are called Tan. A Lapse of Memory by contrast is anything but autobiographical, and its journey, though also back-and-forth, is interior and anything but a quest for origins. Not so obliquely, A Lapse of Memory revisits many of the obsessions and motifs of May You Live in Interesting Times, but in the process, it revises them, rewrites them and even over-writes them, in some crucial respects. A Lapse of Memory for instance, no longer wonders ‘who am I, where do I come from, where am I going’ – a young person’s questions, and those of Tan herself, in May You Live in Interesting Times. Nor does it ‘search for the one I might have been’, or ask ‘can I creep into someone else’s skin?’ – the ‘what ifs’ of an older woman, and the ones Tan raises so poignantly in The Changeling.

A Lapse of Memory, then, is a solo piece, content to remain in one place, and stay put in time, reminiscent in spirit of Samuel Beckett’s Knock’s Last Tape (1958). Tan’s film shares Beckett’s ruminations on memory and forgetting, on mortality, the minutiae of aging and decay, as well as the determination to repeat, to carry on, even when there is no sense: ‘No matter. Try Again. Fail again. Fail better’, as Beckett famously put it in What’s the matter with knock? (1983).16 We observe a body ‘worn at the edges’, solitary in sumptuous surroundings, voided of any stimulus other than that of its own motor- (un)coordination, with a mind confined to observing itself gradually losing its grip. Henry is a restless spirit; his frequent perambulations – across palatial but vacated drawing rooms, along receding corridors and echoing hallways, up and down wide stairwells and past ornate balustrades – trace a possibly intricately plotted, possibly randomly executed daily routine. Tan’s own voice-off musings are part stage-directions for a performance yet-to-begin and yet already-in-progress (Scene 3, morning tea: he pours and drinks his tea with a few elements from the traditional Japanese tea ceremony), and part reflections on this – even to her – enigmatic character, observed by an onlooker, whom Henry may or may not be aware of (He is old, thin and worn at the edges. He suffers from senile dementia. He often dozes off. Henry’s background is unclear. In the voice-over this also remains ambiguous. Presumably he travelled extensively in his earlier years.’17

A Lapse of Memory has a different conditional tense, neither of regret nor of nostalgic longing. The voice-off, commenting on the voice-over, provides clues to additional possibilities: ‘His story would begin faraway across many seas. His real name is not Henry, but Eng Lie [...]. With little more than the clothes on his back, he leaves his village [...]. He would see many things for the first time: long noses, red hair, huge feet [...]. Feeling lonely, he would fantasise and exaggerate his memories of home. It is more likely, however, that Henry’s journey sets out in the opposite direction. As a young, well-to-do European, he will travel east [...].’18

Backtracking and self-cancelation, rather than mere hesitation or ambiguity, structure the film at several levels. We are in J.L. Borges’ Garden of Forking Paths: they give Henry perpetual motion, in place of linear direction.19 If time is suspended, it is as much in the mode of what the Greeks called aion, as it is kairos or chronos: the un-pulsed time of pure duration, freed of the anxiety of waiting, or the monotony of boredom.20 In the case of Henry, the cycles of sleep and waking, of night, dawn and dusk yield a routine of few gestures, none of ambiguity, structure the film at several levels. We are in J.L. Borges’ Garden of Forking Paths: they give Henry perpetual motion, in place of linear direction. If time is suspended, it is as much in the mode of what the Greeks called aion, as it is kairos or chronos: the un-pulsed time of pure duration, freed of the anxiety of waiting, or the monotony of boredom. In the case of Henry, the cycles of sleep and waking, of night, dawn and dusk yield a routine of few gestures, none of great import, yet they make the day pass and allow for a ‘re-boot’ every morning, a morning he welcomes with the rituals of the tea-ceremony, after his Tai-Chi warm-up exercises.

A ritual in particular receives his meticulous attention – and deserves ours: every evening, as dusk falls along one of the endlessly receding corridors, Henry lays out a string of brightly lit lanterns, like beacons or buoys: they could be lighting the passage for ships on the high seas, or simply aid late-night passers-by make their way home through the maze of a city’s narrow streets. On the other hand, they might be a line of buoys laid out by a fisherman at night, to hold up his nets and attract a catch. Just as carefully as he lays them out, he hauls them back in: pulling ashore or down to the ground who knows what, or nothing at all. Or again, Henry could be setting out a route for his inner journey, and by collecting the lights, retrace his steps, the way Ariadne’s thread once helped Theseus return from the Minotaur, or like Danny, the boy in Stanley Kubrick’s The Shining (1980) who outwits his Minotaur-father Jack by backtracking in his own footsteps.

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17 ‘China Tan, A Lapse of Memory, in Kreuger 2007 (see note 5), p. 29.
18 Ibid., p. 29.
So enigmatic is this passage and yet so luminous in more senses than one, that it is tempting to take it as an emblem for the film as a whole. Besides the double movement of reaching out and tracking back, which, as suggested, applies not just to Henry’s story, but to Tan’s postcolonial project as well, the scene stands as a psychological metaphor for the spiritual state of equilibrium or inner poise so many Westerners have sought in the East, yet it also serves as a contemporary allegory: the West, determined to bring the Enlightenment to the rest of the world, only to find itself having to reel or rein it back in.

A Lapse of Memory takes place in a space so clearly owed to the fantasy and the pre-history of Orientalism that to choose it as the setting suggests less a rejection or critique of British colonial rule and its cultural complement, and more an exploration of Orientalism from its European ‘inside’. The Royal Pavilion in Brighton in its present state was completed around 1822, following the architectural plans of John Nash, otherwise better known for the classicist architecture in London’s Regent Street and the City of Bath. Looking typically Indian (or Indo-Saracenic), and sitting somewhat incongruously in the middle of a Southern England seaside town, the Pavilion’s interior designs are a fanciful mixture of Chinoiserie and Mughal-Islamic fashion, anticipating by some thirty-five years the beginning of the British Raj, i.e. colonial rule on the Indian subcontinent. George IV, the Pavilion’s main patron and chief royal visitor, was notorious for his profligacy as well as his indolence, so while it might have served him to hide there his mistress and to cure his various illnesses, the Pavilion was also what one might call his ‘theme park’, a fantasy environment that allowed the King to experience the pleasures or thrills of faraway or dangerous places, by sparing him the inconveniences and the exertions of physically having to travel there.

For the spectator of Tan’s film, the Pavilion’s interiors pose their own hazards: they are so hung with paintings and overgrown with ornament, so covered in textured wallpaper, tapestries and richly coloured carpets that the eye is in danger of losing its bearing in space, or fails to adjust to the changes in scale, among the miniatures and oversized architectural features. Often it becomes difficult to tell wall from floor, upright from flat, horizontal from vertical, stairwell from window, window from door and door from mirror. Tan’s camera presents this fantasy of the West’s Orient in a manner designed to dis-orient us: challenging our spatial coordinates and our fixed place as viewers with a series of perceptual as well as historical-ideological trompe-l’oeil effects.

Our partial disorientation in space matches Henry’s disorientation in his own life’s story, ‘lost within his various selves and possible biographies’. An old man who can hardly remember the time of day, sleeps a lot and suffers from senile dementia, who mumbles and sighs, ‘waiting for a story he can make his home’, may seem an odd guide for taking us once more through the painful paradoxes of the East within the West and the West within the East. Especially when compared to the questioning and questing reflexive selves, haunted by memory, loss and longing, who speak to us in The Changeling and through the commentary of May You Live in Interesting Times. But Henry’s dementia, in real life a terrible handicap and a tragic way of letting go, here becomes almost a blessing, or as the voice-over has it: ‘His forgetfulness is perhaps his greatest virtue’. Perhaps, even though forgetfulness is not the same as dementia, and dementia not the same as disorientation, this is what A Lapse of Memory seems to offer us, as an ethical position and an aesthetic principle. Disorientation might be regarded as ethical, not just because of the pun that verbally tries to undo the very fixation of the Western gaze. There is virtue, too, in Tan’s title when one considers that it is ‘a lapse of memory’ and not ‘the loss of memory’. To lapse can mean to fall, to sink, to subside or to let go, but a lapse is also a pause, an interval, or the slip (of the tongue) that reveals more than the speaker intended. Consequently, a lapse of memory might allow a crack to open up, and something to become visible and manifest, which re-orient attention and memory, especially when memory is trapped in cycles of hate or traumatic repetition.

**Disorientation: Place after Place**

Disorientation as an aesthetic principle, in the sense of it being the visual equivalent for a certain kind of lapse or interval in the back-and-forth of remembering and forgetting. Also, the truth of art in Western aesthetics, is often grounded on a work’s capacity to conceal and dis-conceal, to disorient and toorient. Much of Tan’s work, as I have tried to argue, lives from the tension between the confrontational face-to-face, and the look back, doubled and multiplied in both time and space. This is no doubt why the encounter between Kublai Khan and Marco Polo in Italo Calvino’s Invisible Cities resonates so strongly: ‘You advance always with your head turned back?’ or ‘Is what you see always behind you?’, or rather: ‘Does your journey take place only in the past?’ [...] Marco Polo could [...] succeed finally in explaining to himself that what he sought was always something lying ahead, and even if it was a matter of the past [...]’. Without having to invoke the backward-looking forward-driven ‘angel of history’ in Walter Benjamin’s Angelus Novus, one could describe such rearview mirroring of anticipated pasts as emblematic of Tan’s own architecture of time and modulations of space. It complicates the face-to-face encounter, without diminishing its force. Put more generally, Tan likes to fracture, break or otherwise bring about a momentary ‘disconnect’ between the image and the viewer, especially in those images where
the gaze – regardless whether extracted from found footage as in *Facing Forward* and *The Changeling*, or activated in the video portrait, as in *Countenance, Correction* and *Provenance* – passes through the folds and layers of temporal deferral, reversal and retroactive revision. If one adds to the time shifts and mirroring effects Tan’s own voice, as it introduces, lends gravity or irony, comments and re-positions the image and what we think we see, then a coherent aesthetic project seems in place, by which Tan troubles the contemplative stance of the witness-observer, as much as she turns round the innate voyeurism of the film spectator.

In what I have said so far, about the face-to-face, as well as about dis-orientation and re-alignments in *A Lapse of Memory*, the mental grid applied is that of the cinema screen and its spectator, filtered through the assumption that we are watching a single channel work, projected on a screen, in front of which the viewer occupies a fixed spectator position. In other words, I conveniently overlook that Tan’s film work follows also the logic and aesthetics of the installation, designed to be screened in museum exhibitions or a gallery show. Twin screens, images seen back-to-back, or projected without boundary and frame are part of the museum’s moving image dispositif. This dispositif, with its temporal delays and spatial displacements, confrontations and encounters, is built into the very texture and thematics of Tan’s work, embodied in the fundamental tension of the stilled video image and the filmed still photograph. Critically at issue, that is: what is being revisited and revised, in the return to the portrait and the face as preferred subjects of Tan’s installation art, is the upright, forward-pointing, frontal orientation of so much Western art, including the cinema: traditionally based as both painting and the film projection are on the rectangular frame, eye-level position, and monocular perspective.

This is why *A Lapse of Memory* needs to be read not only in its thematics of memory and forgetting, and its mutual disorientation of Western fantasy and Oriental ritual. Depending on its actual, specific on-site performance, Tan’s work should be re-positioned also according to its potential for *situatedness*. My reference to Beckett hinted at its element of theatricality, with Henry at once stage-managed by the voice-over, and escaping such direction through the inner *perpetuum mobile* of his own repetition-compulsion. Most provocative, however, in its attempt to also re-situate the viewer is the opening scene. Focusing first on Henry’s feet and then his face, the camera effects a subtle switch: the close-ups lend the feet a certain faciality, as close-ups tend to, while the face, still asleep, all curled-up, stubbly and wrinkled, appears more as an appendage, muted in its expressivity and obtuse in its individuality. Read as an invitation to get to know this character not face to face, but to focus on him through his and our own bodily presence, ‘seeing with one’s feet’ as it were, this opening ‘grounds’ the film in a specific location twice over: that of its (filmic) setting, and that of the place of the performance of its setting. If one thinks of the gallery as the generic white box, a space empty until it is filled with images, artefacts, or in this case, projections, then the historic setting of *A Lapse of Memory* takes on a specific reflexive dimension: the Brighton Pavilion, too, is a space both empty and full, vacated by its Royal inhabitants, and yet filled with their faded Imperial dreams and fantasies. And Henry, too, is both empty and full: voided by his ongoing dementia, he is still full of story-fragments from his life, on which he has ‘elaborated and embroidered’, weaving them into – as well as projecting them onto – the fabric of the Pavilion’s walls and floors. A mind inside a pavilion inside a pavilion: three kinds of spaces, interiors or envelopes, one might say, that mirror each other and yet differ and defer from each other, around the notion of projection and fantasy, intermittence and the loop.

For most of the year the Dutch Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, too, is both empty and full: one can be sure that Fiona Tan, like her protagonist Henry and possibly even the historical figure Marco Polo, will ‘make it her home’. As the commentary predicts: ‘he will finally let go of the past and like a new emperor, he will reset the clocks and re-start the calendar at zero.’ What more appropriate common ground for a Chinese Emperor and a Venice merchant, than this installation in this space, for them to let go and re-start again? If Marco’s relay, like Henry’s lapse, is Tan’s loop, staged at the extra-territorial site of a somewhat anachronistic notion of the national in contemporary art, then this performance of disorientation and re-alignment is set to go on, and should go on, time and again, place after place.