The Distance of Time

A chair can be seen off-centre in a dark room. A flash of bright light, repeated in unsteady staccato instants, momentarily brings the unknown room into sharp relief. Darkness so quickly descends again that it is unclear exactly what the light was. Perhaps a television, out of sight, advertisements flicking past, a streetlight malfunctioning or a hot pot of unwatched oil coming alight on a stove. While I consider this scene, thinking about the unknown source of light, the sound of thunder suddenly rolls toward me, naming the flash as lightning. In this moment, distant time and space are brought into proximity with this instant. Lightning and thunder bring the notion of distance into shared conceptual territory, where lightning arrests our attention, bringing focus to the time between something seen and something heard. In this suspended moment, where thunders temporal arrival occurs, time is also understood as distance.

Distance may be most traditionally thought of in relation to space, where we understand it as a physical relation between one thing and another (lover, friend, mother, grandfather, home, bakery, train station, forest, ocean, sun, moon etc.). Relational difference in time is often thought of in terms of durations, intervals, or tenses. But, buried in the etymology of the word, distance holds the echo of time. When asked how close or far something is, it is normal to revert to measures of time to convey physical proximity: ‘a 10-minute walk’, ‘half an hour away’, ‘a 12-hour flight’, or ‘three days by boat’. The inverse is time accrued since being in proximity with someone, somewhere or something…’ last Tuesday’ or ’not since I was one’, ‘I haven’t seen him in weeks’, or ‘years ago’.

This complex notion of distance underpins the experimental film work Seuteu by Yana Nafysa Dombrowsky-M’Baye. Of French and Sénégalese descent, born in Tāmaki Makaurau, Dombrowsky-M’Baye travelled to Tournon-sur-Rhône, Aix-en-Provence, and Dakar in 2023, visiting her grandfather’s country for the first time. This sojourn brought new understanding of the intergenerational complexity that occurred within their family because of Sénégal’s colonization by France, the birth country of her grandmother. The resulting footage explores how a daughter might come to know a grandfather, the unmet link in the matrilineal line, as well as exploring the temporal distance of connection.

In Intimate Immensity[1], French philosopher Gaston Bachelard traces a path between daydream and immensity, questioning what memory is and how it relates to intimacy. Through the metaphor of the forest, Bachelard explores ideas of depth, inner immensity, and ancestral connection. In an early passage, he states that he knows his grandfather got lost in a certain wood, that he was told of it, and has not forgotten it. He says, ‘It happened in a past before I was born. My oldest memories, therefore, are hundreds of years old, or perhaps a bit more’. This leads me to ask how and when we come to know our ancestors. How does our knowing of our kin emerge when we are distanced from the spaces, places, and times of their existence? How can we find new ways of knowing when the connective threads are severed, over distance, and over time? What latent trace must remain in order for something to be followed, a thread reconnected, a dropped stitch looped back into the weft?

In Seuteu, archival and more recently recorded scenes are interspersed with depictions of the various materials, objects and moments that make up our everyday. By bringing these elements into relational proximity, Dombrowsky-M’Baye suggests that such things might retain a resonance through which connection may be tentatively restored.

[1] [1] Bachelard, Gaston, and John R. Stilgoe. *The Poetics of Space*. Translated by Maria Jolas. Reprint edition. Boston: Beacon Press, 1994. (p. 188).