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Immersive Imagined Cultures: Communicating the lived experience of cultural identity and memory through video installation

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Abstract

In recent years a proliferation of video installation has been created concerning the notion of cultural identity and cultural memory. Highlighting the complexities of these themes, video installation provides the artist with an opportunity to create an affective environment for the viewer, through which the lived experiences that inform cultural identity may be expressed, shared and understood; while the experience of viewing becomes a part of the process of becoming that cultural identity continues to undertake. It is the central argument of this thesis that the strengthening relationship between video installation and the concept of cultural identity is intrinsically linked to the medium’s ability to create an immersive sensory field involving sight, sound, time, space and movement, in which the viewer undergoes a phenomenological experience and engages in an active questioning of how cultural identity is formed, experienced and evolved.

Drawing on phenomenological, postcolonial and feminist theory, I critically analyse the sensory elements of three video installations that are global representatives standing for this body of arguments; Shirin Neshat’s Rapture, Dana Claxton’s Sitting Bull and The Moose Jaw Sioux and Nalini Malani’s In Search of Vanished Blood. Relevant due to their themes of cultural identity and the poetics of memory, and their use of all the sensory components of video installation as a means of communication, these artworks illustrate the diverse issues that cultural identity can include, along with an evolution in the complexity of the medium itself. Moving beyond issues of representation, this thesis delves into the communication of cultural identity and memory between the artist and the viewer.
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Introduction

Step through a doorway from a bright white cube into a darkened space. Your first encounter may be a sound: a single voice, a chorus, a rhythmic melody. Perhaps your attention is caught by a soft filtered light, projected across the expanse onto a wall, replacing the structure with a moving mirage. You have entered a new world. You have walked into a moment that stimulates your senses, captivates your every faculty, entices you to immerse yourself in the experience that is unfolding around you. This realm, the domain of the video installation, is an embodied site; where the artist enables you not just to see but also to feel the message they wish to communicate, to participate and experience it for yourself. We all have bodies located in space and time and on this most basic level we can all relate, yet we are all so vastly different in both our personal individuality and the cultural identities we associate with. Our receptiveness to sensory experiences is the common ground that unites us, and it is through the creation of environments that engender phenomenological encounters that artists allow us to traverse the disparities of our cultural memories and begin to understand ‘the Other’. When we surround ourselves with the elements that form the video installation there is no room to read wall text,¹ to critique the finer intricacies of the image’s composition, or to interpret the artwork in relation to that hanging or positioned beside it. Instead we succumb to the world we have entered through the doorway from the white cube and in doing so begin to understand the memories that inform that world.

In recent years a proliferation of video installations have been created concerning the notion of cultural identity. This phenomenon highlights the paradox of new media being utilised to articulate the traditional. These video installations provide the artist with an opportunity to create a ‘lived experience’² for the viewer through which the sensory aspects that constitute cultural identity may be expressed, shared and understood. It is the central argument

¹ Usually positioned outside the black box in the main gallery space.
of this thesis that the strengthening relationship between the concept of cultural identity and its articulation via video installations is intrinsically linked to the medium’s ability to create a sensory field, involving sight, sound, time, space and movement, in which the viewer undergoes a phenomenological experience. Thus the artist communicates the lived experiences that form cultural memory and inform cultural identity through the viewer’s lived experience of the artwork itself.

Our cultural identity is a theoretical notion. It is a concept formed through our cultural memory that is in a constant state of evolution and flux. Based upon a shared history, cultural identity develops through the lived experiences that the individuals within societies encounter and is performed through our traditions and rituals, both old and new. To fully communicate the sensation of one’s cultural identity and memory may be an impossible task as it is not a fixed and quantifiable entity, but rather an imagined and embodied feeling. However today in an era of cross-cultural collisions and shared ‘zones of contact’ there is an ever-increasing demand to attempt an expression of such ideas. With the growing prevalence of international art festivals, artists globally are facing the challenge to bridge cultural chasms and in doing so are experimenting with varying media to serve as modes of communication.

There has been a marked increase in video-based artworks present in international art festivals and biennales in the last decade and there may be multiple reasons for this development. These include the growing availability and affordability of technology necessary to create such works, along with the presence of spaces and equipment designated for the installation of video works within major art institutions becoming an industry standard. In addition to this, one cannot discount the logistical practicality of transporting artworks in this medium around the world, as they can be uploaded to small storage devices and sent with far greater ease and less cost than the shipping of paintings or sculptural forms. However, in this thesis I will focus on the connection between the selection of video installation as an artistic

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medium and the communication of cultural themes, themes that are often linked to the conceptual frameworks of biennales and art festivals that focus upon cross-cultural relations.⁴

**Defining 'Cultural Identity'**

The scope of this thesis is broad, incorporating interdisciplinary theory from the fields of art and film history and sociology. It is necessary to build an understanding of the concepts of cultural identity and cultural memory in order to comprehend the challenges faced by artists who endeavour to explore them in their artworks. As noted, cultural identity is perpetually evolving in accordance to cultural shifts, an issue that falls into the discourses of both Orientalism and post-colonial theory, which in turn focus in particular upon issues of representation and communication.

When dealing with the expression ‘cultural identity’ as a central component of my research topic it is necessary to have a cogent definition and theoretical understanding of the term. A seminal work in the field of post-colonial discourse that concerns cultural identity and its representation is Stuart Hall’s essay *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*.⁵ In this essay Hall problematises the established understanding of the term ‘cultural identity’ as a collective culture formed by a shared historical experience that has been emphasised in much post-colonial theory and argument. This traditional definition places cultural identity in a static position that becomes essentialised as the continuous framework of meaning by which a culture is understood. Hall argues that this classification fails to acknowledge that whilst a cultural identity is built upon shared lived experience, this experience is constantly evolving. It is not merely a matter of who we are but what we have become and are becoming still, an element of which is comprised of the identity we produce in the act of representation. This is not to discount the importance of tradition and memory in the formation of identity; a cultural identity has a

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⁴ For example the curatorial theme of the 2010 Biennale of Sydney was ‘All Our Relations’.

History that carries “material and symbolic effects”. However these histories do not define but rather inform the identity, which is a politicised position based on both past and present. Working from a Caribbean background, Hall focuses on post-colonial representations of identity through documentary film to illustrate his theory. Extending Frantz Fanon’s notion of ‘passionate research’ he posits that the use of documentary film is not merely a tool to rediscover suppressed or lost identities but also to produce and re-form them, a concept that can be applied to the creation of video installations. While Stuart Hall’s work sits within post-colonial discussion, its application to the broader discourse of identity politics is possible due to Hall’s understanding of cultural memory and cultural identity as an adaptable perspective derived from lived experience.

Political scientist Benedict Anderson also establishes a helpful conceptual framework I will utilise when forming my definition of cultural identity. Dealing more specifically with nationalism and ‘national identity’, Anderson’s second edition of *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* acknowledges the difficulty in defining conceptual terms such as ‘nationalism’ but also recognises that these terms are ‘cultural artefacts’ whose meanings shift over time until they come to command a “profound emotional legitimacy” in the present. Anderson poses a definition of nation as “an imagined political community” created to ensure a sense of continuity, linking the past with the future. This imagined community is formed through a process of ‘thinking’ the nation that has historically been imagined through the visual and aural. I will draw on these aspects of Anderson’s imagined communities as they address the shifting and conceptual nature of cultural identity; an imagined

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6 Ibid., p. 395.

7 Frantz Fanon cited in Hall, ‘Cultural Identity and Diaspora’, p. 393.


9 Ibid., p. 4.

10 Ibid., p. 6.

11 Anderson writes, “If nation-states are widely conceded to be ‘new’ and ‘historical’, the nations to which they give political expression always loom out of an immemorial past and, still more important, glide into a limitless future.” Ibid., pp. 11-12.

12 Ibid., pp. 22-23.
sense of belonging that informs the traditions, beliefs, habits, and memories of the individual within the community. The acknowledgement of the role of the visual and the aural in the development of both national and cultural identity reasserts the importance of the senses in imagining culture, and can be extended to include the theory of phenomenology.

At this point it would also be helpful to note the work of Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm, who Anderson references, and his book *Nations and nationalism since 1780*. Also dealing with nationalism, Hobsbawm argues for the importance of the individual in attempting to understand the phenomena of the nation and nationalism, stating that nations are “constructed essentially from above, but which cannot be understood unless also analysed from below, that is in terms of the assumptions, hopes, needs, longings and interests of ordinary people.” In this thesis I contend that artists exploring cultural themes assist in this manner of ‘understanding’, providing insights into the assumptions, hopes, needs, longings and interests Hobsbawm refers to through the content of their artworks.

These classic Marxist theorists, Hall, Anderson and Hobsbawm, represent a school in the study of identity politics and representation. While they do not explain the affective or immersive aspect of cultural and national identity, their acknowledgment of the importance of shared experience and memory in creating cultural identity, its imaginary form, and its articulation through the individual, are precursors to developing a study of the affective dimensions of cultural identity. Therefore, drawing upon their theorisation of cultural and national identity I have formulated the following definition of cultural identity for this thesis: a sense of belonging built upon shared lived experiences, traditions and memories within a cultural group, that will constantly evolve as it is not only informed by past experiences and memories, but is produced through its representation and communication by the individual in the present.

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14 Ibid., p. 10.
The Video Installation

Whilst grounding my research in previous criticism and analysis of video art and installation, a full history of video as an artistic medium, with its links to Surrealist filmmaking and the Fluxus movement, will not be included in this thesis. Rather, an in-depth investigation of the application of video installations and their potential to convey what Margaret Morse terms ‘kinesthetic insights’ will be undertaken, incorporating the theory of phenomenology to provide a conceptual framework. In embarking on a study of the sensory elements of video installation and their ability to effectively communicate the embodied nature of cultural identity it must be noted that to date there is no established lexicon equipped to deal with these concepts. Here we are attempting to override the contradiction of expressing through written language an understanding we are simultaneously claiming may only be perceived through sensory experience. This is a challenge that I endeavour to overcome by basing this study on specific artworks in an effort to draw away from the conceptual realm and provide palpable examples as a foundation for the hypothesis. However it must be understood that in investigating the experience of the immersive environments of these artworks it is at times necessary to write using the poetic language that best conveys sensory engagement.

At this point I would like to distinguish the artistic medium of video installation, as discussed in this thesis, from video art. The distinction between these two artforms I would argue, is that video art is usually comprised of a single or multiple channel video projected onto a wall or played through a screen that is independent from its installation space and is placed according to curatorial aims. Whilst in a video installation the installation space is an integral and deliberate component of the artwork, the artist actively constructing an environment

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17 Ibid.
involving video projections interacting with each other and with the space. It is this second practice that I will address here. As with all new mediums, video installation as a relatively recent artistic practice has polarised both academic and industry critiques, along with public opinion.

With the proliferation of video installation internationally through art festivals, as previously noted, professional and public evaluations are increasing, making the issue of their effectiveness as artworks topical at this time. However it may be helpful to take Leo Steinberg’s suggestion for looking at modern and contemporary art which, according to Susan Best, "suggests that the first response to new art should be to suspend judgement, holding in reserve criteria and taste based on art of the past in order to give the intentions of the new work the space to emerge and become perceptible," and apply it to video installation.

A discourse surrounding video art and its history has been gaining momentum since the 1990s with works such as Cyrus Mannaseh’s *The Problematic of Video Art in the Museum, 1968-1990* and Kevin Robins’ *Into the Image: Culture and politics in the field of vision* addressing the politics of the installation of video art and the poetics of representation through the medium. However a key text that provides a valuable foundation for this thesis is Margaret Morse’s essay ‘Video Installation Art: The Body, the Image, and the Space-in-Between’ from Doug Hall and Sally Jo Fifer’s *Illuminating Video: an essential guide to video art*. In this essay Morse focuses on video installations and addresses the problems of articulating the phenomenological experience. Acknowledging that descriptive explanations are not sufficient, she notes that the vocabulary for communicating the sensation of the video installation is limited at best. She speculates that the solution is to focus on the mechanics of video installation; how its means of expression function in conveying this lived experience for the viewer. Differentiating video installation from the discipline of film, Morse places importance on the interaction the viewer has with the artwork claiming that while classical film is ‘representational’ in nature,

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placing the viewer in a position of watching, video installations are ‘presentational’ and provide the viewer with multi-sensory stimuli that they must negotiate, react and respond to.\textsuperscript{22} It is this presentational format that Morse sees as also separating video installation from the more traditional art forms of painting and sculpture, providing an actual space rather than an illusionistic one. Within this actual space the viewer can engage in an embodied phenomenological experience.

**What does phenomenology add?**

Encorporating phenomenology, Véronique M. Fóti’s edition *Merleau-Ponty: difference, materiality, painting*\textsuperscript{23} serves as a insightful text for those who strive to employ the theoretical works of philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty to examine works of art. Merleau-Ponty introduced the concept of the phenomenology of perception by claiming that one’s experience of the world is comprised of the culmination of intellectual understanding and corporeal encounter and that these two facets cannot be separated. Merleau-Ponty established that whilst intellectual perception can be controlled, it is informed by the perceptions of the body which are reactive and grounded in time and space. Thus it is argued that perception signifies an active sensory experience of “being in the world”\textsuperscript{24}. Fóti brings together a series of essays with the aim of “problematizing (as did Merleau-Ponty) the boundaries that have traditionally separated the discourse of philosophy from discourses on painting.”\textsuperscript{25} Within this text Hugh Silverman’s essay ‘Traces of the Sublime: Visibility, Expressivity, and the Unconscious’\textsuperscript{26} focuses on the phenomenology of the self-portrait and the roles of the artist and viewer in relation to the

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{22} It must be noted that film is becoming increasingly interactive, however the phenomenological aspect of the body’s active navigation of the space is not yet an aspect of cinema.


\textsuperscript{25} Fóti, *Merleau-Ponty: difference, materiality, painting*, p. xiii.

\end{flushleft}
artwork. Silverman argues that as both subject and object the painter imbues the artwork at once with the visual and the sensual through the gesture of painting. Likewise when the viewer stands in front of the self-portrait they take the place of the painter and intrude upon the scene, engaging in a dialogue with the experience of the painter in the act of painting. These notions are echoed in Michael Haar’s essay ‘Painting, Perception, Affectivity’, in which he claims that it is the “bodily being-in-the-world … which is the origin of art.” This collection of essays is one of a number of editions to use Merleau-Ponty’s concepts of embodiment to address artistic endeavours and the dialogue between the artwork and viewer; however its scope extends only as far as the two-dimensional medium of the painting. Therefore while providing a helpful precedent for how arguments of this nature may be undertaken, it does not address the more complex issues of four-dimensional new media.

By placing video installation within the arts parallels can be drawn with other time and installation based mediums such as performance and body art. However the further potential of the video installation, as explained by Morse, is its removal of the artist that “allows the visitor rather than the artist to perform the piece.” The location of the viewer within the ‘space-in-between’, surrounded by the audiovisual and kinesthetic, allows for a process of learning through the body, similar to Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the phenomenology of perception, creating an environment that Morse differentiates as not mimetic but simulated. She states, “These arts address the wide-awake consciousness that we call experience. … Experience implies that a change has taken place in the visitor, that he or she has learned something.” It is from this juncture that I propose to extend the hypothesis of learning through the experience of video installation to encompass the communication of cultural identity.

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28 Morse, ‘Video Installation Art’, p. 155.
29 Ibid., pp. 158-159.
30 Ibid., p. 165.
One of the most recent works to address similar concepts to this thesis is Susan Best’s *Visualizing Feeling*[^31]. Writing to address what she terms a “methodological blindspot in art history”,[^32] Best analyses the affective dimension of art with specific reference to minimalism, revealing the reactions and feelings produced by artworks that are typically characterised as a rejection of subjectivity. Focusing on female avant-garde artists, a link is established between the feminine and the innovation of an affective component of art using psychoanalytic theory. Whilst I use phenomenology rather than psychoanalysis to engage with the effective quality of art there are many parallels between Best’s undertaking and my own. Best writes, “the affective dimension of art may be apprehended or felt fairly immediately, but its meaning is not so readily apparent. This may be because this aspect of art is not part of any of the key methodologies that art history deploys. Hence we have a limited vocabulary to describe artistic feeling and no seasoned experience of detecting and thinking about it. My aim is to redress this poverty of means to discuss affect.”[^33] Similarly I investigate the immersive aspect of the video installation and the affective engagement of the viewer with its content, the “subjectivity that is both embedded in the work and yet produced by the viewer’s interaction with it.”[^34] In doing so I attempt convey the phenomenological method of communicating a lived cultural identity through the embodied experience of the video installation.

I will specifically address artworks made in the last fifteen years in response to cultural identity and informed by cultural memory that use video installation as their medium. I will do this using three artworks that are global representatives that stand for this body of arguments; Shirin Neshat’s 1999 two-channel video installation *Rapture*, Dana Claxton’s four-channel video installation from 2003 *Sitting Bull and The Moose Jaw Sioux*, and the 2012 six-channel video and shadow play installation *In Search of Vanished Blood* by Nalini Malani. These salient

[^31]: Best, *Visualizing Feeling*.
[^32]: Ibid., p. 1.
[^33]: Ibid., p. 7.
[^34]: Ibid., p. 8.
works are relevant due to their themes of cultural identity and the poetics of memory; as their recognition as successful artworks is supported by their inclusion in international biennales and art festivals; and for their capability to employ all the potential elements of video installation as a means of representation and communication. Their points of difference also play an important role in their selection and pertinence as they illustrate the diverse issues that form cultural identities, along with the evolution of the medium’s use of immersive environments to convey the phenomenology of identity, from structured dialogue to complex kaleidoscope.

I will begin my investigation of the use of video installations to communicate cultural identity through the creation of sensory environments in Chapter 1 by considering Shirin Neshat’s development of an active installation space and engagement of the viewer within a dialogue in *Rapture*, a two-channel video installation created in 1999. I first analyse how Neshat formulates a poetic narrative that establishes a series of binaries through the imagery of the video projections and their positioning on opposing walls within the installation space, juxtaposing the male and female, the structural and natural, and the constrained and emotional, communicating one conception of cultural identity as experienced by an Iranian woman. However I then argue that these divisions are undermined by the back-and-forth rhythm that emerges between the two projections and Neshat’s placement of the viewer in the centre of the installation with an unfolding dialogue taking place across the space, giving the viewer both embodied agency as the mediator of the conversation in the space-in-between and an understanding of the male-female dynamic within Islamic Iran. The combined use of highly symbolic operatic performance and ambiguity allows Shirin Neshat to phenomenologically engage the viewer while leaving them without answers, forcing them to actively consider their experience and the potential outcomes and meanings of *Rapture*.

Progressing from Neshat’s construction of a space of dialogue, in Chapter 2 I will examine Dana Claxton’s 2003 four-channel video installation *Sitting Bull and The Moose Jaw* 35

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35 This work, along with *Turbulent*, won Shirin Neshat the International Award of the XLVIII Venice Biennale in 1999.
I argue that this video installation seeks to engender within the viewer an understanding of the complexity of cultural identity for the Lakota people of Moose Jaw, informed by collective memory and connection to land, through the creation of a form of talking circle within the space in which the viewer may become enveloped. I note how Claxton draws on elements of documentary film in order to problematise the official history of the area and highlight the personal and ancestral stories that comprise the cultural memory and inform the imagined community. In this chapter my analysis explores the potential of each sensory component of the video installation; the soundscape, visual imagery, use of space and manipulation of pace, uncovering the phenomenological impacts each of these components may have on the viewer’s comprehension of the content and exploring how they connect and enhance one another. Dana Claxton’s artwork provides an opportunity to understand how the inclusion of traditions such as oral history and talking circles in new media art is a method of producing contemporary cultural identities, informed by both past and present, and including the viewer within the circle of its creation.

From Neshat’s initial construction of an active space in which dialogue moves back and forth, to Claxton’s development of an inclusive space in which the viewer is becomes involved in the oral, visual, spatial and temporal talking circle, Chapter 3 traces the further evolution of the immersive installation space within video installation. Nalini Malani’s 2012 six-channel video and shadow play installation *In Search of Vanished Blood* forms a completely immersive environment, in which the viewer becomes engaged with a constantly evolving web of interwoven imagery, sound, layered space and shifting pace. In the final chapter of this thesis I will delve into the labyrinth of symbolic and codified references Malani incorporates in this artwork and attempt to peel back the layers to examine the complexity of identity and collective memory presented, particularly in regards to the issue of communal violence in the name of

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36 This work was featured in the 2010 Biennale of Sydney ‘The Beauty of Difference: Songs of Survival in a Precarious Age’.
37 Hall, ‘Cultural Identity and Diaspora’, p. 393.
38 This work was featured in dOCUMENTA (13) in 2012.
culture. Working with images and stories specific to contemporary India, Malani conveys her experience of a culturally justified masculine drive to violence which she then intertwines with universal symbols of violence and oppression through the use of myth and appropriation of recognisable international artworks. In adding this layer Malani makes the work accessible to all and highlights the universal nature of masculine collective violence and the historical oppression of the feminine psyche. I provide theoretical background for a range of these components, information important in understanding the complex issues, while also considering the mode in which these conceptual aspects are integrated into the installation in order to incite a sensory engagement. Chapter 3 highlights how the video installation has evolved to not only include projections and the installation space, but sculptural forms, painting, shadow, light and movement. Immersing the viewer completely within a living space that they must actively negotiate and unravel in an embodied manner, *In Search of Vanished Blood* communicates the complexity of the imagined community, informed by shifting and interacting memories, ideologies and politics.

At this point I must acknowledge that the three case studies put forward in this thesis all focus on artworks created by female artists. This was not a conscious decision, the video installations chosen based upon their content and immersive environments rather than the gender of the artist. Though both Neshat and Malani raise issues of femininity in their artworks as components of their concepts of identity, it is not the intention of this thesis to look specifically at feminism as a central theme. However it should be noted that feminist theory and phenomenology have been linked in the writings of Elizabeth Grosz. Writing on the body in gender politics, Grosz critiques the historical suppression of the feminine through its alignment with the bodily and emotional, in contrast to the rational masculine. In attempting to undermine this structure and give recognition to the female experience, Grosz identifies Merleau-Ponty’s perhaps unintentional contribution as a significant influence on feminist writers, providing them with a common theoretical struggle. “His emphasis on lived experience and perception, his focus on the body-subject, has resonances with what may arguably be
regarded as feminism’s major contribution to the production and structure of knowledges – its necessary reliance on lived experience, on experiential acquaintance as a touchstone or criterion of the validity of theoretical postulates.” There is also a historical connection between female artists and new media, such as video installation. As Barbara London explains, “Many women entered this wide-open field with its clean slate and no old-boys network. Viewers became participants and engaged in a more active relationship with image and sound. Vitality and candour characterize the earliest media projects, which were made as an alternative to and a critique of male-dominated modes of art production.” Therefore it is not necessarily surprising that the chapters of a thesis dealing with video installation and phenomenology should consider three female artists.

Each chapter of this thesis is written in a slightly different style, though with the same voice throughout. These stylistic shifts in prose reflect the differing structures and affects of the video installation at the focus of each chapter, again highlighting the problem of writing about the affect and the sensory; the lived experience. I have attempted to convey the embodied experience of each artwork through its discussion; Chapter 1 expressing the back-and-forth feeling of dialogue from the space-in-between, Chapter 2 structured in a manner that reflects the more constructed documentary style of the artwork, though still cyclical in its communication, and Chapter 3, the most descriptive and yet complex chapter, that attempts to peel back the layers of symbolism, theory and myth and explore the connections that form the labyrinth of this installation.

Evolving in conceptual and creative complexity, through the three chapters of this thesis I examine the use of video installation by Shirin Neshat, Dana Claxton and Nalini Malani to create immersive environments utilising the visual, aural, spatial and temporal. Environments that when encountered by the viewer constitute a phenomenological experience of active

39 Elizabeth A. Grosz, Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism, Allen & Unwin Pty Ltd, St Leonards, 1994, p. 94.
engagement, allowing communication of cultural identity in the form of shared experience and memory, across cultural boundaries.
Initially arising and claiming its place as an accepted artistic medium in the 1960s and 1970s, video art, and the subsequent development of video installation, had strong ties to avant-garde cinema at its point of origin. While experimental cinema opposed narrative continuity in its entirety due to the distraction it posed from the medium of film itself, avant-garde cinema reacted against the manner in which mainstream film adhered to certain genre structures and character stereotypes through linear narrative.\(^{41}\) Influenced by these disruptions to the traditional cinematic form, a similar questioning of the contemporary issues of technology, cinema as commodity and genre classifications emerged in the video installations of the 1990s in which, “Narrative returns in moving image art … but it returns affected by its critique, deconstruction, and rejection in the earlier movements.”\(^{42}\)

In creating video installations artists appropriated elements of the traditional cinematic experience, such as the development of the ‘black box’ as opposed to the white cube of the gallery space, to enhance the viewing experience. This development had necessary implications for the understanding of how a gallery or museum space should be configured, and much scholarship has been dedicated to this particular impact, however I will not address this substantial category of art history in this thesis.\(^{43}\) Within these black boxes artists extended concepts explored by avant-garde cinema regarding the renewed notions of narrative by making structural changes such as the removal of a beginning and end, replaced instead with the construction of a looping experience that may be entered at any point. However they simultaneously differentiated themselves from the restrictions that remained within cinema, evolving through experimentation with the separation of visual elements on to multiple

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\(^{42}\) Ibid.

\(^{43}\) One key text on this subject matter is Cyrus Manasseh’s *The Problematic of Video Art in the Museum 1968-1990*.

competing or complimentary, screens in place of one continuous image that formed a single point of concentration. The placement of the viewer within a space that they must personally negotiate gave agency to the viewer and forced a level of participation that the cinematic space of film did not offer.

These are to name but a few of the artistic mechanisms video installation artists began to employ in order to create a new poetic form of narrative, that Deidre Boyle describes as, “...visually creating a mythic dimension that invited viewers to experience a different ... sense of time, place, and meaning.”\(^44\) This form of narrative in turn enabled a new means of communicating the complexities of ideas such as nationhood, gender and identity whilst engaging the viewer in a more active manner. If we are to take on Stuart Hall’s understanding of cultural identity as a matter of becoming,\(^45\) these narratives in which the viewer holds agency form a process of questioning and creating identity and provide a space for cross-cultural communication in which artists can "negotiate and translate their cultural identities in a discontinuous intertextual temporality of cultural difference,"\(^46\) a 'Third Space'.\(^47\)

One artist who participated in these early conceptions of narrative in video installation is Shirin Neshat with the creation of her trilogy, comprised of *Turbulent* (1998), *Rapture* (1999) and *Fervor* (2000).\(^48\) Having previously worked with the medium of photography, Neshat began working with video installation as she felt the territory in which cinema and the visual arts merged provided new possibilities.\(^49\) Addressing the limitations of cinema she states, “What I like about cinema is the narrative ... but what I don’t like about cinema is that the viewer is so passive, but with installation presentation you have more possibility of engaging the viewer.

\(^{45}\) Hall, ‘Cultural Identity and Diaspora’, p. 394.
\(^{47}\) Ibid., p. 53.
\(^{48}\) Neshat did not intend for these works to form a trilogy, but found they worked in this way once created. Arthur C. Danto, 'Shirin Neshat', *BOMB*, no. 73, Fall 2000, p. 64.
They no longer sit back passively, but the way I design my installations for example the viewer is very much caught in between the story and the dialogue.\textsuperscript{50}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image1}
\label{fig:1}
\end{figure}

The trilogy developed through the continued interest of Neshat in the representation of gender within contemporary Iran, each work presenting a two-channel installation in which each projection focused on a separate gender. Beginning with \textit{Turbulent}, a work that examined the restrictions of women through performance, Neshat presents footage of a man positioned in front of an audience singing a traditional Iranian song based on text a by Jalal al-Din Rumi, followed by footage of a woman producing abstract vocals in an empty room. (See Figure 1) As the work unfolds it reveals that, despite being disallowed from singing in the public realm, the

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid.
woman is able to reach a state of spiritual enlightenment through the freedom of her voice. Through this artwork Neshat begins to examine notions of the feminine that can be related to the semiotic and the indefinable nature of ‘woman’. Using Julia Kristeva’s thesis that woman is “something that cannot be represented, something that is not said, something above and beyond nomenclatures and ideologies,” one could read the female voice in Neshat’s *Turbulent* as a semiotic interruption in Iranian religious performance. The fact that her ‘song’ is nonsensical and cannot be understood or known is significant as it lies outside the semiotic, constituting the poetic eruptive force that could “disturb logic that dominated the social order … by assuming and unraveling its position, its syntheses, and hence the ideologies it controls.”

Kristeva’s notion that if ‘woman’ exists at all it is only in relation to the existence of ‘man’ forms a complex framework of relational identity that is further developed in the second work of the trilogy; *Rapture*. It is this work, a two-channel video installation running thirteen minutes consisting of two black and white projections being screened simultaneously on opposing walls, that utilises a poetic form of narrative to present the viewer with competing notions of religion, gender, repression and exile, that I will focus on in this chapter. These concepts are communicated through the use of visual binary juxtapositions, physical space, operatic performance and symbolic ambiguity; devices that disrupt the traditional viewing format in order to position the viewer in an environment in which they must experience the narrative. However, though creating stark binary oppositions that are immediately apparent to the viewer, it is the subtle form of dialogue that Neshat creates between the projections, in which the viewer becomes involved, that allows a deeper understanding of the artwork. The embodied experience of the viewer as an active witness and mediator within this dialogue serves to form the link between the separated genders. It is this embodied role and the techniques Neshat uses to implicate the viewer that I will explore here.

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Binary Oppositions & Divided Space

Iranian born artist Shirin Neshat moved to the United States of America to complete her education in 1974, at the age of seventeen. Unable to return to Tehran due to the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Neshat did not revisit Iran until 1993, at which time she encountered a significant change from the environment within which she had grown up. Broad cultural shifts were evident, as the movement toward religious conservatism transformed in turn people’s body language, physical appearances, and the manner of gendered interaction.\textsuperscript{54} Returning multiple times after her initial visit, Neshat developed an interest in the “question of the separation of the sexes and its relationship to the issue of social control and ideology.”\textsuperscript{55} Initially exploring these concepts in her first split screen video installation \textit{Turbulent} by investigating the boundaries of the gendered individual through the use of music, Neshat developed this enquiry to encompass not only the individual but the collective, as determined by their sex, in her second installation \textit{Rapture}. The binary division of women and men is not a culturally specific notion, finding articulations in societies worldwide. As such, the initial breakdown of the Neshat’s works into a gendered binary opposition played out between contrasting screens places the content of the work in a conceptual field accessible to all. However Neshat extends these juxtapositions beyond the sexes to align them with symbolic oppositions. She explains, “In \textit{Rapture}, the premise of the piece was men and women’s distinct nature in response to socio-political pressure; I presented this contrast through new sets of ‘opposite’ elements including nature/culture, rebellion/conformity, and predictable/non-predictable.”\textsuperscript{56}

Produced in the form of two projections screened on opposite walls of a darkened room, separated from the gallery context, the sculptural form of Neshat’s \textit{Rapture} is a specific and calculated component of the work. The viewer is presented with a literal opposition through the


\textsuperscript{56} \textit{Ibid.}
physical aspect of the installation, which requires them to view the images depicted in the two pieces of black and white footage in contrast with one another, rather than in a continuum, as is the case with Dana Claxton’s work discussed in Chapter 2. Each projection follows the movements and activities of a gendered group, one a cast of men moving through the enclosed space of a fortress, the other a grouping of women roaming through the open desert, eventually coming to the shoreline of the sea. The use of the multiple projections forces the viewer to see the genders of male and female as separate, highlighting their distinction as there is no interaction shown within the frames of the video presented, they occupy different walls and, as such, different realms. In this way, the void between the projections could be interpreted as a physical representation of the void between the sexes and their collective cultural experiences. The installation space itself providing a physical division that parallels the spatial divisions within Islamic cultural traditions, between public and private, civic and domestic.

Figure 2.

This binary opposition continues to be articulated through the sculptural form in the architecture of the spaces the groups inhabit within the video. In the opening sequence of the video footage the viewer is presented with a long shot of each location, (see Figure 2) in one projection they see the darkened silhouette of a medieval fortress looming above and all but
filling the screen. While in contrast the alternate projection shows a desert plane, framed to accentuate a distant horizon line that conveys a sense of vastness, the landscape continuing on not only as far the eye can see but further still. As the footage continues figures appear in both projections, the camera moving inwards in order to focus on each group. It emerges that it is the men who are choreographed by Neshat to move in a cluster through a fifteenth-century fortress, occupying the ‘militaristic space’\textsuperscript{57} that connotes notions of order along with implications of a guarded interior. Neshat specifically selected the location in Morocco as it represented “an idea of a typical Islamic city, and that idea of boundary, the walls and the canons built in this fortress kind of represent this idea of men near a space that asks for defence and protection and war.”\textsuperscript{58} The shadows of the architectural features, the archways and tunnels of the fort, often surround the men encasing them in darkness, confirming the spatial confines of the environment they inhabit, (see Figure 3) as will be elaborated later in the chapter. This sense of physical restriction is heightened as the footage progresses and the men are forced to follow the twists and turns dictated by the dominant structure, forming a virtual maze that channels them onto the parapet.


\textsuperscript{57} Shirin Neshat: The Woman Moves, Jung & Jung.

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid.
In stark juxtaposition, the women in the opposite projection are physically positioned within the expansive natural setting of the desert awash with sunlight, able to spread across the visual field, unhindered by the constraints of the built environment. (See Figure 4) There is an endlessness to the barren desert that the group of women scatter across that only ceases when they arrive at the shoreline, at which point the sense of the infinite space of the desert is merely succeeded by the sense of the infinite space of the sea. Challenging conventional visual tropes in which women in Muslim countries are typically depicted in urban surrounds, Neshat explores in Rapture the way these same women are perceived and how they might react when relocated in a natural context, dislocated from the familiar and separated from societal codes of conduct. In doing so she encourages the viewer to participate in the sense of liberty we assume these women are experiencing in contrast to the restricted culture we as outsiders perceive they normally inhabit, highlighting conflict between the historical connection of women and nature and the perceived necessity for women to be artificially controlled by social constraints. Through this creation of binary difference in the setting Neshat conveys to the viewer the sense of disparity between male and female that she experienced in a post-Revolutionary Iran while

59 Ibid.
subverting established presumptions; confining the men within the structural order they champion, and giving the women freedom within a natural environment.

As the physical settings of the two projections form a binary opposition of confinement and freedom so too does the attire Shirin Neshat has chosen to dress her cast in. However, contradicting the environmental surroundings in which the men are detained and the women are released, the costumes carry implications of the inverse. Dressed in administrative clothing the men are seen in gleaming white business shirts that reference Western fashion and notions of modernity. If only by appearance this group can be viewed as unconnected to any particular cultural or religious group, assuming a mode of dressing that is international and indistinguishable. Conversely, the women are depicted in black chadors, a form of dress often associated in Western society with female subservience and more recently with violence,62 and generally understood in terms of the spatial limitation of the female body.63 This garment cannot be confused with that of any other cultural group and places the women firmly within the Muslim world, immediately communicating to the viewer a superficial sense of who these women are and what they believe.

In choosing to depict the women in *Rapture* in chadors, Neshat at once creates a barrier between the Western viewer and the women within the artwork by inserting a highly politicized garment that is deemed as Other, while also encouraging the viewer to question their preconceived ideas of women who assume the chador. Though Neshat presents visual articulations of religion, she refrains from forming a judgment on its value,64 preferring to allow an ambiguity that promotes interpretations by the viewer. In the case of the video installation *Rapture*, the chador could be interpreted as a means of freedom. Meaning ‘tent’, if viewed as a portable house the chador could in fact enable the women to move throughout the desert while retaining a sense of security, while the men are unable to leave the confines of their literal homes.

62 Milani, Shirin Neshat, p. 6.
63 “The term ‘chador’ means tent and indeed the veil, for centuries, functioned as a portable, fenced-off house shrunk to the size of a woman’s body. Gendered allocation of space, however, has a sweeping relevance and the desire to limit women’s space is not peculiar to one culture or faith.” Ibid., p. 9.
Farzaneh Milani emphasises the possibilities Neshat provides for finding a mutual understanding between the women in *Rapture* and the viewer, stating, “If we can avoid becoming entangled in the dichotomy of the ‘liberated, global’ West and the ‘oppressive, provincial’ East, if we can resist the impulse to dismiss Neshat’s women out of hand just because they wear the veil, then we will discover them to be powerfully self-assertive agents. Stretching fields of action and imagination, challenging traditional allocation of power and space, they communicate universal concerns without compromising their cultural specificity.”\(^{65}\) This supports Kristeva’s account that women exist conditionally beyond the semiotic articulations and structural boundaries of male logic as an excessive force,\(^{66}\) and embody something that cannot be represented in traditional modes of signification.\(^{67}\)

It is true that these distinctions between the sexes may have been represented with a two-dimensional medium such as photography, with contrasting images presented in relation to one another. However Shirin Neshat is able to create a more complex narrative of gendered cultural experience within *Rapture* by utilising the capabilities of video as a medium through the demonstration of movement and sound that is not available to more traditional art forms. The narrative form is evident in the artwork’s clear delineation of a beginning and end to the projections, while the narrative arc is formed throughout the two projections as the viewer follows the cast’s movements through their particular environments towards a climactic endpoint in the installation. The corporal movement of the figures in the footage is accentuated through the simultaneous movement of the camera, and the relationship between the physical activities and the soundtrack.

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Turning Heads: following the narrative

Following the opening long shots that establish the settings for the two projections, as discussed above, the male-centered projection cuts to a space within the fortress in which a darkened archway frames the shot and a group of men is seen approaching from the distance. The camera retains this architectural frame as it gradually moves forward using the cinematic technique of the dolly zoom to meet the men’s advance, which is given a sense of purpose due to the low chanting that emanates from them, until the men halt at the entrance to the arch, falling silent, and the viewer is confronted with a close up of the group, cast in shadow, in the foreground. As the continuing procession gathers behind, filling the background, an impression of confinement becomes evident to the viewer, the growing number of men restricted to the space beyond the archway, steadily becoming more and more congested. With the sudden lack of sound, Neshat creates a sense of personal space, during which the viewer becomes the voyeur and is able to study the wall of unmoving faces that look back at them uneasily.

Concurrently on the opposite wall the projection that has opened with an establishing long shot of the landscape, with the low-lying horizon line spreading straight across the frame, remains static as the group of women emerge in the distance, their female figures indistinguishable but instead presented as sculptural forms due to the amorphous black shapes of the chadors billowing in the bright desert sunlight. In comparison to the men, the women spread unhindered across the visual plane, moving forward slowly and silently to meet the camera, until they too stop as a group to be filmed close up filling the projection with a mass of faces and eyes framed in black, staring at the viewer with a determined gaze. While the viewer is placed in the position of voyeur when looking upon the male projection at this point, the female projection claims an unwavering authority. This initial sequence stands as a beginning to the narrative of Rapture, a cinematic form of introduction occurring with the cast approaching to greet the camera. It is also a sequence that establishes the women portrayed within the video
installation as strong and compelling characters, undermining any reductive preconceptions of weakness associated cultural restraint. 68

After a period of silence, the footage of the men changes, a different male chanting begins with a faster pace than the previous soundtrack and the accompaniment of a low beat of clapping hands, as the men are filmed from a variety of angles while they move in swarms throughout the fortress. Always proceeding in huddled groups that call to mind a colony of ants, the men gain momentum in time with the rhythm of the soundtrack, marching through the maze of pathways toward the camera, their approach upon the fixed camera creating an experience of confinement as though they cannot move beyond it. The angle shifts to depict the men from above, filling a circular space below roused into chaotic motion as they push and pull, replicating the circular architectural form in their mob-like cluster. The camera cuts to a shot of the top of wall surrounding the space where another group of men stand and the camera pans slowly across them, allowing the viewer to watch as they look down impassively at the spectacle below. As the camera returns to the bird’s eye view the perception that the men are unable to escape the outside gaze of the camera surfaces. The following scenes show men carrying ladders that they then climb without purpose and undertaking ritual practices, passing along incense and unrolling carpets. Conveyed by the cast with a sense of intent that is accentuated by the steady beat of the soundtrack and the masculine strength of the repetitive chanting, these actions are revealed by the relentlessness of the camera to be pointless. Neshat confirms, “…this crowd of men come and go everywhere, busy, seemingly very busy doing something, but actually not accomplishing very much … it was more about creating a kind of space, a mental space, where people just really carried a sense of absurdity.” 69

While this all unfolds in the male projection, the female projection continues to focus on the women’s faces in silence, as they stand witness to the activity that occurs across from them. It becomes apparent that, whilst there is a clear binary division of the installation space

68 Milani, Shirin Neshat, p. 7.
69 Shirin Neshat: The Woman Moves, Jung & Jung.
through the separation of the projections and their placement on opposing walls, the active content that takes place within the projection and the soundtrack accompanying it preferences one projection at a time, while the other projection watches on, establishing a form of dialogue. That is not to say that the footage of the women standing is passive, it could be argued that their sustained gaze at the camera holds greater agency than the men’s senseless unrest. This is a complexity that will be examined further in the next section of this chapter.

Suddenly the women begin to ululate and simultaneously the chanting ceases and footage of groups of men standing still looking at the camera, stopped in the midst of their procession throughout the fortress, is projected on the other wall. The focus shifts to the ululating women, a practice associated with, but not specific to, the Persian culture. The sound could be interpreted as either wild or transcendental. Contrasted with the verbal chanting of the men, the ululation highlights once again the problem of woman representing, or expressing, herself within the symbolic structure of post-Revolutionary Iranian culture. The use of the untranslatable ululation references what Kristeva identifies as the “ruptures, blank spaces, and holes in language”70 and provides the women with a means of interrupting the established semiotic structure. Though the period of ululation is brief, the intensity of the unified sound coupled with the close up depiction of the women’s faces, tongues vibrating rapidly, ensure the projection of the female experience commands the attention of the viewer, as well as the attention of the men across the installation space.

Once the ululating comes to an end there is silence for a moment as the women continue to look back at the viewer and then, just as suddenly as they broke into ululation, they turn their backs on the camera and begin to walk away. As the camera cuts to a shot of the women at a further distance, continuing their movement out across the desert, a soundtrack of music from an indistinct instrument similar in sound to violin begins to quickly play. The regularity of its ebb and flow creates a tempo that connotes a sense of urgency when viewed in conjunction with the camera’s constant pulling back from the women and their movement.

70 Julia Kristeva cited in Best, Visualizing Feeling, p. 2.
within the frame, chadors flapping with the speed. While the length of time that the camera focuses on the women’s exodus promotes an understanding of distance, in contrast the men remain fixed in their positions, passive in their stance. The viewer experiences the women’s need to make space between themselves and the structures represented across the installation space in the other projection.

The instrumental music gives way to a chorus of men singing in unison. The sound is melodic and one presumes it is a form of religious prayer as the men in the projection begin to assume ritualistic positions, kneeling and bowing in concentric circles. Again the viewer is placed in the position of voyeur watching the men perform these rites, unable to access the meaning of the words or the practices they undertake we can only observe and appreciate the ordered nature of their collective rituals. Here the men engage with the semiotic structure of language and cultural codes of practice that Hélène Cixous argues are constructed in a phallocentric and masculine form. Meanwhile, the women stand clustered in a rectangular formation, another symbolic binary opposition set against the circles the males form. These contrasting black and white patterns formed by the male and female bodies as they move together reference the recognisable minimalist geometric design of Islamic art; the use of repetition, positive and negative space, and symmetry. The cultural connotations imbued in these visual elements of the video projections support the performative aspects, reinforcing for the viewer the cultural specificity of the artwork’s concepts.

As the men pray the women raise their hands to the camera in a united gesture, revealing that their palms have been painted with Farsi calligraphy. Again, the viewer cannot read the inscriptions, yet the presence of the written word on the women’s bodies is highly suggestive. Drawing references to Neshat’s earlier work Women of Allah, (see Figure 5) a photographic series of portraits of women overlaid with Iranian poetry, the text within Rapture could reference the women’s inability to sing as the men do and represent their rebellion against

their enforced silence.\textsuperscript{73} This interpretation is also conveyed in the agency of the positions of the women’s arms, as if in protest. (See Figure 6) Choreographed as a deliberate gesture,\textsuperscript{74} the raising of the women’s arms is an alternate mode of representation for the women in a similar way to the ululation. Luce Irigaray contends that, “If we [women] don’t invent a language, if we don’t find our body’s language, it will have too few gestures to accompany our story.”\textsuperscript{75} Reading the gesture with Irigaray’s argument in mind, the position of the raised palms is a means for the women to ‘speak’ in physical terms, creating a visual and physical boundary between themselves and the men, rejecting the masculine structures they face opposite, and holding firm in their active and unwavering stance. This gesture is a powerful symbol with affective consequences for the viewer who feels the meaning and strength behind the action more so than they comprehend the men’s frenzied ritual.

\begin{figure}[h]
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\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{73} The location of singing in the male domain is referenced in Neshat’s previous video installation Turbulent, 1998.

\textsuperscript{74} Here I follow Luce Irigaray’s understanding of the term ‘gesture’ as associated with a form of active performance.

\textsuperscript{75} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 103.
As the men’s song ends and silence falls the women again turn their backs to the camera and walk away to a still undisclosed destination. Then the men begin to chant and clap once more and navigate the paths of the fortress to emerge on the parapet where they can presumably look out upon the women. The camera follows the backs of the women in one projection, whilst looking over the shoulders of the men to the outside world in the other. Again Neshat reinforces the binary distinction between the men who are trapped and can travel no further and the freedom of the wandering women. Abruptly the men’s chanting halts and, in a frame that shows a close up of the men leaning over the walls, their heads turn in synchronization to their left toward the camera, gazing directly ahead, looking toward the projection of the women.

Female voices begin to chant in a manner as yet unheard during the video installation in time with the rhythm of a drum that is depicted in close up being beaten by a woman’s feet.
Over the chanting a single female voice increases in volume. Forming a connection to the first work in the trilogy *Turbulent*, the woman in *Rapture* also sings in an ethereal manner, expressing not words but pure sounds, as though she herself is in ‘rapture’.76 This evocative soundtrack builds as a climax in the narrative, as the final sequences of the installation unfold, showing a small group of women entering the frame pushing a rowing boat. As the men remain static in both their stances and within the frame of their projection, a larger group of women descends over the rocks onto the shore of the sea, rushing to the water’s edge. The camera pans across the beach until the boat, now in the water, comes into frame, highlighting the importance of the vessel as the singing dies down. A close up looking back toward the shoreline shows the women pushing the boat through the waves. The physical effort of the venture is conveyed through their movement with the movement of the tide and the sound of their heavy breathing as the chanting eventually stops, leaving only the waves to be heard.

In a final climactic moment the rapid instrumental music that played during the women’s first flight from the camera resumes and the men, as if stirred into action, run to the parapets and mount them. Adopting the cinematic tool of tying certain soundtracks to particular themes within a film, Neshat’s reincorporation of this music at this time, invokes the same sense of escape in the viewer it did previously, creating a cumulative emotional response. As six women climb into the boat and begin to drift out into the waves the camera follows their movement with the tide. The men are seen in silhouette from a distance standing on the parapets of the fortress, arms slowly waving at the women, while a shot from behind of the women who remain on the beach shows they stand in complete stillness. As the instrumental music continues to play the men remain, waving helplessly, bound by their own structural regimes, rituals and architecture while the female-centred projection focuses on the boat as it disappears out to sea.

Shirin Neshat utilises these stark binary oppositions within the dual video projections and across the installation space of *Rapture* to convey to the viewer a sensory understanding of the lived experience of gender division she perceives in contemporary Iranian culture. The symbolic juxtaposition of the built environment and the natural world, along with the contrasting forms of movement expressed by the genders within these spaces, create an awareness of the different experience of space that Iranian women encounter compared to men. While the men feel a sense of belonging within the structural codes they have created, the women’s belonging is aligned with their gender and their shared experience of resistance and rebellion, articulated through means other than the semiotic structure of language.\(^7^7\)

It must be understood therefore, that while *Rapture* constitutes a culturally specific work that focuses on the collective experience of womanhood in post-Revolutionary Iran, it does not portray women in the simplistic position of restriction and deference. Rather, a far more complex image of woman emerges through the narrative of *Rapture*, portraying their perpetual resistance to the oppressive structures of their culture, as Milani acknowledges, “Two competing narratives of womanhood emerge … a paradoxical blend of conformity and revolt, of accommodation and protest, of acquiescence and resistance. Both are a response to the curtailment of women’s access to the public domain.”\(^7^8\) Neshat sees the Iranian women to be brave and strong, their rebellious reactions to oppression often becoming a catalyst for change.\(^7^9\) In creating the video installation *Rapture* Shirin Neshat places the viewer in a position where they can begin to comprehend the sense of division that exists within a gendered experience of Iranian culture, whilst addressing the complexities of these distinctions, a site where they engage with these cultural intricacies, exploring and questioning them further.

\(^{77}\) Cixous states that, “In woman, personal history blends together with the history of all women, as well as national and world history.” Cixous, *The Laugh of the Medusa*, pp. 252-253.
\(^{79}\) *Shirin Neshat: The Woman Moves*, Jung & Jung.
The Space-In-Between

A documentary records a truth; a work of art finds ways of presenting to the mind what cannot be shown directly. And it requires Spirit – or wit – in the viewers, to find and infer the idea from its mode of presentation. It is in this way that philosophy and revealed religion work together in Neshat’s art to convey to her viewers, independent of their cultural situation, the deep truths of the human spirit.

(ARTHUR DANTO, ‘SHIRIN NESHAT AND THE CONCEPT OF ABSOLUTE SPIRIT’) 80

Shirin Neshat’s use of binary oppositions in her video installation Rapture is a key aspect of the work and as such has been the focus of much of the scholarship surrounding the installation.

Art historians and theorists such as Claudia Mesch, Farzaneh Milani, Sussan Babaie, Nancy Princenthal, Rebecca R. Hart and Maeve Connolly have all undertaken in-depth descriptions and analyses of Rapture, discussing the complex nature of womanhood that exists with present-day Iran as depicted and examined by Neshat. 81 Comprehensive in their investigation of the binary oppositions of the artwork, these texts assert a focus on division, which then extends beyond the work to become a metaphor for the artist herself, as a female Iranian artist in exile, inhabiting a Western land. Art historian Sussan Babaie addresses this association, stating that, “In our world, we seem compelled to make her life a duality, a binary that also fits other binaries: Islam of the East and secular religions of the West (for secularism is also a religion when positioned in such oppositional formulae), patriarchal authority and gender-balanced freedom, female and male, free and bonded.” 82

While comprehensive on the theme of binary oppositions such as gender division, societal distinctions and religious disparities, many of these texts fail to delve into the manner in which these established juxtapositions come to form a dialogue with one another. Instead they

MILANI, SHIRIN NESHAT.
BABAI E, HART & PRINCENTHAL, SHIRIN NESHAT.
remain focused on the initially apparent dual level of the installation that determines the space between the projections to be a space of division, rather than a space for interaction. An exception to this pattern of interpretation is the work of Arthur Danto, who instead concentrates on the experience of the viewer positioned within the installation space, writing not only of the cerebral understanding that *Rapture* enables, but also of his own personal sensory encounter, as will be discussed further in this section. It is in the same vein as Danto’s reading of Neshat’s *Rapture* that I will discuss the sensory ‘space-in-between’ that the artist creates within the sculptural space of the installation, through the call and response timing between the projections\(^{83}\) and the implementation of a single soundtrack that unites the visual components of *Rapture*, along with the impact that this space-in-between has upon the viewer who inhabits it in absorbing for themselves the experiences of gender within a specific culture.

As previously outlined in the description of the two video channels, though the projects run simultaneously, the narrative ‘action’ appears to alternate between the channels rather than unfold in both projections concurrently. In this sense, the narrative forms a call and response across the installation space, as the divided genders converse with one another through stages of action and reaction. This exchange between male and female complicates the binary reading of *Rapture*, adding a dynamic element that calls into question the agency of the women who, though segregated, represent an equal half of the action. Their activity is not defined by the men but rather forms a counterpoint to their structured ritual. Neshat notes that, “People are mistaken when they think that I am insisting that there is an incredible separation between men and women, that I am glorifying their opposition. That’s not true. Rather, this is my system of creating opposites, and then bringing men and women together again.” She goes on to explain that she “wished to create a dynamic between the male and female, traditional and non-traditional music, and the whole creation of things."\(^{84}\) The call and response that forms this dialogue between the gendered collectives, establishing a conversation within a group seemingly


defined by their cultural association as Islamic Iranians, is enabled through not only the content of the videos but through the use of the installation space itself. By positioning the channels to be screened opposite each other, Neshat simulates the configuration of a conversation between two people, facing one another, each speaking in turn. Although *Rapture* does not include spoken communication, the alternating focus of movement directed to one channel while the participants in the other channel observe establishes a dialogic back-and-forth momentum across the room that the viewer becomes actively included within as witness. Therefore the sculpture of the installation is not a random or aesthetic decision, so much as conceptual necessity.  

If one analyses this method of installation in terms of Merleau-Ponty’s writings on the experience of dialogue, it constitutes an atmosphere in which reciprocal perspectives are shared to form a ‘dual being’.  

Merleau-Ponty describes the conversational space as a “common ground; [where] my thought and his are inter-woven into a single fabric, … a shared operation of which neither of us is the creator.” As such, the dialogue that is represented by the two projections and the installation space that stands between them in Neshat’s *Rapture* forms an active and engaged space where alternate understandings and lived experiences come together in an exchange to inform one another. For example, while the women seen independently, clothed in their chadors and located in a desolate space, may be read as repressed and helpless, when engaged in the conversation with the males who are physically restricted by the walls of their fort the women become the rebellious and free. It is the phenomenological potential of the dialogic space to allow differing perceptions to co-exist and for thought to form, and in the case of *Rapture*, the installation forms a dialogue that allows thoughts and understanding to form within the viewer through their embodied experience within the space.

The unspoken dialogue of *Rapture* is further signified by Neshat’s soundtrack. As has already been discussed, the soundtrack of the artwork plays an important role in the building of

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85 Ibid., p. 48.
87 Ibid.
the narrative arc with its creation of a sense of rhythm and climax for the viewer. In addition to this, the aural component of the video installation, comprised of chanting, singing, instrumental music and silence serves to demarcate chapters within the narrative that assist the viewer in determining when and where to shift their attention, coercing the viewer into following the dialogue of *Rapture* in order to comprehend its interwoven nature as well as its dualities. In this manner the soundtrack also performs the task of uniting the two channels, as while the two opposing projections both play continuously and therefore cannot be watched concurrently by the viewer, the soundtrack is singular and stands as the common element connecting the competing visuals. Connolly highlights this fact, writing that the work involves, "...the staging of visibly separate spaces, or spheres, for men and women. This emphasis on opposition or division is also formally underscored by the editing, directing attention from one screen to another, and by the use of black and white cinematography. Yet despite the existence of multiple image sources, [the] work is characterized by a relatively cohesive sonic environment, in which layered audio effects merge with music."88 However her focus still remains on the issue of binary oppositions within *Rapture*, not exploring the nature of the impact this soundtrack has on filling and enlivening the installation space, and assisting the viewer in understanding the narrative they experience whilst in that space.

Incorporating traditional vocal sounds such as the ululation and religious chanting, Neshat firmly positions *Rapture’s* content within the cultural context of Islamic Iran, however the use of these emotive sounds rather than non-subtitled spoken words that would be foreign to a large proportion of any given audience, allows the viewer access on a sensory level to an emotional understanding of the narrative. In this case the soundtrack plays a vital role standing in place of a verbal exchange, as the use of music represents a form universal language that might be equally understood, or interpreted, by all through an affective approach.89 The choice to omit spoken words with subtitles ensures an ambiguity within the video installation, that forces the

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88 Connolly, *The place of artists’ cinema*, p. 97.
89 Ebrahimian & Neshat, ‘Passage to Iran’, p. 45.
viewer to watch the actions of the gendered groups, listen to the sounds that articulate their experience, and feel both the competitive tension of the dual projections and the cohesive conversation taking place across the installation space.

Art critic and philosopher Arthur Danto, in his introductory essay to a volume dedicated to the artwork of Shirin Neshat, writes on his own personal experience of ‘being’ within the installation space of *Rapture* and the effects it had upon him:

> The way these works were conceived is that the audience sits between two screens, one in front of, the other behind it. The action moves from screen to screen. … It is a powerful experience to be immersed in and surrounded by the sound coming from different directions, as I did when I first saw the work in the contemporary art gallery of the Art Institute of Chicago, with the space all to myself, moved by the duelling amplifiers, which literally put me into a state of rapture. … For me, it looks like the enactment of some archaic myth, requiring an interpretation… To what does ‘rapture’ refer? To a faith the women have in abandoning the brooding chateau and the barren strand? Is the rapture something we share or should share? I was deeply moved, then as now.⁹⁰

Throughout the essay Danto goes on to explain how the relationship between the video channels, and the men and women within them, across the space comes to feel like a confrontation, grounded in the conflict between the triviality of the men’s adherence to ritual and structure, and the women’s resolute desire for freedom, whether physical or spiritual.⁹¹ The men reacting to the women, and then the women reacting in turn, the viewer situated in the middle. He notes, that while the choruses create an active space, the periods of silence hold just as much agency and power filling the installation environment in a different manner.⁹²

Through its invigorating and forceful nature, Danto asserts that in *Rapture* Neshat has created an artwork that acquires power as it instills in the viewer a wish for repetition, a need to undertake the relatively short viewing experience again in order to perceive alternate details, inferences or interpretations. Drawing a parallel to Plato’s *Ion*, Danto clarifies that there is no

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⁹¹ Ibid.
⁹² Ibid., p. 10.
quantifiable reason for the artwork’s effectiveness, but rather that it holds a ‘mythic energy’\textsuperscript{93} that allows \textit{Rapture} to “move the minds of its viewers – to engage their sympathies, or at least inflect their thoughts…”\textsuperscript{94} As such, while a cerebral analysis of \textit{Rapture} as a depiction of genders in conflict is available to the viewer, for Danto an understanding of the embodied experience of the artwork and a questioning of its effects will provide the viewer with a more involved appreciation of Neshat’s aims in creating this video installation.

In developing \textit{Rapture} as a video installation Shirin Neshat wishes not only to convey to the viewer a conceptual understanding of the complexities of identity for women in Iranian culture, but also to provide the viewer with the agency to engage with this issue. Positioning the viewer in the space through which the dialogue between the two video channels is undertaken, Neshat challenges them to make their own decisions about where to place their focus, becoming a form of mediator within the space who must acknowledge all they are able to and draw an overarching view of the unfolding events and the meaning they convey.\textsuperscript{95} While not trapped within the installation space, as the men are trapped within the fort in the video projection, the viewers do experience active discomfort due to their position. Manipulated to navigate the dual channels in order to follow the unfolding narrative, the viewer comes to feel a tension across the installation space that they must physically turn to negotiate. This back and forth motion that is required of the viewer is demonstrated in the videos that viewers have attempted to capture of the installation as they encounter it.\textsuperscript{96}

The physicality of the viewer’s participation in the viewing of the video installation necessarily adds an affective dimension to their sensory experience and understanding of \textit{Rapture}. Susan Best explains the ‘affective state’ using Charles Altieri’s conception of the term as

\textsuperscript{93} Ibid., pp. 13-14.
\textsuperscript{94} Ibid., p. 13.
being “characterised by an imaginative engagement in the immediate processes of sensation,” and as such the corporeal element of *Rapture* for the viewer within the installation space provides a location for engagement of the imaginary in the reading of the artwork along with the embodied sensory impact of the conversational space. The discomfort felt by the viewer is a symptom of the artwork’s capability to affect the viewer, and this affective quality allows Neshat to communicate on a further level with her viewers than a purely cerebral one. As scholar Elizabeth Grosz attends, “Art, according to Gilles Deleuze, does not produce concepts, though it does address problems and provocations. It produces sensations, affects, intensities as its mode of addressing problems, which sometimes align with and link to concepts, the object of philosophical production, which are how philosophy deals with or addresses problems.”

Therefore Shirin Neshat does not proffer answers but rather, through the effects of *Rapture* upon the viewer, encourages one to engage within the content she presents and to question it.

It is Merleau-Ponty’s belief that within an embodied space phenomenological experience is not necessarily an instant sensation, but rather that it is over the course of time that we take to view and feel the separate regions within the space that our understanding of the experience emerges. I believe this is true of viewing *Rapture*, as not only is the understanding of the narrative arc understood over the course of the thirteen minute loop, but the viewer’s awareness of their own role within the work is revealed, as they choose how they will stand within the space, which projection they will watch, and by default, which they will ignore. Neshat has been candid about her interest in this active engagement with her audience that is enabled by her choice of medium. She states, “Unlike a cinematic picture, where you are sitting in your chair and are passive, here you become a part of the piece. It’s a very emotionally and psychologically demanding situation in which you have to keep debating whether you should be looking on this side or that side. … You have to make a decision which side you are going to watch, which means you have to decide which part you are going to sacrifice. It puts you in a very peculiar

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97 Charles Altieri cited in Best, *Visualising Feeling*, p. 5.
98 Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, p. 2.
position where you have more impact as a spectator.”

In creating this stressful phenomenological experience for the viewer, Neshat replicates in the embodied viewer the tensions of the figures within her videos. As the viewer becomes torn in their attentions across the space, whilst also attempting to understand the exchange taking place within it, they are able to comprehend the need of the women in the video to move and break free, along with the feeling of helplessness the men must endure trapped within their own cultural structures. Here Shirin Neshat manages to produce a video installation that, as Margaret Morse puts it, “…exploits the capacities of the body itself and its senses to grasp the world visually, aurally, and kinaesthetically.”

By placing the viewer in this position of power, allowing them agency in their own personal experience of the artwork, *Rapture* becomes open to a variety of interpretations, every viewer drawing on differing aspects, and combinations of elements, to derive a conceptual meaning from the work. As can be seen through the scholarship surrounding this artwork, various art historians have written contradictory accounts not only of the overarching message *Rapture* conveys but also of what is depicted in the work itself. While general consensus seems to place the men within their own fort, undertaking their quotidian rituals, Lyubov Bugaeva reads the frenetic movement as the men ‘attacking’ the fortress. Interpretations of the architectural spaces themselves are distorted by the thematic direction a scholar might wish to emphasize. For example, focused upon the religious connotations of the work, Claudia Mesch writes that the fortress is actually a mosque. While, enraptured in the to-and-fro of the dual projections, Nancy Princenthal states categorically that it is the men who beat the drum with their feet, yet this imagery is clearly shown in the video channel centered on the women’s activity.

Differing for each viewer, these interpretations of the visual components of *Rapture* stand as a form of superficial evidence to the fact that the phenomenological experience of the

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100 Ebrahimian & Neshat, ‘Passage to Iran’, p. 48.
103 Mesch, *Art and Politics*, p. 120.
individual viewer informs their understanding of the artwork. This is supported by Merleau-Ponty’s thesis that, “…each particular observation is strictly linked to the location of the observer and cannot be abstracted from this particular situation…”

This understanding of the impact of the embodiment of the space can be explored in greater depth when applied to the conceptual interpretations of viewers in relation to the complete work. Interpretations in terms of the notions of identity and culture that are put forward to be considered include issues of gender, religion, ritual, structure, freedom and rebellion. Regarded in this manner, the video installation forms what Homi Bhabha terms a ‘Third Space’; “The pact of interpretation is never simply an act of communication between the I and the You designated in the statement. The production of meaning requires that these two places be mobilized in the passage through a Third Space, which represents both the general conditions of language and the specific implication of the utterance in a performative and institutional strategy of which it cannot ‘in itself’ be conscious.”

As such Shirin Neshat’s Rapture provides a space for the viewer and the ‘Other’ to meet and engage on a phenomenological level, allowing an exchange in understanding independent of preconceived beliefs and assumptions.

Operatic Performance, Ambiguity & Exile

She doesn’t ‘speak’; she throws her trembling body forward; she lets go of herself; she flies; all of her passes into her voice, and it’s with her body that she vitally supports the ‘logic’ of her speech. Her flesh speaks true. She lays herself bare. In fact, she physically materializes what she’s thinking; she signifies it with her body.

(Hélène Cixous, ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’)

Shirin Neshat captures the immensity of communicating cultural concepts through her use of operatic performance and extravagant imagery, and the uncertainties she intentionally leaves open

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105 Merleau-Ponty, The World of Perception, p. 36.
106 Bhabha, The Location of Culture, p. 53.
to interpretation in *Rapture*. Using the camera to guide the viewer in following the movements of
the men and women, at no time does the individual play a role in either of the video channels.
The groups move on mass, acting as united formations, as the camera pans across their faces or
frames a cluster, never singling out an individual.\(^{108}\) The unity of the collective as articulated in
the projections signifies that Neshat is not portraying the circumstances of an individual but the
conflicts faced by a cultural group who are attempting to negotiate the sudden change a
revolution institutes upon a nation. The operatic performance is represented in the expansive
natural environment and imposing structure of the fortress, the energy of the rhythmic music
and intensity of the vocals, the patterns within the choreographed mass movement, and the effort
of the women as they push the boat to the shore and out against the tide, heaving and panting.
These aspects of the narrative are exaggerated to express to the viewer the force behind the actions
of the groups; these are not characters but symbols of a cultural shift and search for identity.

The narrative style of *Rapture* is vaguely reminiscent of some French New Wave cinema
in its experimentation with the established rules of storytelling and cinematic sparseness.\(^{109}\) The
footage within the projections shares a comparable editing style with the later minimalist films of
Marguerite Duras, such as *Agatha et les lectures illimitées* (1981), in which long shots and pans
across exterior horizon lines are starkly juxtaposed with jump cuts to interiors. The use of
architecture to frame particular shots is echoed, along with the use of chiaroscuro, the contrasting
of light and shadow, and black and white film stock create a sense of the dramatic visually,
without the need for verbal dialogue. More visually similar still is Philippe Garrel’s *Le lit de la
vierge* (1969). Shot in the Moroccan desert, as was *Rapture*, this black and white film uses
camera work to track human movement at a fast pace when navigating the built environment,
whilst using long, panning, cinematic shots when meditating the natural landscape. Like
*Rapture*, this film also uses its soundtrack, rather than spoken word, to set the work’s pace and
build to its climax, which also has parallels in its involvement of the symbolic visual trope of a


human disappearing out into the sea. However, though Rapture’s filming techniques and editing approach follow an overarching narrative structure that in its poetic style fits within the category of cinema, as established by the New Wave, the footage within the projections moves beyond cinema and into the realm of art when one considers the implications of its installation and the space-in-between previously discussed.

As the viewer stands alone within the installation and becomes a part of the active space they engage with the figures in the video in an “experience of self, and specifically self in relation to the ‘collective’.”

Though the viewer cannot come to embody the position of the figures within the projections, they are able to interact with the performative aspects of the artwork that cross the boundaries of culture, the emotive and sensorial understanding conveyed upon the viewer through the operatic universalising the broader issues of the experience such as the feelings of futility, resistance and determination that are commonalities among cultures. It is Shirin Neshat’s aim to use the video installation to engage viewers from all cultural backgrounds in a questioning of the collective cultural experience of women in Iran. In order for this questioning to be undertaken without predetermined judgments, Neshat creates a form of operatic poetry in Rapture that dissuades the viewer from interpreting it as one would a documentary or film. Reinforcing Morse’s distinction that film is ‘representational’, while video installations are ‘presentational’, engaging an active viewer, Neshat encourages her embodied viewers to engage on a sensory and emotive level. Feeling the work as opposed to reading it.

The distancing of the viewer from a cerebral analysis, and the promotion of an emotive engagement assists in putting the viewer in an open-minded position when they encounter the ambiguous ending to the narrative, in turn allowing them the flexibility to question its meaning. As the six women who have boarded the boat drift out to sea their movement becomes that of the water; that which Neshat sees as symbolic of something that never stands still. So too are the

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111 Milani, Shirin Neshat, p. 13.
112 Shirin Neshat: The Woman Moves, Jung & Jung.
women, who are indefinable and elusive.\textsuperscript{113} Where are these women going? What will become of them? Is this an escape or a suicide mission? Rejecting the “finite, definite, structured, loaded with meaning … places woman on the side of the explosion of codes: with revolutionary moments.”\textsuperscript{114} The uncertainty of the outcome in \textit{Rapture}'s narrative is an intentional strategy by Neshat to continue the engagement of the viewer beyond the conclusion of the viewing experience. Forcing the viewer to leave, or re-watch, the video installation with the question of the women’s aims and fate weighing on their minds. “I didn’t want to make it clear what it was all about. What was clear was that they were very brave, and they were very strong to make such an act,”\textsuperscript{115} asserts Neshat. “Whether this departure signifies an act of suicide or one of liberation, it certainly embodies an idea of courage and self-determination.”\textsuperscript{116} This expression of uncertainty places Neshat within a generation of Iranian artists who bring structures of knowledge into doubt, and in doing so become concerned with a crisis of identity.\textsuperscript{117} In \textit{Rapture} Shirin Neshat is able to call to question what it is to identify as both woman and Iranian, and propose to the viewer that rather than seeing the veiled figure as repressed they might instead experience her strength.

However even this is not a given, as the questions posed by the video installation are never answered. Neshat admits that, “The most I can do is to show how complex everything is.”\textsuperscript{118} This aversion to claiming an authoritative stance within her work may stem in part from Neshat’s position as an Iranian artist in exile, the space-in-between she creates in her video installations replicating the her own position between her native and assumed cultures.\textsuperscript{119} Acknowledging her position as exile, Neshat is clear that her artworks are very much those that

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{113} Kristeva, ‘Woman Can Never Be Defined’, p. 137.
\item \textsuperscript{114} Julia Kristeva, ‘Oscillation between Power and Denial’, \textit{New French Feminisms}, eds. Courtivron & Marks, p. 166.
\item \textsuperscript{115} \textit{Shirin Neshat: The Woman Moves}, Jung & Jung.
\item \textsuperscript{116} Shirin Neshat cited in Danto, \textit{Shirin Neshat}, p. 55.
\item \textsuperscript{118} Ebrahimian & Neshat, ‘Passage to Iran’, p. 53.
\item \textsuperscript{119} Newman, ‘Moving Image in the Gallery Since the 1990s’, p. 111.
\end{itemize}
would be made by an Iranian artist living outside Iran, and are quite distinct from those that would be made by an Iranian artist still occupying their homeland. These works are created as a means to make sense of the events and changes, philosophical and ideological, to Iranian society that she missed during the Revolution, and the shift from the ‘Persian culture’ to the Islamic Republic of Iran. In using her art making practice in this way, Shirin Neshat creates works that allow viewers who are positioned as outsiders to the Iranian culture to attempt to understand these experiences also.

Shirin Neshat creates in the video installation Rapture an embodied space that positions the viewer in the crossfire of a dialogue that takes place between the two opposing video projections that form the artwork. This dialogue, and its communication of the imagined cultural experience of Iranian women, is conveyed through the use of the visual footage and soundtrack of the video, along with the manipulation of time and space. Neshat represents an early articulation of the immersion of the viewer within a highly constructed video installation, and while the following chapters will show the evolution of the level of this immersion over the next fifteen years, Rapture remains an important example of phenomenological engagement stimulating an understanding of the shared lived experiences that inform an imagined culture within an active and embodied viewer.

120 Shirin Neshat: The Woman Moves, Jung & Jung.
Chapter 2: Within the Talking Circle
Dana Claxton’s Sitting Bull and the Moose Jaw Sioux

Developing from the poetic and narrative based non-verbal dialogue of Shirin Neshat’s Rapture, video installation has evolved to appropriate elements of other forms of filmmaking and film documentation within its potential techniques and practices. One genre of film that has an entrenched connection to cultural discourse and representations of identity and memory is documentary. Documentary filmmaking has long formed an established method to “describe and interpret the world of the collective experience.” On the surface the role of the documentary and the aims of some video installations may appear similar, as both mediums have been utilised to address the creation and representation of cultural identity. In talking of the post-colonial reclaiming of representation by cultural groups, Stuart Hall asserts that cinematic representation can serve as a form of resistance against dominant categorisations and portrayals, assisting formerly marginalised groups to both rediscover and produce their cultural identities. Similarly, video installations created by indigenous artists in a post-colonial context often strive to achieve a form of self-determination in the perception of their culture through their artworks, at times incorporating documentary footage and audio as components of the works. One such artwork that blurs the line between documentary and video installation is First Nations artist Dana Claxton’s Sitting Bull and the Moose Jaw Sioux, made in 2003.

Commissioned by the Moose Jaw Art Gallery, Sitting Bull and the Moose Jaw Sioux is a four channel video installation that tells of the migration of the Sioux people to Canada, led by the Hunkpapa Lakota chief Sitting Bull after the Battle of Little Bighorn in 1876, and their subsequent encampment outside Moose Jaw until 1921. Visually the installation includes historical photographs of the Sioux along with footage of archival newspaper clippings and present day imagery of the landscape where the camp once stood, accompanied by voiceovers

121 Film documentation and theory has had an impact not only on the school of film studies, but also on the art world, informing developments in performance art, conceptual art, and feminist art practices.


123 Hall, ‘Cultural Identity and Diaspora’, p. 393.
from contemporary Lakota storytellers. Seen in isolation this material could be perceived as elements of a documentary film, detailing a series of historical events and recording a First Nations’ perspective. Yet a number of fundamental points of difference distinguish this video installation from the format of a documentary film.

Within the discipline of film theory, documentary can be defined by its formal characteristics and techniques. Commonly film within the genre is constructed using a logic of linear narrative that serves to inform its audience. Film theorist Bill Nichols classifies this linearity into four components; the development of a problem, the offering of related background information, an assessment of the current perspectives and understanding surrounding the issue; and the presentation of a potential path to resolution. Composed in such a manner documentary film becomes what Margaret Morse would deem representational, rather than presentational. She writes, “…the screen of film divide[s] the here and now of the spectator from the elsewhere and elsewhen beyond with varying degrees of absoluteness. … The visitor to the installation, on the other hand, is surrounded by a spatial here and now…”

It should be noted however that more recent documentary theory investigates the changing nature of the genre, such as Craig Hight, Kate Nash and Catherine Summerhaynes’ publication *New Documentary Ecologies*. Published this year, this study focuses on the way in which new media technologies and forms of communication are altering the development of what defines documentary. Looking at the relationship between differing forms of media, along with active engagement of the audience, “documentary has become relational; documentary now consists of networks made up of various agents including humans, software and hardware.” With greater interactivity for audiences through contributions of online content, financial support via Crowdfunding, and publicly accessible critiques, documentary film allows its own

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125 Morse, ‘Video Installation Art’, p. 156.
127 Ibid., p. 4.
form of participation and agency. Yet this evolving form of documentary is still distinct from the video installation. Not only having the ability to depart from the classical structure of documentary film by working outside the linear boundaries of narrative logic, moving beyond the purely cerebral nature of this logic and engaging sensory perceptions and embodied reactions, but also to do so physically, incorporating the installation space as an equally important component of the artwork, alongside the medium of video projection.

Dana Claxton, who has worked in documentary filmmaking in addition to her video installations, sees the two practices as distinct, stating that in video art she recognised “the freedom of it; that you didn’t have to have a beginning, middle or end.” Her aim is to create artworks in which “the viewer ‘feels’ the work, as opposed to just a gaze; becoming part of the story, by way of entering the work.” In Sitting Bull and Moose Jaw Sioux Claxton allows the viewer to enter the work and become a part of this story of cultural identity through the incorporation of language, the representation of people and the landscape, the use of space, and the manipulation of pace and application of cyclical time. This process culminates in a video installation that addresses cultural connections to land and oral histories in a presentational manner that encourages active viewing through the creation of a culturally specific talking circle in which the viewer can take part.

Language & Oral History: the sound of culture

*Storytelling comes from being in the world, from experiencing life rather than measuring or controlling it.*

(Majorie Beaucage, ‘Aboriginal Voices’)

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128 Ibid., pp. 1-5.
130 Dana Claxton, email message to Katherine Preston, 14 June 2013.
Entering the installation space of Dana Claxton’s *Sitting Bulling and the Moose Jaw Sioux* first demands the transition of the viewer from the bright white cube of the gallery to the dark black cube Claxton requires her installation to be positioned within.\(^{132}\) In stepping from one environment to the other the viewer’s eyes must necessarily adjust and consequently their aural senses become heightened. Therefore the first components of the video installation that are encountered and perceived are the continuous low pulsating soundtrack and the voice of one of three Lakota storytellers speaking in a combination of the Lakota language and English.

When the viewer is once again able to focus upon the visual elements of the installation their eyes seek out the subtitles that run continuously along the base of the three channel video projection screened on the largest wall, as it is these subtitles that allow the viewer to understand what is being articulated by the often disembodied voices. In reading the subtitles the viewer becomes engaged in a story, an oral history communicating the experiences of the Lakota Sioux who migrated to Moose Jaw after "the American government, they broke their treaties and went into Indian land, and began digging for gold."\(^{133}\) Recorded during interviews with Dana Claxton, the orators John LaCaine, Hartland Goodtrack and Francis Goodtrack are second-generation descendents of those who inhabited the Moose Jaw winter campsite.\(^{134}\) In conversation with one another they recount how their grandfathers were given rations and tools to work on the land outside Moose Jaw beside the white men. However they also detail histories that disrupt the official written records of the area, revealing that when their ancestors went to Father Bernard in Lebret for assistance, an area to the north-east of Moose Jaw, “the RCMP went there and told them not to give them food.”\(^{135}\) Contradicting long developed beliefs within the European Canadian collective memory that their treatment of the indigenous people was fair and just, these stories bring to light an alternative that has not been recorded in the history books.

\(^{132}\) Claxton, email.


\(^{134}\) Lynne Bell, ‘Dana Claxton: From a whisper to a scream’, *Canadian Art*, Winter 2010-11, p. 103.

\(^{135}\) Claxton, *Sitting Bull and the Moose Jaw Sioux*. 
Rather, the telling of these stories through oral histories highlights the “critical importance of aboriginal languages as keys to articulation (or songs of survival).”136

In utilising traditional language Claxton creates a link to the past, an intrinsic tie between the events recounted and their contemporary telling is achieved through their being verbalised in the language they would have originally been expressed in. As such, there is an authority and validity imbued within the stories through the continuity of their telling. There is a sense of timelessness in hearing the intonations of the men’s conversations that allows the viewer to feel that they are being included in a tradition of oral histories, whilst the inclusion of English and the electronic soundtrack that underlies the voices connects the installation to the contemporary. Oral histories form an important aspect of First Nations culture, as writing was not a component of the culture until European encounters.137 Storytelling was the primary method of communicating the lived experiences of the community and still functions in this manner today. Hence, “the incorporation of Indigenous stories and oral memories into the works of Dana Claxton [creates] documents of Indigenous lived experiences.”138 establishing a continuum in the passing down of this knowledge that the viewer becomes a part of through the act of listening.

Within the context of the Sitting Bull and Moose Jaw Sioux artwork traditional language holds a particular importance in the description of the connection to land experienced by the First Nations people, as the very structure of the language is embedded with references to the physical landscape. Gerald McMaster quotes Lee-Ann Martin’s explanation of the intrinsic connection between First Nations languages and the land:

Vital cultural knowledge about land is encoded within the language of Aboriginal peoples.

Physical landmarks such as lakes, hills or rock formations reaffirm the connections of the

people with the sacred and the profane, the natural and the supernatural, the past and the present. Animals, trees and other plants are personified and perpetuated in both the spiritual and secular oral traditions of Native communities. Such specific knowledge of the land as expressed in the language contributes to a personal sense of cultural identity that locates Aboriginal people throughout time in relation to a particular place.\textsuperscript{139}

Informed by the landmarks around them, the Lakota language is distinct from the languages of other neighbouring clans and references specifically the landscape that is described by the narrators of the artwork. Hence, the viewer is being enveloped by not only the stories of the experiences connected to the land but also a language that is itself connected.

The use of Lakota language has a secondary importance, assisting in the encouragement to engage with traditional language, and in doing so preserve it. First Nations languages are rapidly facing extinction, with only three of the original fifty-three languages deemed likely to survive.\textsuperscript{140} In favouring the Lakota language over English in \textit{Sitting Bull and the Moose Jaw Sioux} Claxton shows that its continued use constitutes a form of protest, a claim of survival for the language itself; the tradition of oral histories; and the stories themselves, passed down and retold for new generations.

Due to this gradual disconnection of younger generations of Lakota people from their traditional language the oral histories passed down have consequently become fragmented. This fracturing of the whole is apparent within \textit{Sitting Bull and the Moose Jaw Sioux} as the storytellers each tell sections of the tale, constantly interrupting each other to make corrections and question statements that have been asserted by another. No one person interviewed seems to possess the whole ‘truth’ in the way that the colonising European culture claims to through authoritative written accounts, yet each speaker, whether in Lakota on English, has an important part to tell. Just as imagined communities and cultural identities continually shift according the to shared memories that inform them, personal histories become hazy as details are forgotten. Hartland talks of his grandfather’s journey to the area and confides, “I didn’t ask him how he ended up in

\textsuperscript{139} McMaster, ‘Land, Language, Identity’, p. 106.
\textsuperscript{140} Ibid., p. 107.
Moose Jaw or he might have told me, but I forgot.” These admissions of flawed memory and the problems the human element brings to historiography may leave gaps in the stories of the people, however they also engage the viewer in a personal realm of lived experiences from the past. The viewer becomes an element within the artwork through their insertion into the cyclical conversation, following the confusions and corrections in an attempt to untangle the truth. In following these fragments an authenticity is given to the oral history by the viewer’s participation and investment; connecting on a personal level with these familial conversations the viewer can relate these lived experiences of the inescapable past to aspects of their own family histories.

It is important to note that whilst we address oral histories and access cultural memory when engaging with the storytellers in Sitting Bull and the Moose Jaw Sioux for Claxton it is not a matter of reliving the past, but reclaiming past events and languages to develop a contemporary cultural identity. As previously discussed, Stuart Hall’s framework asserts that the ‘production’ of cultural identity is a necessary response to the post-colonial environment. Claxton’s use of the Lakota language, where possible, to recount the oral histories of the clan can be read as a method of reclaiming these histories in a contemporary context. The articulation of these stories in an ancestral language recorded through new media creates a hybrid of old and new, past and present, with the inclusion of a few scattered English phrases denoting the resultant shifts of colonialism and assimilation. Similarly, the use of subtitles to translate the Lakota narration into English is not only a means to allow outside viewers to understand and share in the recited experiences, but also signifies the reclamation of the Lakota stories by contemporary Lakota

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141 Claxton, *Sitting Bull and the Moose Jaw Sioux*.
142 Taunton notes that, “The incorporation of Indigenous stories and oral memories into the works of Dana Claxton, therefore, creates visual documents of Indigenous lived experiences.” Taunton, ‘Indigenous (Re)memory and Resistance’, p. 128.
143 “The inescapable past, although it may be translated as it passes from generation to generation, remains her object of scrutiny. Events, people and places are memorialized through language and within the parameters of a social and cultural matrix.” Patricia Deadman, ed., *Dana Claxton: Sitting Bull et le Sioux de Moose Jaw*, exh. cat., Moose Jaw Museum & Art Gallery, Moose Jaw, 2007, p. 14.
people in their current English-speaking context, the subtitles designating English as the secondary language in this environment. While the events are located in history, the implications of these events; their manipulation within official records; and the oral traditions affiliated with them are ongoing and inform the cultural identities of the Lakota people today.

Therefore it is the auditory element of Sitting Bull and the Moose Jaw Sioux that explains Claxton’s subject matter most patently to the viewer, literally articulating the story that the artist is attempting to convey. Referencing a formal quality of documentary filmmaking, the orated storytelling serves to animate the visual components of the artwork and provide an understanding of these visual aspects for the viewer. Like the narratives of documentary film, the conversations of the Lakota storytellers capture the viewer by nurturing a desire to learn more. As the viewer listens they become involved with the accounts, the corrections and the questions that form these personal histories, which in turn comprise an aspect of cultural memory. This engagement aids in the success of the video installation to communicate the lived experiences of the Lakota people of Moose Jaw not only through its explanation but also in its ability to invite the viewer to remain within the installation space. The conversation provides an access point for the viewer from which they must continue to listen to hear the remainder of the tale.

However the story is not told using a traditional narrative logic, but rather a layered and open-ended dialogue, the non-linear form of narrative being a key formal quality that differentiates Sitting Bull and the Moose Jaw Sioux from classical documentary film. Just as the conversations and accounts are fragmented due to the conflicting recollections and flawed memories, the sequence of events retold is based upon conversational prompts and segues rather than chronological accuracy. This is highlighted when the artwork is experienced in its entirety from beginning to end, as the event that marks the stimulus for the migration of the Lakota Sioux to Moose Jaw, the Battle at Little Bighorn, is not addressed until towards the close of the piece, before the work loops back to the initial descriptions of the clan’s experiences in Moose Jaw once again.

145 Non-linear narratives are now being presented in contemporary documentary film.
This non-linear form links to the oral customs of the First Nations people, in particular the tradition of the talking circle. “The significance of the circle itself is seen as sacred, representing the interconnectedness of all things (people, earth, moon, sun). Individuals were given the opportunity to express their thoughts on an issue in both large and small groups by continuing to go around the circle, recognizing the value of each speaker, until a collaborative consensus was reached.”\textsuperscript{146} Contrasted with the narrative written accounts of these events, cyclical works such as Claxton’s provide us with an alternative that aligns with Majorie Beaucage’s argument that, “We can dispel the lies through stories that are circular and organic. The principles and values of connectedness are our ancestral memory. The stories we remember and dream and tell each other are testimonies of our cultural memory.”\textsuperscript{147} In creating a form of talking circle with \textit{Sitting Bull and the Moose Jaw Sioux}, Dana Claxton has invited the viewer into the circle to bear witness to these testimonies and take part in this new version of the story as it comes into being and assists in continuing the formation of a cultural memory and identity.\textsuperscript{148}

Again the viewer is enveloped within the installation through the narrative, but in this case because there is no ‘right’ time to commence the experience, nor a logical time to depart. The viewer becomes caught up in the transitions between Lakota and English; the shifts of the story; the jumps back and forth; the narration and the conversation, all underscored by the “insistent beat”\textsuperscript{149} of the synthesised soundtrack that forms a sense of sustained pace throughout the experience. The viewer is submersed in an aural expression of a still developing cultural memory, both formed by lived experience and articulated as lived experience for the viewer to encounter.


\textsuperscript{147} Beaucage, ‘Aboriginal Voices’, p. 215.

\textsuperscript{148} “Stories change, and the teller, the audience, the occasion, the time all combine to create a new version. There is not just one way to tell a story. Each person creates their own story as they listen. What we choose to remember shapes who we become.” \textit{Ibid.}, p. 218.

Landscapes & People: reappropriation of the visual

By the time the viewer has engaged with the *Sitting Bull and the Moose Jaw Sioux* on an aural level their eyes will have adjusted to the darkness of the space and they will become able to comprehend that they are standing within a large room with a three-channel video projection visible upon the longest wall and a single-channel on an adjoining shorter wall. (See Figure 7) As there is no timed entrance to the installation, another component making this video installation distinct from documentary film, there are a range of potential images the viewer could initially encounter. The three-channel projection has been created using footage depicting archival photographs of the Sioux people, layers of historic newspaper clippings, contemporary scenes of the Moose Jaw area and the interviews of the three descendants who serve as narrators. These images interchange continuously across the three channels and form a collage of interrelated images, all contributing to the story that constitutes the *Sitting Bull and the Moose Jaw Sioux* installation. This constant shifting of images between the three channels visually echoes the notion of the talking circle, moving in a cyclical manner. Simultaneously, the single channel that sits apart shows ongoing footage of the Moose Jaw landscape.

Figure 7.
As previously mentioned, the viewer may first be drawn to the subtitles that run continuously along the base of the three-channel projection. These subtitles become the first visual point of reference for the installation for three key reasons. Firstly, after initially engaging with the work through the aural component, the viewer seeks out a literal translation to the soundtrack in order to find the key to understanding what they can hear. The subtitles serve this purpose, translating the Lakota spoken word into English written text. Secondly, one is visually drawn to the subtitles as they are literally highlighted, the black text running across lines of vivid colour, such as fluorescent green, overlaying the changing images beneath. Finally, the importance of the subtitles, and their link to the oration, is also emphasised by their ongoing presence within the three-channel projection. While the three channels alternate between different symbolic forms of imagery, the subtitles that provide an access point to the First Nations’ story for the viewer, who in this case stands as ‘Other’, are the constant. As such, the subtitles allow Claxton to incorporate the tradition of oral history into Sitting Bull and the Moos Jaw Sioux and the perpetuation of traditional language, whilst still allowing outside audiences to engage completely in the reclaimed history.

A further connection evident between the aural and visual aspects of this multidimensional artwork is the intermittent footage of the interviewees whose voices can be heard throughout the installation. Though limited, the appearance of John LaCaine, and Hartland and Francis Goodtrack represents a source for the oration that has drawn the viewer in, their physical presence providing a contemporary grounding for the knowledge that has been, and continues to be, passed down. Following the notion that historically Western society has given precedence to what can be seen, the inclusion of the footage from Claxton’s interviews with the Sioux descendants lends a form of authenticity and authority to the oral claims and explanations presented in the work. Claxton documents the interviewees’ ways of “challenging

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150 "...Plato gave primacy to sight. When he decided that we had five sense..." 
Plato and Aristotle closely associated vision and reason. This has been a persistent bias in Western culture." 
the colonial discourse, [as] they undermine the authority of the signs that constitute its knowledge, and reassert the authority of the signs of their own rightful knowledge.” Yet it must be noted that connotations of authenticity perceived from the outside perspective of the viewer can quickly transgress into a form of Western Primitivism. As Charlotte Townsend warns; the simplistic idea that all that is needed is to cast aside past misrepresentations in order to expose a ‘true reality’ stems from an idealism, one that continues to place First Nations people in the position of the ‘noble savage’.

Dana Claxton avoids the danger of this idealistic perspective of a pure and authentic history by advocating the personal histories that are components of cultural memory, which in turn inform the cultural identity of the imagined community. The focus on familial oral histories is visually articulated through the inclusion of footage that captures archival photographs of the interviewees’ ancestors, visual portrayals of those the Lakota storytellers refer to when explaining the passage of the tales from distant history to present. The individuals shown symbolise the many stages of witnessing that have enabled these versions of history to be known today. These images (see Figure 8), included in Sitting Bull and the Moose Jaw Sioux, were sourced by Claxton from local media archives, originally taken by European settlers as a method of recording their interpretation of the unfolding events, positioning those First Nations people involved as the Other, as something to be examined and documented. However, Dana Claxton appropriates the images, changing their purpose from one of detached historical record to a form of family photo album.

152 Ibid., p. 79.
153 “One of the key sites that Claxton turned to in search of documents to reconstruct, retell, and remember the history of the Sioux in Saskatchewan is an archive of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century photojournalism from the Moose Jaw Times.” Taunton, ‘Indigenous (Re)memory and Resistance’, p. 125.
A relationship has been established over time between personal memories and the archive, allowing it to assume a new role due to the demands of the First Nations people for both the personal and cultural histories that inform their identities. This new relationship is built upon the importance of the photographic in the historical and autobiographical constructions people create for themselves,155 ironically an importance established by the European. “A nostalgic invocation of ‘indigenous identities through images of the pre-colonial past’ is involved, together with ‘a new sense of positive empowerment expressed through the acquisition and thus redefinition of western cultural documents…”156 In interpreting the images in this way indigenous groups are able to take back control of the gaze that is connected to such photographs; from white superior looking upon exotic savage to descendent looking upon

156 Ibid., pp. 3-4.
ancestor. By including lists of the names of camp inhabitants and their descendents across the three-channel projection a direct lineage is created, further linking past to present. As Patricia Deadman explains, “Claxton challenges the stereotypical imagery of colonial photography by creating an installation in defiance of marginalisation and impersonal connection. In a mode often described as the ‘tourist gaze’, the portraits of our grandfathers served as documentation for the ‘business of confirming and reproducing the racial theories and stereotypes that assisted European expansion.’ Claxton’s connection to family reaffirms the claim of authentic voice to memory.”157 As witnesses to this connection, the viewer becomes further immersed in a familial story, understanding the perpetuation of the cultural memory on a deeper level yet again.

The use of archival media, found by Claxton through extensive research, extends from photographic portraits of past Moose Jaw inhabitants, to footage of photocopied newspaper articles and headlines layered upon one another, occasionally shifting to reveal another story underneath. The gradual removal of the layers signifies both the process of accumulation that shapes history, memory and identity, and the process of revealing that can uncover hidden interpretations lost over time. Displaying headlines such as ‘Dance of the Sioux in Moose Jaw’, ‘Sioux Indians Who Camp Near Moose Jaw’, ‘Custer massacre refuges given aid by Moose Jaw man’ and ‘Sioux Indians, Red Coats To Re-Live Sitting Saga’, the newspaper clippings selected by Claxton demonstrate the manner in which the Lakota Sioux were categorised as an outside and isolated group, posed as the Other. In doing so Claxton calls attention to elements of historical discourse that are important but potentially misrepresented, and reconstructs them by placing them alongside one another, allowing historiographic trends to emerge.158 These images provide the viewer with an understanding of the ‘official’ history presented to Moose Jaw residents against which the oral histories of the Lakota storytellers can be read. For example, though referencing the same events, such as the assistance provided to the Sioux by Father

157 Deadman, Dana Claxton: Sitting Bull et le Sioux de Moose Jaw, p. 16.
Bernard when the Sioux reached Moose Jaw, the emphasis of the story shifts between the newspaper article and the oration of Francis Goodtrack.

Succinctly articulated by Deadman, “The collective act of constructing historical knowledge determines which fragments of the past will be reflected in the present. For Dana Claxton, the reconstruction of history is both personal and an affirmation of Aboriginal culture, that which has been excluded from the framework of western interpretation.”¹⁵⁹ As such, Claxton highlights the importance placed upon Sitting Bull, who is presented as a form of figurehead in the media archives following the Western tradition of the heroic leader, by including an article with the headline ‘Sitting Bull Sat In Moose Jaw’. Yet, as formerly mentioned, the events of the Battle of Little Bighorn and Sitting Bull are not mentioned until the end of the installation’s narration, suggesting that the more important aspect of the account is in fact the story of the people. This notion is supported by the argument that, “In both Canada and the United States new ways of doing post-contact history are being developed - there is a movement away from narratives of great battles and prominent figures such as chiefs, generals, and administrators, to social and community histories in a context of ethno-history.”¹⁶⁰ The very title of the artwork accentuates this concern, intriguing the viewer with the promise of a heroic tale, only to capture them in an alternate personal history for the majority of the installation’s thirty-minute loop. In Sitting Bull and the Moose Jaw Sioux the viewer is given both the historic documents of the Moose Jaw Times, unaltered since their publication, and the family tales passed down through generations and self-reflexively fragmented, and asked to question where validity lies.

Visual juxtapositions are not only employed to show links and shifts between the past and present through portraiture and archived accounts, but also by the inclusion of footage depicting present-day Moose Jaw in contrast to imagery of traditional campgrounds and timeless landscapes. The use of the three concurrent channels allows Claxton to simultaneously show the

viewer images of moose and buffalo around Sioux campsites and contemporary footage of
‘Indian heads’ decorating the Fourth Avenue bridge in Moose Jaw today, or a composition in
which the central channel, portraying scenes of the Saskatchewan prairies inhabited by wild
antelope, is framed by the two side channels that show a close-up of a street sign in the snow that
reads ‘Sioux Crescent’. These visual constructions transport the viewer into a space where they
are surrounded by the connections of the Sioux people to the land of Moose Jaw. Encased by
these representations the viewer may be able to comprehend the accumulation of historical links
between the people’s cultural identity and their tie to the land, through the grounding of their
shared memories and experiences in a physical location. While their oral histories speak of the
land; the hunting seasons; the names they bestowed upon different areas, the historical
drawings; photographs of camps; contemporary footage of the landscape they inhabited; and
visual symbols of their impact upon the Western development in the area stand as evidence of
the ongoing connection of the Sioux to Moose Jaw. Claxton establishing “an Indigenous-centred
history that tells of interconnected and interdependent relationships between the Sioux and the
white settler society of southern Saskatchewan at the turn of the century.”

Set adjacent to, but separate from, the three-channel projection is the single channel
component of Sitting Bull and the Moose Jaw Sioux. This projection shows footage of the
landscape surrounding the modern city of Moose Jaw, the low-lying hills, the river and the
iconic prairies. The framing of the landscape in this manner, in a distinct rectangular projection,
references the longstanding tradition of landscape painting within Canadian art history, along
with its connotations of the Romantic and its use in constructing a national identity. Faced with
a lack of a ‘Westernised’ national history, Canadian artists instead focused on developing a
national aesthetic by capturing the uniquely Canadian landscape in styles influenced by their
European counterparts. In claiming the right to interpret the ‘landscape’ in this way

162 Ibid., p. 164.
163 “In Canada, where landscape painting has long figured prominently, the Group of Seven (1913-31) laid
claim to what they considered an art of truly Canadian landscape painting. Lawren Harris, an influential
member of that group, returned to this country in 1908, after four years of artistic training in Berlin, with
European settlers consequently attained a sense of ownership over the land, subsuming it into their own cultural identity, as “even to the present day, governments and art institutions continue to use strong Canadian landscape tradition to promote a sense of national identity.”

In contrast to this interpretation of the landscape “the First Nations have a spirituality that is grounded in a relationship with their surrounding space and in the sanctifying of territory. It is not a ‘landscape’ as developed by European art history... It is the indivisible contract between man and nature as equal before creation.”

In referencing the European notion of the land Claxton is able to reinterpret this rendering of the Moose Jaw surrounds. Rather than refuting the settler’s gaze Claxton engages with it, and in doing so uncovers a physical place that has been the grounds of cross-cultural encounters for over a century. “The shared places where people have met the land repeatedly over time still reside in the layers of the Saskatchewan soil. ... Ownership of land becomes contentious when the understanding of a sense of place or the essence of place conflicts with principles and values inherent in cultural memory. Sense of place ‘has been determined by interactive, reciprocal, sensuous, relationships with the landscape that surrounds us.’”

Through the separation of this section of the installation Dana Claxton allows viewers to relate to the land that the Sioux people to connect to. Whilst we as outsiders may not be able to fully conceive the First Nations’ relationship with the land, engrained in their languages, their histories and their mythologies, the single channel projection allows us to engage with the land that is the foundation of the cultural memory Claxton’s work seeks to articulate; the land that forms a significant part of the cultural identity of the Moose Jaw Sioux.

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the idea that the mythical unity of a people was created by the land they inhabited. These ideas were strengthened for the Group when they viewed an exhibition of Scandinavian landscape paintings in Buffalo in 1913. They identified with the nationalist sentiments expressed in these representations of the northern landscape and began to embrace the myth that the North was shaping a nation of rugged individuals.”

Petra Halkes, Aspiring to the Landscape: On painting and the subject of nature, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2006, p. 10.

164 Ibid.
Although the visual component of the artwork *Sitting Bull and the Moose Jaw Sioux* has links to the modes and aesthetics of documentary filmmaking with the inclusion of researched archival material and contemporary footage, the installation still stands apart, “working in a space between poetic form and documentary.”¹⁶⁷ This is achieved in part through the division of the projections, the three-channel projection working on a cognitive level, while the single channel is affective in nature. Lynne Bell describes her encounter with the separated projection, “As I watch the landscape footage on the single-channel screen that stands alone in the gallery, I have to slow down my viewing pace. The camera-work invites the viewer to experience the heat of the luminous summer day, the wind as it brushes the tips of the long grasses, and the constantly expanding space as the camera angle (and the viewer’s position) shifts and moves.”¹⁶⁸ As such the visual element of *Sitting Bull and the Moose Jaw Sioux* does not merely enable Claxton to communicate issues of authenticity and authority, articulate disparities between European accounts and the oral histories of the Lakota Sioux, and establish a connection to the land for all viewers, allowing them to understand the shared experiences and cultural memories associated with the Moose Jaw area, it also transcends the two dimensional projections on the wall to become a part of a spatial encounter.

**A Sense of Space**

The expansive yet darkened space, set apart from the primary gallery area, that *Sitting Bull and the Moose Jaw Sioux* is installed within becomes a temporary, but integral, component of the artwork for the duration of the installation. Rather than a purely curatorial decision for placement, this environment is a requirement of the artist who states that the work “requires space to breath, to be absorbed by the viewer.”¹⁶⁹ Isolating the viewer from all other interactions and encasing them within the darkness Dana Claxton immerses them in the artwork, forcing

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¹⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 163.
¹⁶⁹ Claxton, email.
any viewer who stays within the space to engage with the video projections presented to them. As such, “The visitor … is surrounded by a spatial here and now, enclosed within a construction that is grounded in actual (not illusionistic) space.”

This positioning of the viewer has phenomenological repercussions, enabling the embodied viewer to learn through both mind and body, using their ‘sensory perception’ to feel with the body that which the mind cannot fully comprehend. Merleau-Ponty argues that the human experience is comprised of a complex combination of intellectual and ‘sensory elements’ that are activated within the shared space where reflection and understanding occurs.

Gaston Bachelard writes that this comprehension through sensation is due to the ‘reverberations’ of the ‘poetic image’, in this case constituted by the video installation. The reverberations are echoes of the past that resound through the dynamism of the poetic and can be felt by the embodied viewer.

In *Sitting Bull and the Moose Jaw Sioux* Claxton manipulates the installation space, through her use of cinematic scale, inclusive space, negative or empty space, and visual spatial placement, in order to allow the viewer to sense the reverberations of her poetic imagery, conveying a lived understanding of a culturally specific memory.

The initial impact of the visual element of the installation is primarily due to its dominant cinematic scale. Measuring over ten metres in length, wrapping around a corner of the room, and looming over two metres high, (see Figure 9) the projections in *Sitting Bull and the Moose Jaw Sioux* fill one half of the installation space and orientate the viewer to stand, or sit, and consider the moving and alternating images. Surrounded by the images both horizontally and vertically, the cinematic scale becomes immersive, the viewer becoming enveloped by the light of the projections just as they have been enveloped within the talking circle. The first, and most obvious, advantage of the size of the projections is the subsequent ability to show footage of the

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170 Morse, ‘Video Installation Art’, p. 156.
172 Ibid.
173 Ibid., p. 63.
175 Ibid.
Moose Jaw landscape that connotes its extensive nature. As previously discussed, the First Nations’ concept of land varies significantly from the European perception and while the cognitive features of the installation, primarily the narrative tale and the supporting visual material, explain to the viewer the various connections the Sioux hold with the land of Moose Jaw through their cultural memories, the notion that the land forms a part of their identity is difficult to convey. Claxton attempts to communicate this to the viewer by allowing the land to, in a sense, speak for itself. Presenting the sweeping landscape to the viewer on such a grand scale conveys a sense of awe and importance that cannot otherwise be articulated.  

As the viewer stands within the dark space and is immersed in the expanse of light and colour that forms the projection of the land, they necessarily feel physically dwarfed by the vastness and beauty and must realise the power of the land even if they have not experienced it first hand. Speaking in phenomenological terms, “The things of the world are not simply neutral objects which stand before us for our contemplation. Each one of them symbolises or recalls a particular way of behaving, provoking in us reactions…” While one could not argue that a viewer who does not have cultural ties to the Moose Jaw Sioux could gain the ingrained connection to land that Claxton’s artwork attempts to communicate, it is possible that in embodying the installation space the viewer could be granted an appreciation of where this connection stems from.

176 The use of scale to express the grandeur of the landscape can be seen throughout art history. An example of this is the works of the Hudson River School in the mid 19th Century.


178 Townsend-Gault argues that creating artworks acting as “forms of translation, reaching across cultures on many different levels... is a complex and subtle operation, and not a relatively simple matter of translation from language A to language B. It is more a matter of transforming knowledge - ontological mysteries and body language, historical representations and story-telling - in ways that are controlled by those who hold it.” Townsend-Gault, ‘Kinds of Knowing’, p. 99.
Yet the viewer is not alone in embodying the installation space that Claxton has created in *Sitting Bull and the Moose Jaw Sioux*. In addition to the immensity of the land, the installation’s scale also means that when the archival photographs of the Sitting Bull and other Sioux people discussed earlier are projected they become larger than life, standing over the viewer, their unwavering gaze looking down upon them. The cumulative effect of these gazes and the bodies they belong to is to create an embodied space. This is true also of the footage of the living descendents who are interviewed for the artwork, their gestures and facial expressions leaving a physical imprint. Before the viewer even enters the installation these omnipresent figures stand within the environment and fill it with a performative and ‘lived-in’ presence. Hence when the viewer does insert themselves into this environment they cannot passively watch but must actively engage with these other entities, and it is this embodied transaction that allows a deeper level of communication to take place. “Indeed our experience contains numerous qualities that would be almost devoid of meaning if considered separately from the reactions they
As Merleau-Ponty further explains, we come to know others not as pure spirit or intelligence, but through the matrix of their bodily manifestations. Consequently, it is through the inclusion of these oversized representations that one can feel the presence of the Sioux people, both past and present, and can therefore grasp the resonance of their stories and histories on a more dynamic level.

The installation space of *Sitting Bull and the Moose Jaw Sioux* does not just concern the environment’s visual scale; the auditory dimension also comprises an important part of the installation, filling the space. It has been established that the soundtrack of oral histories played within the installation generates a form of talking circle between the interviewees who recount fragmented aspects of their cumulative memories. Surrounded by the sound of these accounts the viewer becomes physically included in the circle, encased as it were by the presence of these voices, as the embodied viewer responds to the echoes of the poetic image. This element of the artwork with which Claxton further provokes the viewer on a sensory level assists the artist in ‘giving shape’ to the phenomenon she is creating for the viewer, creating a site of intellectual and emotional communication, a shared space “where the seemingly different ways of knowing or being interface.” Applying Bachelard’s understanding of the body’s interaction with poetic space it stands that “reverberations bring about a change of being. … [until] the poem possesses us entirely”, hence in creating a living space through the inclusion of conversational speech Claxton involves the viewer in an embodied transaction within the appropriated talking circle.

The circular notion of space, conveyed in both the aural encompassing of the installation and the non-linear narration that moves backward, forward and sideways rather than chronologically, is reiterated in the physicality of the installation space. Able to move within the expansive room, the viewer can shift between the projected channels, choosing to come forward in order to focus on a specific channel, or to step back enabling an overview and understanding.

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180 Ibid., p. 62.
181 Ibid., p. 59.
182 Deadman, Dana Claxton: *Sitting Bull et le Sioux de Moose Jaw*, p. 15.
of the interaction between the four channels when seen simultaneously. The viewer may also move between channels at will in both clockwise and anti-clockwise directions, choosing to progress quickly or to linger. Therefore while the viewer may only be able to participate in the aural talking circle through their sensory engagement rather than active speech, they have agency through their movement within the space and their choice of where to focus their attention. As Margaret Morse warns, “however detailed a video installation becomes in conception, there remains an element of uncertainty and risk at the level of the material execution and installation of its elements conceived by the artist, and an element of surprise in the actual bodily experience of the visitor.” While placing the power with the viewer in this manner means that Claxton is unable to ensure that all elements of her work are contemplated equally, or encountered as initially intended, it also allows the viewer to relate to, and correspond with, Sitting Bull and the Moose Jaw Sioux in a more affective realm. As the viewer has physical control over their navigation of the installation they partake in the artwork, bringing their own lived experiences, and thereby become able to have an embodied interaction with the elements of the work that relate to their own personal histories and interests. Dana Claxton draws upon a “collective sense of humanity” in order to communicate cross-cultural ideas through embodied commonalities between each individual viewer and the living space of the installation, that differ from one viewer to the next.

The agency available to the viewer in Sitting Bull and the Moose Jaw Sioux is reliant on Claxton’s construction of the installation space with the three-channel projection and single projection. The multiple channels allow the range of visual and auditory material previously discussed, which promote awareness of cultural memories and prompt an appreciation of the construction of the cultural identity of the Moose Jaw Sioux, to be presented to the viewer in one space. It must be noted that while the artist has imparted an active role upon the viewer she has

184 Morse, ‘Video Installation Art’, p. 155.
185 “Claxton recognizes our relations within a shared, collective sense of humanity using the conventions of present-day storytelling to bring the past into the present. Her video installation presents the subject within a negotiable temporal distance.” Deadman, Dana Claxton: Sitting Bull et le Sioux de Moose Jaw, p. 15.
still manipulated the space in order to emphasise certain details. An example of this artistic choice is the division of the single channel projection on to a separate wall and the juxtaposition of its content. The installation instructions that accompany the artwork state that the single channel projection must be placed adjacent to, but at a distance from, the three-channel projection.\(^{186}\) (See Figure 9) Claxton says of the isolation of the single channel, “The fourth channel has always been placed on its own. It’s the actual site where the Sioux camp was and where my relatives lived. It’s a beautiful place to this day. I wanted the beauty of the natural world to be shown by itself, as a reminder/signifier that land is sacred, and needs to be cared for, as well as the animal nations upon the land.”\(^{187}\) In this case the embodied space the viewer is immersed within is not only the installation space but the contemplative embodied space of the natural prairie land, as set apart from the contrasting and confronting three-channel projection. “A conceptual world is manifest as literal objects and images set in physical relation to each other. That is, the technique for raising referent worlds to consciousness is not mimesis, but simulation.”\(^{188}\) By isolating one channel to highlight its differing phenomenological impacts on the viewer Claxton portrays the complexities of the connection to land that informs the First Nations identity.

**Captured and Captivated: pace & cyclical time**

*Video installation … remains a form that unfolds in time – the time a visitor requires to complete a trajectory inspecting objects and monitors, the time a video track or a poetic juxtaposition of tracks requires to play out, or the time for a track to wander across a field of monitors, and, one might add, the time for reflection in the subject of her- or himself, that is, for the experience of a transformation to occur.*

(Margaret Morse, *The Body, the Image, and the Space-In-Between*)\(^{189}\)

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186 Installation Instructions for Dana Claxton’s *Sitting Bull and the Moose Jaw Sioux* were provided by the Biennale of Sydney for the purpose of this thesis.

187 Claxton, email.

188 Morse, *Video Installation Art*, p. 159.

Once the viewer has entered the video installation *Sitting Bull and the Moose Jaw Sioux* and begins their encounter with the multitude of artistic devices Dana Claxton has employed to convey a sense of cultural memory and identity they must necessarily spend time to unravel the various forms of imagery and sound, along with their experience of the space itself, in order to contemplate and comprehend the aims of the artwork. The time that is spent is ultimately determined by the involvement of the viewer, however the artwork itself does hold some agency in encouraging a certain length of engagement and manipulating the experience of time for the viewer. As opposed to traditional art forms, such as painting and sculpture, which a viewer can consider for as long or short a period as they wish, with no influence other than their own interest, the video installation uses a timed cycle of footage and a narrative to provide the viewer with a guide as to how long they should remain within the space. In this sense the use of video installation by Claxton stands as an active decision to use an artistic medium with the capacity to capture a viewer in Morse’s ‘mythic dimension’, in which sensations of time, place and meaning shift.¹⁹⁰

Following the format of the talking circle, *Sitting Bull and the Moose Jaw Sioux* unfolds in a cyclical manner, with the visual footage looping every thirty minutes. These repeating sequences provide the opportunity for the viewer to enter the installation at any point of the screening,¹⁹¹ without the need for timed entries in order to begin at a designated starting point, this is aided by the non-linear form of narrative that the soundtrack of interviews employs. Once the viewer has entered into the space and engaged with the stimuli that are presented to them they may find that they wish to follow the narrative and the imagery in order to gain a complete reading of the story being told. In this way the cyclical temporal format of the video installation is one of the methods used to hold and immerse the viewer within the space, in order to allow them time to fully comprehend what the artist is attempting to convey. This temporal space is necessary as according to Merleau-Ponty we embody “a world in which being is not given but

¹⁹¹ Morse, ‘Video Installation Art’, p. 162.
rather emerges over time.”192 In communicating not only concepts as complex as cultural identity, but also the sensory experience of holding a collective cultural memory, Claxton requires her viewers to not merely walk through the installation space and exit, but to take the time to form a relationship with the artwork to the fullest extent possible. By engaging each viewer regardless of their point of entry and attempting to hold them in the space for the duration of the thirty-minute cycle, *Sitting Bull and the Moose Jaw Sioux* as a video installation attains a depth less readily available to artworks of other mediums.193

Once ensnared in the cycle of the video there is a need to further engage the viewer in order to avoid the possibility of boredom that would result in the viewer leaving the installation space.194 Claxton manages to manipulate the sensation of time itself through the creation of a rhythm within the work that the viewer may become caught up in, providing them with a momentum that excites interest and makes time seem to pass at a faster pace.195 This is particularly necessary for *Sitting Bull and the Moose Jaw Sioux* as the cycle runs for such an extensive period of time. However Claxton notes that the editing process is directly determined by the intention of the work, “After researching, and shooting the project I began to edit with my editor. … I never have a length in mind, just a story, and the story tells me really how long it will be. … I just let the story unfold, weaving itself. [Here] the story/history/moment, needed time to be told.”196 The rhythm in this installation is developed through the movement of images within the three-channel projection, the pace of the narration, and the low beat that quickens to eventually culminate in a “Sitting Bull Rave”.197 Through the synchronisation of the visual footage, the oration and the musical soundtrack, the rhythmic ties connect the aural


193 “In a very real way, depth is more about the temporal unfolding of the phenomena than about the relationships among the array of beings in space.”


195 Merleau-Ponty discusses the ‘cinematographical rhythm’ created by the choice of imagery, sound, sequence and time in cinema.
Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, p. 73.

196 Claxton, email.

197 Dana Claxton cited in Bell, ‘Dana Claxton: From a whisper to a scream’, p. 162.
components of the installation to the three-channel projection. This expansive and dominant wall sets the tempo of the artwork and draws the viewers into the cognitive elements that are being presented. Being caught within the depth of the dimension of time allows for ‘living movement’\textsuperscript{198} within the artwork, based in the spatial and temporal here and now which in turn creates a setting for a phenomenological experience of understanding to take place. This is the primary aim of Claxton, who states, “I do [think the pace has an effect on the way it is viewed by visitors], when we take the time to sit with something, a real meaningful visit, the potential for transformation can occur. Most of my work has been about the spiritual realm and how to convey that.”\textsuperscript{199}

While the momentum builds in conjunction with the three-channel component of the work, it should be noted that the single channel projection stands as complimentary, but disconnected. This impression of division is in part due to the fact that there seems to be no sound that directly relates to the single channel. The footage of the wind blowing through the prairielands sets a slower, more contemplative pace through the connotation of silence, despite the sound that fills the room, and instills a sense of calm upon the viewer. When the viewer immerses themselves in the single projection they isolate themselves from the rest of the space and enter a contemplative realm, “time itself is lodged within the landscape and its resounding within space is a primordial depth.”\textsuperscript{200} Therefore, Claxton accomplishes the engagement of the viewer on both a faster, cognitive level and a slower sensory level through her use of space and time, features only available to her through the artistic practice of video installation. These multidimensional impacts are integral to the success of \textit{Sitting Bull and the Moose Jaw Sioux} communicating the complexities of cultural memory that in turn inform a collective cultural identity to an audience through the sensory potential of creating a lived experience through art.

Drawing formal elements from the genre of documentary film and appropriating them to create a video installation, Dana Claxon seeks out shared cultural memories and reworks them

\textsuperscript{198} Merleau-Ponty, \textit{The World of Perception}, p. 58.
\textsuperscript{199} Claxton, email.
\textsuperscript{200} Mazis, ‘Time at the Depth of the World’, p. 126.
to produce a new understanding of the identity of the Moose Jaw Sioux. Historical archives acknowledge the past, oral histories give access to the personal and visual references to the landscape suggest a continuum; connection to land informing the past, the present, and going on into the future. *Sitting Bull and the Moose Jaw Sioux* integrates the elements of sound, imagery, space and pace that form video installations in order to create a imagined talking circle that includes the viewer, allowing them to live the experience of being a part of the cycle and actively engage with the process of producing cultural identity that this artwork is a component of.
Chapter 3: Active Immersion
Nalini Malani’s *In Search of Vanished Blood*

With greater access to technology, allocation of space within galleries and museums to exhibit video installations and the establishment of international art festivals focusing on the development of new media arts, the medium of video installation has become increasingly integrated into artistic practice.\(^201\) As a result the development of video installations themselves has evolved. In 1990 Margaret Morse referred to the presentational art form of video installation as “hybrid and complex”\(^202\) and I would argue that with the passing of time this complexity has increased. From its very beginnings, “video posed a challenge to the sites of art production in society, to the forms and ‘channels’ of delivery, and to the passivity of reception built into them,”\(^203\) and as the practices used by video installation artists have been accepted and theorised by the art world they continue to change in order to further this challenge.

From initially being comprised of multiple projections placed in relation to one another to form dialogues within a space, to creating an inclusive temporal space surrounded by sound and imagery, the video installation has come to incorporate further innovative and creative uses of space and technology, as well as reintroducing elements of more traditional art making, such as painting, in new and unconventional ways. Dorine Mignot claims that, “For the last ten years I have seen a whole new generation of artists with different cultural backgrounds emerging. They ‘speak’ from within their cultural situations. In their works a new and tantalizing mix has been developed between documentary, fiction and art.”\(^204\)

Following the initial lead of artists such as Neshat and continuing on from the developments of figures like Claxton, artists who are furthering the realms of what constitutes

\(^{201}\) ‘Greater access to technology’ as a result of increased availability and reduced expense.

\(^{202}\) Morse, ‘Video Installation Art’, p. 158.

\(^{203}\) Martha Rosler, ‘Video: shedding the Utopian moment’, *Illuminating Video*, eds. Fifer & Hall, p. 31.

‘video installation’ continue to manipulate time through the use of pace and flow\(^{205}\) and ask their viewers to negotiate a spatial field filled with both visual and aural stimulus, utilising the phenomenological understanding gained by the embodied experience the video installation provides as previously identified in the earlier chapters of this thesis. However artists such as Nalini Malani have pushed these encounters to another sensory level through their immersive installation methods and use of the installation space. Taking on conceptual subject matter of great complexity, Nalini Malani creates video installations that form sensory labyrinths of layered and constantly changing content that envelop the viewer and make them an active participant within her poetic environments. It is one of Malani’s most recent works, *In Search of Vanished Blood*, that will be the focus of this chapter.

Originally conceived as a site-specific artwork for *dOCUMENTA (13)* in 2012, *In Search of Vanished Blood* is comprised of six-channel video projections, five rotating reverse painted Mylar cylinders suspended from the ceiling of the installation space, four spotlights and an eleven-minute soundtrack. In this artwork Nalini Malani addresses issues of violence, femininity, phallocentrism, and national and religious identities. The medium of video installation enables the use of constantly shifting, layered imagery and sound to represent issues that must be considered if we are to alter our understanding of violence as conceived throughout world history.\(^{206}\) Drawing upon her own personal and familial experiences of violence in the form of the Indian Partition, along with the more contemporary event of the 2002 Gujarat riots, Malani uses highly codified and symbolic imagery and narration derived from various cultural and historical platforms\(^{207}\) to engage the viewer in a process of unravelling the concerns she is attempting to address. However in doing so the artist raises more questions than she offers answers. Malani’s inclusion of multiple narratives within *In Search of Vanished Blood*, along with

\(^{205}\) Laleen Jayamanne explains the manipulation of time and pace in her recently published book, writing, “The subjectivity of duration is really not our possession; rather, we are within it, like fish in water, we acquire amplitude through an awareness of its expanded and contracted circuits.” Laleen Jayamanne, *The Epic Cinema of Kumar Shahani*, Indiana University Press, Indiana, 2014, p. 16.


\(^{207}\) An example of this is the inclusion of the archetype of Cassandra from Greek mythology.
numerous motifs and their manner of installation, creates an artwork that examines the problem of violence as produced by a phallocentric society and the possibilities of embracing the female voice in both a local and global context. This is achieved through the creation of an immersive sensory experience for the viewer, in which they can read and grapple with the symbols of these dilemmas and delve into their intricacies, feeling the overwhelming nature of the complex web.

The Problem of Violence

“To learn through suffering’ – this seems to be the law of the new gods, and likewise the way of masculine thought. This way does not seek to love Mother Nature but to fathom her secrets in order to dominate her, and to erect the astounding structure of a world of mind remote from nature, from which women are henceforth excluded. … The gain of culture by the loss of nature. Progress through pain. The formulae which underlie Western culture, spelled out four hundred years before our era.”

(Christa Wolf, Cassandra)208

Born in Karachi in 1946, Nalini Malani became an exile a year after her birth when the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947 forced her non-Muslim family to flee to Calcutta, rather than remain in Pakistan. This particular period in history was a time of trauma, as anthropologist Veena Das writes, “The enormity of violence is not in question. The very moment of the birth of India as a nation free from colonial domination was also the scene of unprecedented collective violence.”209 As such it could be contended that violence has its own role within the cultural identity of Indian society, violence being an element of the national memory since the nation’s inception. Having grown up with her own family’s memory of the trauma of Partition, which continued to live on within her, Malani saw a continuation of communal violence within Indian society as various tribal wars and riots provoked by religion unfolded, prompting “a concern with the nature of public violence, embodied violence, sexual


violence, and the abjections it produces in India in the last sixty to seventy years roughly."  

It is this concern with violence, and its links to the notion of Indian nationhood, that Malani explores through her video installation In Search of Vanished Blood.

Engaging with contemporary incidences of collective violence, Nalini Malani responds to the 2002 Gujarat Riots and the allegations of state sanctioned violence by the Hindu population against Muslim inhabitants. As Malani created In Search of Vanished Blood over 2011 and 2012 the Chief Minister of Gujarat, Narendra Modi, was under investigation for his complicity in initiating and condoning the riots of 2002 that had come to be recognised as genocide, thousands of individuals including women and children being killed due to their religious identity.  

While the state openly proffered opinions of the initial attack on the train at Godhra that provided the stimulus for the riots as a ‘horrific’ and ‘immoral’, they used this as a justification for the ensuing call to violence, one official government press release referring to the riots as the “restoration of peace”.  

Nalini Malani questions this justification of communal violence in the name of defending one’s ideologies, a rationalisation that was apparent from the time of Partition in the attempts to “preserve the purity of the population” as a matter of national honour.

Malani critiques the cultural belief in collective violence as a justified means of defence and traces it back to a perversion of elements in Gandhian thought that have come to be rearticulated over time. An archetype entrenched in the cultural history and identity of the nation of India; Gandhi’s philosophies combine two genealogies, the peaceable value of ‘ahimsa’, but also the less referred to tradition of “royal and ascetical violence.”  

Informed

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213 Ibid., p. 34.


215 ‘Ahimsa’ is a Sanskrit term meaning ‘not to injure’.
by the Hindu *ksatriva* (warrior) and *sadhu* (renouncer) powers that “are not averse to ideas of
violence, not random violence, not ethnic violence, but ideas of the taking of life, in just and
honorable causes.” Gandhian thought includes a vein that can be distorted in order to
perpetuate a perceived necessity for violence. It is in this manner that Malani sees that, “Gandhi
is excavated from historical, archetypal, primordial space and is brought into the contemporary,
but along the way his ideas get perverted. So as I understand it, the ideology of Gandhi in a
perverted form, finally, is what we see in Narendra Modi.”

For Nalini Malani this continual belief in violence to defend, that could be seen as
engrained within the cultural identity of India, is symptomatic of the phallocentric logic that
pervades human society. Just as Veena Das discusses attempts after Partition for “reinstating the
nation as a ‘pure’ and masculine space,” Malani sees the world, and India as a component of
that, as a place where the female psyche is not allowed to function. Rather, it is only the
aggressive male psyche in operation, that results in the human becoming a ‘mutant’ in a
phallocentric environment. Applying this model to Gandian thought, in particular his belief
in masculine abstention, Malani confesses, “Masculine abstention as sign of political power and
organized force... It somehow doesn’t take the feminine part. In fact it denigrates it I think, and
in some sense if that happens, then the pure phallocentric nature takes over in a virulent form,
and then I think it is like Siva gone completely wild.” Unsatisfied with this state of being
Malani questions how people come to accept it; how periods of intense violence, once justified,
become part of a form of amnesia that allows us to continue the cycle.

The first clue to Nalini Malani’s concern with these issues within her video installation
*In Search of Vanished Blood* lies in its very title, taken from the poem of the same name by Faiz
Ahmad Faiz. Written by the Pakistani poet in 1965, the Urdu poem is a direct response to

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Partition and the amnesia society experiences when looking back upon this period of Indian history, representing a lack in the cultural memory. Faiz illustrates through the written word the absence of blood, as evidence of the violence, on the land, in written history, and in the memories of the people. He writes;

There's no sign of blood, not anywhere.
I've searched everywhere.
The executioner's hands are clean, his nails transparent.
The sleeves of each assassin are spotless.
No sign of blood: no trace of red,
not on the edge of the knife, none on the point of the sword.
The ground is without stains, the ceiling white.
This blood which has disappeared without leaving a trace isn't part of written history: who will guide me to it? 223

He also points to the absence of a cause for the violence, denying the justifications of defence of ideology or nationhood, but instead asserting that the violence “earned no honour”, 224 and decries the pointless nature of such brutality in his final lines;

From the beginning this blood was nourished only by dust.
Then it turned to ashes, left no trace, became food for dust. 225

For Nalini Malani this poem “epitomises the Partition in every possible way. And every time there have been sectarian problems and violence this poem completely comes to mind.” 226 Again seeing parallels between a series of events of communal violence over time, Malani highlights a lineage of violence that supports her thesis of an aggressive phallocentric environment. The futility of this violence is articulated by Faiz in his poetry so well that Malani uses it to form what she refers to as a ‘nerve system’ through her video installation. 227 Rather than perform the poem in a traditional sense, Malani emphasises its importance through its use

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224 Ibid.
225 Ibid.
as a title, while also projecting the text, translated into English by Agha Shahid Ali, as a visual component of the video installation. (See Figure 10) By including the text within the video projection in this manner viewers unfamiliar with the poem may be able to read its lines and establish their own understanding of their meaning.228

Figure 10.
http://www.galerielelong.com/exhibition_works/1892

The technique of first filming the text being projected scrolling over the figure of a woman’s head wrapped in white cloth, which is then projected onto the installation wall where further shadow play from the rotating cylinders create additional visual layers, (see Figure 11) is key to Malani’s practice of creating a sensory labyrinth for the viewer to unravel and immerse themselves in, as will be discussed later in this chapter. However at this point an analysis of the imagery of the shrouded head that Malani chooses to combine with the ‘nervous system’ of her

228 “I didn’t want to recite it. It was too overpowering, too topical in a sense. I wanted to open it up.” Malani cited in Kurjaković, ‘Quarries of Blindness and Shadow of Hope’, p. 17.
artwork is useful in unlocking the various coded symbols she uses to reference violence. The motif is relatively ambiguous. Engaged with on a purely aesthetic level it is quite beautiful in its muted tones and simplicity, referencing a Surrealist aesthetic; most obviously Rene Magritte’s 1928 painting *Les Amants* (*The lovers*). (See Figure 12) Yet this image also connotes a powerful sense of horror, conveying feelings of suffocation and oppression as it illustrates a method of torture during which a victim in encased in cloth and water is thrown onto them, causing them to effectively drown inside the moist fabric.229

![Figure 11.](image)


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229 Ibid., p. 17.
The implication of torture within the image of the shrouded head is but the first of many references to violence within the visual components of *In Search of Vanished Blood*. When reverse-painting the interiors of the five Mylar cylinders that are suspended from the ceiling of the installation space, a technique that has been historically used in India since its introduction from China, Nalini Malani uses photographs of the Naxals, groups of Communist tribal guerrillas primarily located in the east of India, as her stimulus. (See Figure 13) Collecting these photographs from Naxal websites before they were censored by the government and removed, Malani then attempts to make storylines out of the images, adding a human element by creating a sense of the lived experiences of the people who form these groups. The fact that access to these photographs is transient due to government censorship affirms the state imposed amnesia that discounts factions, tribal communities outcast due to their opposition to governing ideologies. It also means that Malani was unable to form a complete storyline from the images, instead creating...
a ‘concoction’ that drew upon images intrinsically linked with the depiction of violence, namely Goya’s *The Disasters of War* plates. (See Figure 14) She explains, “I was looking through a lot of images to find this continuity. It was the same with trying to find images, which proved to be more difficult, of the militant groups of Hindus and the Taliban, etc. But there what I did was that I actually used images from Goya and transferred them into these characters.” (See Figure 15)
Figure 15.

In combining contemporary journalistic photographs with recognisable historic artworks imbued with the theme of violence Nalini Malani creates a form of collage through her drawing and painting where emotive images, charged with connotations of brutality and destruction, meld together in intricate ways. As such, these intertwined images, that become further entangled through the use of spotlights and projection light to create the shadow plays cast by the reverse-painted drawings in the Mylar cylinders, (see Figure 15) convey to the viewer the layers of complexity involved in attempting to understand the problem of violence.\(^{232}\) Malani recognises this difficulty and adds to it further still by introducing the story of Draupadi to the video installation, incorporating narrated sections of the tale into the soundscape of *In

\(^{232}\) The shadow plays created by the Mylar cylinders are reminiscent of zoetropes, one of the earliest devices to create “the illusion of continuous movement.” Leo Enticknap, *Moving Image Technology: from zoetrope to digital*, Wallflower Press, London, 2005, p. 7.
Search of Vanished Blood. Written by Mahasveta Devi in 1978, the story of Draupadi is set within the context of the Bengali tribals and recounts the traumatic events that unfold when a woman involved in collective protest and action is apprehended by government forces. Malani selects a section towards the end of the text to narrate and play within the installation space for the viewer to be confronted with, including the lines:

Something sticky under her ass and waist,
Only the gag has been removed.
Incredible thirst.
She senses that her vagina is bleeding.
Between the thighs there still lies hope.
She sees her breasts, and understands that, indeed, she’s been made up right.
Her breasts are bitten raw, the nipples torn. How many?

Notably the line “Between the thighs there still lies hope” is not a line from Devi’s text and has presumably been inserted by Malani to express a sense of hope, possibly in the feminine, a theme I will explore in the next section of this chapter.

However Malani does not intend to turn the women of the Naxals, or any of the tribal militants, into heroes. She returns to the problem of the phallocentric drive to aggression and the justification of violence, stating, “I’m totally against violence. It’s a conundrum. Even though my sympathies are going to the tribal people, they’re fighting and are taking the right to kill, but who has the right to take away life? These are questions that I’m posing to myself as an artist and what the work is about.” These questions are not answered within In Search of Vanished Blood, but rather are opened up to the viewer in order for them to feel the weight and complexity of the issue and engage with it.

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In conversation with Nalini Malani, social-cultural anthropologist Arjun Appadurai raises further questions still, suggesting “violence is not containable, as a separate part of life. It flows in and through a lot of things. So like money, it has to be channelled. You can’t say, ‘I won’t have violence,’ you have to say, ‘how will you move it, what’s a good path for money to flow?’”236 The constant and cyclical nature of this violence, of “tragedy repeated”,237 concerns Malani who is baffled that, in an age of progress, one can still commit violent acts in the name of God, perpetuating a time warp in which nothing has changed.238 This feeling of being caught in a never-ending loop can be sensed by the viewer in In Search of Vanished Blood in the silhouette’s referencing Eadweard Muybridge’s running dogs;239 perpetually in motion, yet projected in a stationary position on the wall of the installation space, the viewer experiences the exhaustion of the constant but futile cycle. (See Figure 16)

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238 Cassandra’s Gift, Kapadia.
239 Eadweard Muybridge, Animals in Motion, Dover Publications, New York, 1957, p. 120.
If not presenting answers in her video installation *In Search of Vanished Blood*, it is Nalini Malani’s task to question the acceptance of violence within the cultural identity of modern India; its distortion, or even absence, in the collective cultural memory; and its perversion in contemporary struggles. In creating this engagement with the viewer, “A possibility or even necessity unfolds here: rethinking and overcoming the existing notions of heritage, patrimony, property, their embodiment in memory, history, place, belonging, and the multiple means and modes in which they are sustained.”240 Malani uses the unfolding nature of the video installation to rethink the tradition of violence established in the aggression of the phallocentric environment and works through the possibilities of a differing approach, an approach that engages with the female psyche.

**A Feminine Approach**

Despite its designation as a masculine space, the female gender has been intrinsically connected to ideas of nationalism and national honour, as well as the production of violence in modern India, the female body becoming both the site of violence, and the figure to fight for and defend. Nalini Malani explores this dual representation of the female body in *In Search of Vanished Blood*, including depictions of women in the traditional dress of the sari; the image of Kali, the Hindu goddess of time and change; and footage of contemporary women’s faces and bare bodies that become overlaid with symbols of destruction and violence.

As previously discussed the concept of undertaking acts of collective, or communal, violence in the name of maintaining national honour has pervaded the cultural identity of the Indian nation since it’s birth at the time of Partition.241 This national honour has often been tied to the protection of the nation’s women, however in placing such importance on the female population, in particular their bodies, there is a danger that is may develop into a form of

241 This is not to say that this was not true prior to Partition also.
objectification. As Veena Das asks, “How is it that the imaging of the project of nationalism in India came to include the appropriation of bodies of women as objects on which the desire for nationalism could be brutally inscribed and a memory for the future made?” Paradoxically, women came to not only symbolise the nation one was fighting for, but to also represent the nation one was fighting against.

Throughout the Partition women were commonly abducted and raped as a means of inflicting harm upon one’s ‘enemy’. These women not only suffered violent acts upon their bodies while being held captive, but also if returned to their homelands, as they were seen as damaged by the violation they had endured during their abduction. In her essay *Language and Body* Das investigates how in this way women’s bodies became inscribed with both the defeats and victories of the nation, and how this has come to be told through literature and mythology, citing the absence of an official history of the acts of violence perpetrated against women in the name of Partition as the reason for the developments of these ‘fictional’ stories.

Malani also uses creative channels to delve into these issues of women’s bodies being inscribed with the violence undertaken in the name of nationalist ideals. Philosopher Elizabeth Grosz asserts that, “Far from being an inert, passive, noncultural and ahistorical term, the body may be seen as a crucial term, the site of contestation, in a series of economic, political, sexual, and intellectual struggles.” It can be seen that in her video installations, including *In Search of Vanished Blood*, Malani visually articulates this concept. Projected images of women become imprinted with symbols of violence using her shadow play technique, transposing the shadows of the reverse paintings on the Mylar cylinders onto the walls that are the site of the projection.

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242 This was literally the case with the artistic depiction of Bharat Mata (‘Mother India’) painted by Abanindranath Tagore, c.1904-5.


244 “In the legislative debates in the Constituent Assembly it was stated, on December 15, 1949, that thirty-three thousand Hindu or Sikh women had been abducted by Muslims, while the Pakistan Government had claimed that fifty thousand Muslim women had been abducted by Hindu or Sikh men.” *Ibid.*, p. 67.


(see Figure 17) which serves as “a material analogy for how women have been metaphorically inscribed with their national identities.” These symbols include the merged images of the tribal militia and etchings by Goya discussed above, along with illustrations of what appear to be menacing prehistoric creatures. In layering these loaded images upon the faces and bodies of women who ground the viewer in the reality of the issues at hand, due to their photographic nature and the connotations of verisimilitude this medium holds over drawing and painting, Malani conveys the embodied nature of the female experience of the problem of violence.


In highlighting the objectification of the female body in the politics of phallocentric violence that occurred during Partition and continues to occur, Malini also addresses the fact that, as Grosz succinctly puts it, “Women can no longer take on the function of being the body for men while men are left free to soar to the heights of theoretical reflection and cultural

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248 Politicians “continue to talk about national honor when dealing with the violence that women have had to endure in every communal riot since the Partition.” Das, ‘Language and Body’, p. 89.
This argument appeals to the viewer on two fronts. The first is that women should not be determined purely as bodies to be ‘taken care of’, controlled, or manipulated by men and male ideologies. As, for example, “the figure of the abducted woman allowed the state to construct ‘order’ as essentially an attribute of the masculine nation so that the counterpart of the social contract becomes the sexual contract in which women as sexual and reproductive beings are placed within the domestic, under the control of the ‘right’ kinds of men.”

The second tier to the argument is that which is deemed to be feminine should not be relegated to the body, but should be allowed to engage with realms traditionally tied to the masculine; those of politics, reason and culture. In engaging the feminine psyche there is a possibility of countering the phallocentric environment and masculine drive to aggression that has determined the production of the Indian national culture and memory, instead offering an alternative that seeks to alter, if not stop, the cycle of violence. Nalini Malani delves into this idea within *In Search of Vanished Blood* through the introduction of the character of Cassandra. Engaging not only with the Greek mythological figure of Cassandra, the seer and daughter of Priam, the king of Troy, but also Christa Wolf’s 1980 interpretation of the character, Malani integrates Cassandra into the video installation through the soundscape.

Beginning with a synthesised style of music made up of elements reminiscent of violins and drumming, the soundscape at first creates a calming sensation for the viewers through its measured, almost mechanical pace; evoking the tempo of a slow pendulum. Gradually these sounds become more ominous, before they are suddenly broken with a sharp voice stating:

*This is Cassandra speaking.*

Followed by the undulating recital of the lines:

*In the Heart of Darkness. Under the Sun of Torture.*

*To the Capitals of the World. In the Names of the Victims.*

*I reject all the semen which I have received. I turn the milk of my breasts into poison.*

*I take back the world I gave birth to. I bury it in my womb.*

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249 Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, p. 22.

Down with the happiness of submission.
Long live hate, rebellion and death.\textsuperscript{251}

These lines form the last passage of Heiner Mueller’s 1979 play The Hamletmachine, a postmodernist drama that draws on themes of feminism and the environmental movement. The lines selected specifically call to mind ideas of the female body and its affiliation with nature, while also drawing attention to the rejection of woman’s submission. However the use of the name Cassandra is an artistic choice made by Malani, replacing the original name of ‘Electra’ in the script. Here Malani intentionally interposes Cassandra along with all the connotations she carries of a heretofore-silenced female intuition.

In classical Greek mythology Cassandra the seer was cursed by Apollo with the gift of prophecy that nobody would believe, doomed to foresee the fall of Troy but unable to make anyone heed her warnings. Christa Wolf’s interpretation of Cassandra focuses on this idea of society’s wish to remain blind to impending doom, and instead focus on the drive to ‘violence for a cause’. Throughout Wolf’s narrative the voice of Cassandra unravels the events leading up to the war and the experiences of war in a non-linear account that replicates the nature in which memories unfold. She notes the compulsion toward action, stating that events “aroused the craving for more and more events, and finally for war.”\textsuperscript{252} Wolf’s tale echoes Malani’s concerns about the creation of calls to violence by the state, rewriting the Trojan history with the claim that Helen was never in Troy and was merely a symbolic catalyst for an already impending war. When Cassandra confronts her father about this issue and claims, “No one can win a war waged for a phantom.” His response is merely, “Why not? All you have to do is make sure the army does not lose faith in the phantom.”\textsuperscript{253} Further arguing that despite the falsity of the physical ‘cause’, the pretext of Helen is enough to argue “The honor of our house is at stake.”\textsuperscript{254}

\textsuperscript{251} Malani, In Search of Vanished Blood.
\textsuperscript{252} Wolf, Cassandra, p. 27.
\textsuperscript{253} Ibid., p. 69.
\textsuperscript{254} Ibid., p. 70.
The character Cassandra deconstructs the use of the female body and its defence, in this case the beautiful Helen, as a justification for collective violence. She explains; “Then I understood: In the Helen we had invented, we were defending everything we no longer had. And the more it faded, the more real we had to say it was. Thus out of words, gestures, ceremonies, and silence there arose a second Troy, a ghostly city, where we were supposed to feel at home and live at ease. Was I the only one who saw this? Here she also highlights how she is the only one who seems to see the truth. For Nalini Malani Cassandra’s intuition is an aspect of her feminine psyche that allows her to understand the impact and futility of communal violence, and this Cassandra element “exists in all of us.” While the feminine aspect allows us to see the reality of situations, the masculine psyche, or the ‘Apollo aspect’, prohibits us from acting upon this knowledge. It is not Malani’s belief that the feminine is contained within the female gender, but rather that the feminine and the masculine exist in all humans and we have the ability to fluctuate between the two psyches if we so choose, but first we must be aware of this alternative and the way in which we have been directed toward a predominantly phallocentric perspective throughout history.

In the current state of affairs Malani sees a division in the world where politics are overwhelmingly male-dominated, whilst “The violence of war is not an intrinsically female way of solving problems.” In differentiating the feminine and masculine experience, one must acknowledge that some ways of understanding the world become located in the body. The feminine has traditionally been located in the body, as Grosz states, “As a discipline, philosophy has surreptitiously excluded femininity, and ultimately women, from its practices through its

255 “‘Notice that,’ Aeneas’s father Anchises said to us ... ‘Notice that they a chose a woman...’” Ibid., p. 68.
256 Ibid., p. 85.
257 Cassandra’s Gift, Kapadia.
260 Ibid., p. 28.
usually implicit coding of femininity with the unreason associated with the body.” In her conversation with Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, Nalini Malani discusses the connection between womanhood and madness and rather than arguing that this association should not be made, recognises a space for intuition that is allowed through the embodied experience of the feminine. Cassandra is declared mad by her family due to her warnings of impending destruction, yet it is interesting to note the passage in Wolf’s text: “But I, I alone saw. Or did I really ‘see’? What was it, then? I felt. Experienced – yes, that’s the word. For it was, it is, an experience when I ‘see‘, when I ‘saw‘. Saw that the outcome of this hour was our destruction.” Using the phenomenological experience to gain insight into events, and allowing the sense of intuition a space to be felt, is necessary for both men and women if we are to find an alternative path for the future; one that does not fall back on the cycle of violence. In order to do so we must first stop demonising this manner of feeling and thinking and according to Nalini Malani one way in which to do this is to change the terminology of the ‘hysterical’ voice to the ‘female’ voice.

Relating this back to Nalini Malani’s *In Search of Vanished Blood*, the video installation addresses the fact that on the Pakistani and Indian border money has been spent by both states in order to commit violence against people, when instead these governments could have been attempting to establish communication and mutually beneficial exchanges between the nations. Malani asserts, “We all know this! This is the Cassandra aspect, but on the other hand, there’s the Apollo aspect, which stops us from acting upon it. Both parts exist in all of us. What I’m interested in is to try to create awareness…” While the inclusion of Cassandra’s name within the soundscape of the video installation, along with Malani’s extensive discourse on the topic of the Cassandra archetype when addressing *In Search of Vanished Blood*, alert the viewer to these themes of the feminine psyche and its recognition, there is a second, and possibly more overt

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261 Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, p. 4.
262 “The word hysteria comes from the Greek work hyster,a, which means uterus. There is a clear link between apparent madness, deviance, and womanhood.” Christov-Bakargiev, ‘Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev in Conversation with Nalini Malani’, pp. 22-23.
representation of this concept within the work. Within the reading of a passage from the story of Draupadi, already outlined previously, there is the inclusion of a line not from the original text, “Between the thighs there still lies hope!” This statement has remained somewhat overlooked in the numerous academic analyses of In Search of Vanished Blood, however I believe that it is a reference to the hope for the future that lies in the feminine psyche, in this line symbolised by Draupadi’s female genitalia, as well as a hope for future generations who have the potential to change the established structures of the past. Art historian Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, the Artistic Director of dOCUMENTA (13) in which In Search of Vanished Blood was exhibited, speaks of Malani’s representation of her female characters’ traumatic experiences, such as Draupadi and Cassandra, explaining their role in Malani’s goal of ‘opening up’ the issue of universal understanding. “Often conveying for the viewer a feeling of the traumatic consequences of history, they represent a feminine aspect that is nonetheless able to speak in a de-gendered and potentially shared language.”

It is also possible that the inclusion of the image of the goddess Kali in the reverse-paintings of the Mylar cylinders (see Figure 18) could be read as a call for a change in thinking. Kali is the Hindu goddess of Time but is commonly associated with death, in the sense that time eventuates in death; and with change, death being one of these changes. The painted images of Kali, along with the shadow images she casts across the installation space, remind the viewer of the ability for things to end and to be reborn. One such rebirth may be the approach the Indian nation takes when establishing their political and cultural ideologies and determining the form of their collective memory, putting aside the tradition of the phallocentric environment and instead embracing a feminine alternative.

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266 At the time of writing this thesis I have been unable to find any reference to this particular line from the work.

The Layers of the Labyrinth

Though no immediate and complete escape from the ongoing power system is possible, least of all through mass violence, the changes that will restore autonomy and initiative to the human person will all lie within the province of each individual soul, once it is roused.

(Lewis Mumford, The Pentagon of Power)\textsuperscript{268}

The complex political and theoretical issues that inform Nalini Malani’s \textit{In Search of Vanished Blood} are well documented. Created for \textsc{dOCUMENTA} (13), a festival that is grounded in theoretical inquiry, the development not only of the video installation itself but also the concepts that have shaped Malani’s creative endeavours are explored in essays, interviews and critiques in each of the three catalogues that accompany the exhibition. I have written about the issue, or problem, that provided the stimulus for the video installation; that being the problem of violence and the phallocentric environment that has become an element of the Indian national

culture and has dictated the way in which the national memory has been formed. I have also addressed Malani’s proposed alternative, the acceptance of the feminine psyche in each of us and the acknowledgement of the validity of intuition. The intention of speaking to these two key components of *In Search of Vanished Blood* is to ground the discussion of the phenomenological experience of the video installation that I wish to undertake next, and to underscore the complexity of these themes, thus recognising the difficulty in conveying them to the viewer.

It would seem that Nalini Malani, perhaps more so than Shirin Neshat and Dana Claxton, is acutely aware that in creating an artwork that focuses upon a culturally specific issue there is the potential for the viewer to remain removed and perceive the content as relating to someone ‘Other’, despite the possibility of a shared phenomenological language allowed by the medium of video installation. Therefore, as will be seen in my analysis of the embodied experience of *In Search of Vanished Blood*, Malani layers visual and aural elements relating to her own problematic cultural identity and memory with more universal symbols, and phenomenological and sensory devices, in order to engage all viewers, prompting them to question the feelings and reactions she instills in them. As Macushla Robinson describes, “By folding together many images and blurring the boundaries between them, *In Search of Vanished Blood* works against the belief that we cannot cross cultural boundaries. More than this, it wrestles with the idea that we cannot understand each other’s suffering when it falls outside our own cultural and historical circumstances.”

In order to provide a point of access for the viewer, Malani relies first and foremost on creating an atmosphere an audience will want to engage with. “I really believe in the sense of beauty to seduce the viewer … [if it achieves that] You begin to think of what it is telling you.” Within the video installation *In Search of Vanished Blood* Malani does attain a type of beauty that intrigues the viewer, coaxing them to remain and engage with the further intricacies of the artwork, but it also provides a paradoxical

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sense of unease and confusion as the work unfolds over its eleven-minute looping timeframe. This emotive aspect to the installation lays in the calculated way the soundscape, video projections, spotlights and shadow plays have been developed and choreographed in relation to one another.

As the viewer enters the rear cabinet of the basement level of the Documenta-Halle, they walk through the arc of a curved hallway that effectively obscures all sight between the inner and out spaces of *In Search of Vanished Blood*, consequently by the time the viewer is completely within the video installation they have disconnected with the outside world to an extent, instead becoming completely present within the environment Nalini Malani has created. This is key to Margaret Morse’s definition of the video installation, stating, "what ultimately distinguishes [it] … is … whether or not the visitor spatially enters two as well as three dimensions or remains in ‘real’ space.”271 Whilst there is technically a ‘start’ to the artwork, determined by the beginning of the video projection loop, entry to the installation space is not timed so viewers may commence their experience of the artwork at any point, every viewer thus having a slightly different experience. I will outline the phenomenological understanding of *In Search of Vanished Blood* that might take place should one experience the entire video installation from its technical beginning through to its return to this point. However I do not believe that the overarching understanding the artwork is attempting to convey would be dramatically effected by its viewing from a different point as, while the undulations in tone and pace relate to what comes directly before or after, the work does not tell a linear narrative but rather conveys a web of complex and interwoven concepts that take a cyclical form.272

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271 Morse, ‘Video Installation Art’, p. 159.
272 “Her video plays evoke and combine complex histories, while at the same time enveloping the viewer in an affective space that allows us to ‘re-enter’ scenes of devastation.” Robinson, ‘Nalini Malani: in the shadow of Partition’, p. 39.
Walking into the video installation the viewer first encounters the soundscape that can be heard whilst walking through the entrance corridor before the physical components of the work are visible. Long synthesised musical chords are played that convey a sense of the ethereal, vibrating above the viewer’s head. With the introduction of a slow paced drumbeat the notion of repetition is established, the regular but spaced apart beats marking time in a cyclical manner. This section of the soundscape is visually accompanied by the projection of clouds scrolling through the sky onto the walls of the installation space. Physically the viewer becomes immediately aware that the visual components of *In Search of Vanished Blood* take place overhead, (see Figure 19) as five constantly rotating Mylar cylinders hang from the roof above, while the six channels of video are projected high on all of the surrounding walls, creating a frieze that alternatively floats or looms above the viewer.
Malani’s choice to position the visual component of the installation in this way allows her to induce a sensation of insignificance within the viewer, similar to that of the feeling one might have when contemplating the immensity of the never-ending sky. The location of the cylinders and projections also allows multiple viewers to walk around the installation space, in order to attempt to see all the aspects of what unfolds, without interrupting one another’s line of sight. The projection of clouds moving at a speed that compliments, or is complimented by, the rhythm of the soundscape instills a sense of calm in the viewer, which is also assisted by the warm sepia and muted orange tones the sky is cast with. Over the projections, the shadows cast from the reverse-paintings on the cylinders by the light of the projection shining through them create a continuous rotation of symbolic imagery including silhouettes of monsters carrying human bodies, the goddess Kali, figures kneeling in prayer, elements of Goya’s The Disasters of War and sections of human anatomy. (See Figure 20) This constant cycle of illustrations representing violence evoke a sense of the cyclical nature of violence throughout history,
unbounded by culture or time. However Malani’s layering of this imagery with the peace of the clouds and the ambient music instils in the viewer an understanding of the way in which we as humans have been lulled into an acceptance of these repeated acts of violence. They wash over us as these images wash over us, further back than we remember and ongoing into an unseen future.

While on one hand the viewer encounters a sense of insignificance due to the vistas of grand imagery scrolling overhead, simultaneously there is an impression of miniaturisation, in the sense that the immensity of the world and its history has been shrunk into one enclosed space to be experienced by the viewer. In this case Bachelard is brought to mind with his understanding of the miniature as “every universe … enclosed in curves”,273 and his insight that the use of a magnifying glass can open a new experience of the world and with it a “moment when we have to accept unnoticed detail, and dominate it.”274 Through In Search of Vanished Blood, Malani holds a magnifying glass up to the universe she has enclosed within the installation space and demands that the viewers take note of the detail of violence. Though perhaps not asking them to then ‘dominate’ this detail she does offer them the option to critique and question it.

The shadows themselves conceptually relate to the notion of memory. Shifting, changing, but ever-present traces of a physical reality; the shadow like a memory can be manipulated and distorted but ties us to the ‘thing’ that created it. Malani’s shadows accentuate the way in which memories become confused, interwoven and reinterpreted through their rotations, tied to the rotations of the Mylar cylinders. Cast onto the walls of the installation space, the shadowplays interact with each other, at times merging as the cylinders rotate toward each other, as well as with the projections, adding a further layer to the imagery, at times blurring due to areas of shadow within the videos themselves. Malani explains her exploration of the shadow and the metaphor it has become;

274 Ibid., p. 155.
Darkness is more potent than light. It just needs a shadow and you can obliterate light. So that is an interesting motive that I kept in my mind in terms of how quickly one can overshadow light. If you take that further with ideas: how quickly something that has to do with enlightenment or revelation can be completely destroyed, and very quickly, by the “shadow of doubt” or a moment of skepticism. I think that that’s one aspect of the shadow. Because a shadow is very strong, it has no materiality and yet it’s so strong.275

Gradually the beat of the drum increases in tempo and the light changes to a cooler blue tone. The projections of the sky are replaced by projected animations of Muybridge’s running dog and the sense of drifting timelessness is replaced by a feeling within the viewer of running on the spot, with its connotations of futile exhaustion. The viewer feels like the dog, constantly moving but remaining static, while the quicker pace creates a sense of urgency as the shadow play maintains its rotation. As Merleau-Ponty writes, “because we have a body and a history (both personally and collectively), we can never know complete rest.”276 The ambient light fades and the installation space becomes dark, the viewer’s focus is therefore directed to the bright flashes of the projection that now gain a further layer, the projection of close up sections of female faces with the dogs galloping over them. These fragments of the face, concentrating on the mouth or eyes but never seen in its entirety, allow the viewer to engage with a feeling of the oppression of these silent, staring women, imprisoned within the frame of the projection. While acts of violence, still represented by the shadow play, continue needlessly, the feminine is denied a voice.

As the drumming comes to an abrupt stop there is the jarring twang of what might be a sitar followed by the introduction of an ominous hum and the space becomes darker still as the only light cast is from the projection of a thumbprint on one side the installation and the fabric-wrapped woman’s head on the other. (See Figure 21) It is at this point that a disembodied and inhuman sounding female voice states, “This is Cassandra speaking.” After a brief pause, during which the humming chord still permeates the space, a chorus of synthesised voices recites the

passage from *Hamletmachine*. Their taunting tone instills a sensation of unease and discomfort in the viewer that is deepened by the introduction of an extended low chord that sounds slightly out of key. However the lines, “I reject all the semen which I have received. I turn the milk of my breasts into poison. I take back the world I gave birth to. I bury it in my womb,” are highlighted, spoken by one female, unsynthesised voice. While the other sections of the passage carry the tone of a warning, spoken in unison, these two lines carry a more personal meaning, representing the need for each of us to individually reject the masculine psyche, the semen, and return to the feminine, the womb.

Figure 21.
*Nalini Malani d’OCUMENTA 13*, online video, Nalini Malani, 15 June 2012. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6uK9tRoPds8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6uK9tRoPds8)

The use of myth as one of the layers in *In Search of Vanished Blood* is in itself a tool employed by Malani in creating a work that attempts to articulate issues specifically linked to her own cultural identity and memory in a broader context, that will be understood and engaged with by viewers outside her own situation. She explains this choice in one interview stating, “My
works contain references to historical moments, but also to myths because I find that those are bridges; visual and verbal language bridges that connect to the audience.” She goes on to say, “Myths are bundles, which have so much information about historical factors as well as epic factors. It’s a connection that I would like to make. For a long time I have been interested in bringing forth the historic past into the contemporary because certain things are still operative. … I think that’s the only way we can really move on.”

Hence the use of the myth of Cassandra, is a mechanism that Nalini Malani uses in order to narrow the gap of the ‘Other’, taking the problem of phallocentric communal violence and the denial of the feminine psyche she sees as inculcated in her own culture and raising awareness of its commonality within all cultures, and throughout history.

Standing in the darkness, the giant thumbprint and oversized head looming down upon the viewer, one cannot help but feel that the space is closing in upon them and that whatever is about to unravel before them is of significance, what Merleau-Ponty would term the ‘spectacle’ the space is presenting to their senses. The thumbprint symbolises identity, Malini notes the importance of this form of identification at border crossings, our thumbprint literally tying us to particular national identity. Malani actively confronts this image with that of the shrouded head, a representation of both anonymity and censorship. While there is no clear reason for this juxtaposition, the possibility to create a tension between these omnipresent icons across space that is allowed by the medium of the video installation means that Malani can in turn create a sensation of the same tension for the viewer located between them. The viewer becomes acutely aware of the pressure to belong to a nation and maintain a cultural identity, while also feeling the oppression that identity and its memories can carry.

Silence fills the installation environment and at this point, following the viewer’s continuous subjectification to noise whether dominant or ambient, the silence takes on an active presence within the space. There is a sense of Bachelard’s reverberations within the silent space,

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The silence focuses the viewer, building a sense of anticipation, and they centre their attention on the text of Faiz’s poem scrolling in a secondary projected layer over the veiled head. Thus the importance of these lines is phenomenologically conveyed to the viewer, highlighted by a climactic absence of noise and motion. Undistracted, the viewer becomes increasingly aware of their physical presence becoming grounded within the artwork and I would argue that Merleau-Ponty’s assertion that “man is a mind with a body, a being who can only get to the truth of things because its body is, as it were, embedded in those things” can be understood in such a circumstance. In reading the text rather than listening to it, the viewer is unable to let it wash over them, but must instead play an active role in reading and comprehending what Malani is drawing their attention to. In giving the viewer this agency, Malani opens both the poem and the artwork In Search of Vanished Blood up to the viewer, allowing them the opportunity to draw their own interpretations from the words and their own questions about the nature of violence.

**Figure 22.**

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Suddenly all the projections surrounding the installation space become filled with static, (see Figure 22) and the viewer in turn becomes encased in a field of confusion. Simultaneously the silence is broken by the muffled sound of white noise, creating a claustrophobic aural atmosphere for the viewer as connotations of censorship become evident. The shadow play keeps revolving and casting its interacting images, their relationships shifting with each movement of the cylinders and light. Yet the dark elements of the static consume the shadows and the figures become blurred and distorted. If the shadow plays are to be read like memories, then the static illustrates how censorship can alter our memories, particularly the impact on cultural memories tied to our identity when state censorship is invoked. Just as suddenly as it started the white noise ceases and is replaced within the soundscape by a child’s voice reciting the first verse of the hymn *Now the day is over*, written by Sabine Baring-Gould in 1865;

\[
\begin{align*}
    \text{Now that the day is over,} \\
    \text{Night is drawing nigh,} \\
    \text{Shadows of the evening} \\
    \text{Steal across the sky.}^{283}
\end{align*}
\]

While the inclusion of this verse is overlooked in written analyses of *In Search of Vanished Blood* there are overt links to the shadow component of the installation. These lines, isolated from the rest of the hymn, express a haunting feeling that, particularly due to the use of the child’s voice, instil a sense of unease in the viewer.

As the verse comes to an end loud bursts of noise that sound like horns create another aural layer. As these blasts sporadically interject the space synchronised spotlights flash, lighting up the installation space for short periods of time. These spotlights highlight glimpses of women’s faces projected on the walls, but only for fragments of time making it impossible for the viewer to engage with the figures. A cacophony of sounds associated with violence; such as shattering glass, form another layer to the soundscape as footage of a larger than life woman’s body, scrolling up from the feet towards the head, is projected with the image of a skyscraper

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283 Malani, *In Search of Vanished Blood*. 

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layered over it. (See Figure 23) Malani’s use of the female body in these projections is key. Grosz articulates the importance of the body in this form of politics, writing:

"The body is the ally of sexual difference, a key term in questioning the centrality of a number of apparently benign but nonetheless phallocentric presumptions which have hidden the cultural and intellectual effacement of women: it helps to problematize the universalist and universalizing assumptions of humanism, through which women’s — and all other groups’ — specificities, positions, and histories are rendered irrelevant or redundant; it resists the tendency to attribute a human nature to the subject’s interior; and it resists tendencies to dualism, which splits subjectivity into two mutually exclusive domains." 284

Therefore if the female body has historically been determined as the site of irrationality as a means to oppress it in favour of the male rationalism, then we must redress this philosophical dualism in order to raise the feminine body, and therefore psyche, as a valid alternative to traditional structures. Hence, through Malani’s projections the viewer is moved to once again acknowledge the historical preferencing of masculine rationalism and ‘progress’ over the feminine, in this case literally depicted with the phallocentric tower building being inscribed on the body of the woman.

Figure 23.

*Nalini Malani dOCUMENTA 13*, online video, Nalini Malani, 15 June 2012.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6uK9iRoPds8

284 Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, pp. ix-x.
A female voice begins to sing and the space becomes filled with the depth of her voice. While the viewer cannot distinguish what she is singing her tone brings to mind the impression of mourning, as the projections start to display photographs of women’s bodies and faces becoming saturated by pools of red light. (See Figure 17) Thus the viewer is immersed in an aural and visual environment that conveys the impact of a culture of violence upon the female gender. When the singing comes to an end this implied impact of violence is made literal by the narration of Draupadi’s story, as discussed previously. The graphic and visceral descriptions included in the lines of the story that Malani chooses to integrate in *In Search of Vanished Blood* serve to shock the viewer and ground the concepts of communal violence that have been alluded to in an embodied reality that cannot be ignored. In hearing the physical descriptions of violence the viewer takes on a corporeal understanding and feels a bodily discomfort in response.

![Figure 24.](image)


*Nalini Malani d’OCUMENTA 13, online video, Nalini Malani, 15 June 2012.*

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6uK9iRoPds8

Whilst the narration takes place the projections transition from the representations of bloodied women and commence a sequence of animated illuminated hands forming the gestures
of sign language. (See Figure 24) Malani utilised sign language to locate a common ground; between the viewer and the subjects of the artwork, the viewer and herself, the viewer and the concepts presented, and the viewer and other viewers. Sign language represents a universal language, like the artwork itself, a platform from which we as a collective can undertake an ideological shift in our ideas about communal violence, phallocentric logic, and the feminine psyche. The soundscape moves to a rhythmic ticking noise that builds pace, like the sound of a train gaining momentum, and as it does the hands move in quicker and quicker succession until they blur together and become undecipherable. Just as Nalini Malani makes no claim to have a concrete solution to the universal problem of violence, the signs of these hands cannot give us a conclusive answer.

I must acknowledge that this is by no means an exhaustive analysis of all the components that form Nalini Malani’s video installation. In Search of Vanished Blood contains too many interwoven layers, each loaded with symbolic meaning and theoretical content, to unravel in one chapter. In conducting the analysis that is present in this chapter I have focused primarily on the aspects of the artwork that struck me personally, as well as, as many connecting components that could practically be addressed. In working in this way I engage with Roland Barthes notion of the ‘punctum’ as he describes it, the “element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me.” Breaking through the ‘studium’, the cultural interpretation of the artwork, the punctum has an affective impact upon the viewer. It is a detail that attracts the viewer’s attention for no rational reason, rather, it is an ‘accident’ that is poignant to them. In this manner certain aspects of Malani’s In Search of Vanished Blood pierced me through my overarching interest in the complete artwork. Therefore, as this thesis is grounded in the phenomenological, I have focused on the elements of the video installation that inflicted this embodied reaction upon me.

287 Ibid.
288 Ibid., pp. 27-42.
Nalini Malani’s In Search of Vanished Blood creates a lived experience for its viewers not through the mimesis of simulating a culturally specific experience, but by replicating the complex and multi-layered encounter that constitutes the embodied experience of a culture. As Christa Wolf writes in one of the essays that accompanies her narrative Cassandra, “It is the feeling that everything is fundamentally related; and that the strictly one-track-minded approach – the extraction of a single ‘skein’ for the purposes of narration and study – damages the entire fabric, including the ‘skein’.” This idea informs all three of the artworks investigated in this thesis. For Nalini Malani, it is her understanding of this that allows her to create an immersive labyrinth within her video installations that provides the viewer with a wealth of information, symbols and sensations that they may read in their own personal and ever-changing way, just as cultural identities are acutely personal and cultural memories constantly shifting.

289 Wolf, Cassandra, p. 287.
Conclusion

In this thesis I have shown how artists attempting to present an understanding of the experience of cultural identity and memory have utilised the medium of video installation. As cultural identity is informed by shared lived experiences and memories, but also constantly evolves through its reinterpretation and representation, it is an imagined notion that is grounded in the body. Therefore, artists are able to take advantage of the affective phenomenological dimension of the video installation, involving sight, sounds, space and time, to engage the viewer with the complex experience of identity.

The artworks that form the basis for each of the three chapters represent an evolution in the level of immersion artists have become able to create for their viewers, developing the use of space; from divided space to inclusive space, and finally to the interwoven space of the labyrinth. They also demonstrate a growing complexity in the use of video projection through increasing channels and the manipulation of the role of projection, such as Nalini Malani’s dual use of the projection to display video and create her shadow plays. Nonetheless, there remains a thread of similarities between the artworks of Shirin Neshat, Dana Claxton and Malani that reinforce the challenges the artist faces when creating artwork that communicates cultural identity. These include a multiplicity of voice, subjectivity and the complications of history and gender. I have argued that attempts to convey this complexity have been successful in the field of video installation as the manifold sensory components to the artwork allow the viewer to be presented with multiple ideas and understandings simultaneously. While the ability to provoke an embodied and affective reaction within the viewer heightens the chance of their immediate emotional connection and subsequent intellectual enquiry.

In writing of the challenges of expressing cultural identity it is interesting that this thesis has come to focus on three female artists, two of whom are firmly placed as feminist artists, and also to rely on the use of feminist theory in analysing the aims of these artists in creating artworks that articulate the difficulty of ‘woman’ in certain cultural groups and seek to redefine
the place of the female within identity politics. As such, the studies of Neshat and Malani establish a large proportion of this enquiry as part of the feminist project.

While Claxton does not fall into this feminist category, by delving into issues of post-colonialism, problematising the official histories, and creating a platform for the traditions of the talking circle and oral history, she too joins in a quest to raise awareness of the subaltern, speaking for those who cannot speak for themselves. This has emerged as the common theme throughout this thesis. In investigating the link between the conceptual exploration and communication of cultural identity and the material form and encounter of the video installation, I have uncovered a practice of questioning that each of these artists have engaged with. This enquiry by the artists takes its form in the content of their artwork; questioning the perception of gender, the place of women, the accuracy of history and official collective memory, and exploring the complexity of identity in groups who are not represented in dominant theory.

However, none of the artworks, *Rapture*, *Sitting Bull and the Moose Jaw Sioux* or *In Search of Vanished Blood*, examined here seek to provide answers to the questions they raise. Rather, the artists are able to impart their interrogatory quest upon the viewer through the affective dimension of video installation.

The artists in this study create immersive environments that engage the sensorium of the viewer, provoking them to join the process of questioning the artist has initiated. These actively constructed environs, when interpreted through Merleau-Ponty’s theory phenomenology and Bachelard’s poetic reading space, form lived-in spaces for the embodied viewer, in which their sensory interactions with the reverberations of the space allow an understanding to emerge over time. However, these sensory elements do not merely wash over the passive viewer, but rather engage the viewer, forcing them to negotiate and navigate the installation, giving them agency.

Embarking on this thesis it was my aim to account for an increasing number of video installations in art festivals that centred on themes of culture and identity by drawing a link
between this conceptual subject matter and the medium of video installation using phenomenology, arguing that as cultural identity is informed by lived experiences, it is therefore successfully represented by creating a lived experience for the viewer, as can be achieved in the form of the video installation. What has emerged through the process of undertaking this study is that the connections between these conceptual and material aspects are far more complex, engaging embodied viewers through active spaces into a questioning of cultural identity and memory. This work is not an analysis of representation, but an exploration of communication.
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