INTERSTICES AND THRESHOLDS: THE LIMINAL IN JOHANNESBURG AS REFLECTED IN THE VIDEO PROGRAMME, *THE UNDERGROUND, THE SURFACE AND THE EDGES*

Anthea Buys and Leora Farber

Abstract

A former gold-mining camp whose acquisition of the aesthetic markers of a metropolis was almost instantaneous, the city of Johannesburg can be represented, economically and philosophically, as geographically plural. The dialectic between the surface life of the city and its wealth-deriving underground spaces, and the concomitant activation of a third, liminal, space, namely, 'the edges', characterises 'the African modern of which Johannesburg is the epitome' (Nuttall & Mbembe 2008:17). We examine the relationships between these urban spatialities as they are articulated in a programme of selected video artworks curated by the authors that take the city of Johannesburg as their subject matter, source material or provenance. In the article, we pay attention to how the uses and meanings of these spatialities may have shifted, or failed to shift, between their constructions in apartheid-era and contemporary, post-apartheid South Africa.

We propose that the underground, the surface and the edges are at once identifiable modalities that emerge coherently in the selected works *and* interconnected inflections of a singular urban phenomenon. Building on this, we observe that the dialectic between the underground and the surface in Johannesburg contains echoes of the literary and artistic tropes of burial and resurrection, and in support of this observation, employ Jacques Derrida's (1994:xvii) notions of "hauntology", in which he considers the spectral or ghostly as that which 'happens' only between two apparently exclusive terms, such as 'life and death'. In considering "Johannesburg" as a metropolitan phenomenon in the selection of works discussed, we speak of a spectral, *interstitial* realm that exists in-between the strata of surface (the stratum of life, goodness, health and visibility) and underground (a catacomb where the dead, the corrupt and the ailed are hidden). We thus offer a view of being-in-Johannesburg in which inhabiting takes place in liminal spaces – or in-passage between – fluid spatial terms, wherein constant mediation takes place.

Haunted places are the only ones people can live in (de Certeau 1988:108).

In the fifteen video artworks that comprise the curated video programme *The Underground, the Surface and the Edges: A Hauntology of Johannesburg*,[1] an artistic preoccupation with the spatiality of South African cities emerges that privileges spatial liminality, or in-betweenness. This seems to echo observations about socio-geographic subjectivity in post-apartheid urban South Africa which may be more established in discourses

around other disciplines. For instance, in Rita Barnard's (2006) study of post-apartheid literature, *Apartheid and beyond*, she suggests, via a discussion of Zakes Mda's novel *Ways of dying* (1995), that South African literature has historically represented marginal and impoverished groups – for the most part those who were previously excluded from urban life in South Africa – as citizens of 'the space of the imagination' (Barnard 2006:149). This contradictory 'space' occupies no-place, and yet is spatially articulated. In this article, we propose that in the work of several South African video artists (or artists working in video) whose subjects are South African cities (amongst these, there is a preponderance of works that focus on Johannesburg), post-apartheid urban spatial inhabiting is construed in terms of liminality. We choose to read the expression of this liminality through three spatial registers which Sarah Nuttall and Achille Mbembe identify in relation to Johannesburg, namely the underground, the surface and the edges. In the words of Nuttall and Mbembe (2008:15, 17), from whose book *Johannesburg: the elusive metropolis* we borrow the title of the video programme, the dialectic between the surface and the underground, and the concomitant activation of a third space or "the edges", characterises 'the African modern of which Johannesburg is the epitome'.

In this article and the selection of video works that we have arranged under the title *The Underground, the Surface and the Edges*, we acknowledge Nuttall's and Mbembe's important steps towards a theoretical historiography of Johannesburg. At the same time however, in this project, we depart from the foundation that they have laid, pursuing its allusive strands. These strands begin with the implication in Nuttall and Mbembe's (2008:6, 7) text of a certain porousness between the different spatialities identified, an analogy between the space of the underground and the tomb, and a passing introduction to the notion of spectrality. We propose that the underground, the surface and the edges are at once identifiable modalities that emerge coherently in the works we have selected *and* interconnected inflections of a singular urban phenomenon. They are folds in the same fabric of the city. Primarily, it is the porousness between the different spatialities identified and the thresholds or margins between them that we identify as liminal spaces; as those spaces which represent an in-between state, not fully realised, fully understood or fully accepted into the socius. Kevin Hetherington (1997:32) argues that it is at the threshold or margin that activities and conditions are most uncertain and in which the normative structure of society is temporarily suspended or overturned. In this light, the articulation of post-apartheid spatiality through motifs of liminality is in step with a widespread renegotiation of space and power in South Africa's cities, in which the normativity of apartheid urban exclusivity, so long and resolutely entrenched, is repeatedly subjected to precarious acts of overturning.

Building on this, we observe that dialectic between the underground and the surface in the context of Johannesburg contains an echo of the literary and artistic trope of burial and resurrection, or exhumation, and the related trope of the spectral or ghostly. In his reading of the legacies of Marxism and dialectical materialism, Jacques Derrida (1994:xvii) writes of the spectral as that which 'happens' only between two apparently exclusive terms, such as 'life and death': '[w]hat happens between two, and between all the "two's" one likes, such as between life and death, can only *maintain itself* with some ghost, can only *talk with or about* some ghost'. The ghost is neither living nor properly dead. It haunts life with the prospect of death, while ultimately withholding the finality of that prospect. Derrida's spectre is a figure hovering between life and death,

presences and absences, making established certainties vacillate. It does not belong to the order of knowledge.

In the context of this article, when we think and speak of "Johannesburg" as a metropolitan phenomenon, we think and speak of a spectral, *interstitial* realm that exists in-between the strata of surface (the stratum of life, goodness, health and visibility) and underground (a catacomb where the dead, the corrupt and the ailed are hidden). This in-between, interstitial realm of the spectre bridges the various iterations of liminality that we explore in relation to selected works on the programme. Derrida's concept of hauntology – a haunted ontology, or an ontology which uproots its own origins in the notion of being – expresses the effects of the spectre on notions of the distinction between life and death, and presence and absence. In supplanting its near-homonym ontology, hauntology replaces the priority of being and presence with the figure of the ghost as that which is neither present nor absent, neither dead nor alive.

Another iteration of the concept of liminality, and, again, a concept related to that of spectrality and hauntology, is Sigmund Freud's (1955 [1919]) psycho-cultural concept of the uncanny. The uncanny is best expressed by Freud's original German term for the concept, das *Umheimliche*; literally meaning, "the extraordinary or strange". *Das Umheimliche* is closely related to its linguistic opposite, *Heimlich*, which according to *Cassell's German-English dictionary* (1978:644), refers to that which is hidden or clandestine. Both words sit closely alongside *Heimisch*, which denotes homeliness and familiarity. Freud writes of the uncanny as a phenomenon which appears aberrant, but only because of its closeness or resemblance to, or origins in, that which is familiar. In a sense, *Das Unheimliche* "comes out" of *Das Heimisch*. The uncanny, Freud (1955:226) writes, is 'nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind … which has become alienated from it … through the process of repression'. The *Unheimlich* symbolically enables an encounter with a part of the self which has been split off; repressed.[2] It is a state of in-betweeness that marks a return of the unfamiliar – that which has become disturbingly foreign or strange – in the psychic economy. As Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling (cited by Freud 1955:119) states: '*Unheimlich* is the name for everything that ought to remain secret and hidden but has come to light'.

Johannesburg as an interstitial realm

A former mining camp whose acquisition of the aesthetic markers of a metropolis was practically instantaneous, Johannesburg has always represented, economically and philosophically, a dual geography. The rapid development of Johannesburg out of the highveld dust was not only justified, but also caused, by the discovery in the late 1800s of a reef of subterranean gold close to the surface of the ground. This discovery literally furnished early mining magnates with means and a reason to build a modern city above ground. As Nuttall and Mbembe (2008:18) write,

> [t]he entire history of Johannesburg's built structures testifies not only to its inscription into the canons of modern Western urban aesthetics, but also to the originary tension virtually built into its morphology and geological structure between the life below the surface, what is above, and the edges.

Johannesburg's underground and surface are linked causally and economically, but this connection is also realised politically and metaphorically. The mining industry, with its traversal of the subterranean and the

economy that plays out on the surface, saw the inception of the politics of racial inequality and segregation that were institutionally upheld in the city under apartheid. At the most obvious level, white South African and European mining magnates benefited financially from the subterranean toil of predominantly African, but also Chinese, Indian, Malay and mixed-race labourers. This class and wealth disparity along racial lines prompted a further spatial dimension: labourers were forced to live in peripheral, invisible, temporary or threatening spatial environments, such as miners' barracks, hostels, informal "squatter camps", and, sometimes, within the mines themselves for limited periods of time. Meanwhile, white middle-to-upper-class citizens occupied legitimate and permanent living quarters in the central and northern suburbs, and enjoyed a comparatively unrestricted urban lifestyle. This forced inhabitation of peripheral spaces relegated labourers classified as "non-white" to "the edges" of mainstream cultural, social and political life in Johannesburg. However, a counter-culture emerged from this peripheral spatiality that ultimately challenged the hegemony of white culture. In this sense, life along Johannesburg's edges is, historically, essential to the contemporary city.

This condition of inhabiting a spatial zone between two terms (underground – surface, surface – edges, edges – underground and so on) problematises the possibility of a clearly articulated boundary separating these terms. In terms of the geographic spatialities of Johannesburg itself, and in terms of our discussion of selected video works in this article, we see this relationship between these terms as porous; as a fluid interchange, wherein constant mediation takes place. This resonates with Fredric Jameson's (1981:39) description of mediation, as the 'classical dialectical term for the establishment of … symbolic identities between the various levels, as a process whereby each level is folded into the next, thereby loosing its constitutive autonomy'. The borders between the underground, the surface and the edges, less the instant of traversal from one state to another, is in fact, a fourth term; a hiatus between now and then, and an indeterminate spatiality between here and there, below and above, death and life. Stephen Greenblatt (1995:28) describes this state of in-betweenness in terms of liminality, noting that, 'the limen, [is] the threshold or margin, the place that is no-place, in which the subject is rendered invisible'. "The edges", the third spatial term in the title of this curatorial project, share the qualities of Greenblatt's notion of the limen. The geographic and social peripheries or "edges" are, in fact, liminal spatialities, rather than simply, absolutely, discrete ones. In the context of a city such as Johannesburg, the subjects who inhabit the edges are vital to the economic life of the city, despite their symbolic geographic and aesthetic exclusion from mainstream city life.

As the title of this article suggests, we are concerned with aspects of liminality in relation to marginalised communities and as a state of transition, with particular reference to how these play out in relation to Johannesburg. Nevertheless, without compromising the specificity of Johannesburg to the video programme, and consequently to this article, we begin by discussing Berni Searle's video work, *Vapour* (2004),[3] which was filmed in Athlone, a lower-class suburb of Cape Town located on the eastern margins of the city centre known as the Cape Flats. We do so because this work exemplifies the kind of in-betweenness we associate with a reading of "the edges". Thus, we use our discussion of *Vapour* to frame our later discussion of "the edges" as the term is played out in the selected video works – all of which specifically reference and relate to Johannesburg. Through her use of the video medium, and through her evocation of the Athlone space and its inhabitants as located on the geographic and social "edges" of South African society, Searle's work has

much in common with that interstitial, spectral realm which we associate with our reading of Johannesburg as a metropolitan phenomenon.

Tracey Murinik (2004:80) notes that the visual impetus for *Vapour* was a newspaper photograph of a feeding project in Cape Town in celebration of the Muslim festival of *Eid*. Here, 107 large pots of food, intended to feed 42 000 people, were prepared outdoors on open fires. For the video, Searle recreated a scaled down version of the event, using 50 pots laid out over burning fires in an Athlone landscape (Adendorff 2005:111). Yet, as Murinik (2004:80) proposes, despite the recognisability of imagery, such as close-ups of burning wood, the heavy bulkiness of the cast-iron pots and the misty veils of steam,

> what we are presented with in her recreation is unclear. The nature of the event taking place, or coming to an end as it would seem, is not defined … Filmed and photographed at dusk … *Vapour* reveals a procession of sorts: rows of massive cooking pots and a number of figures that snake methodically, barefoot, between them, occasionally lifting lids, vulnerable in their exposure, but seemingly impervious to the unpredictable elements around them.

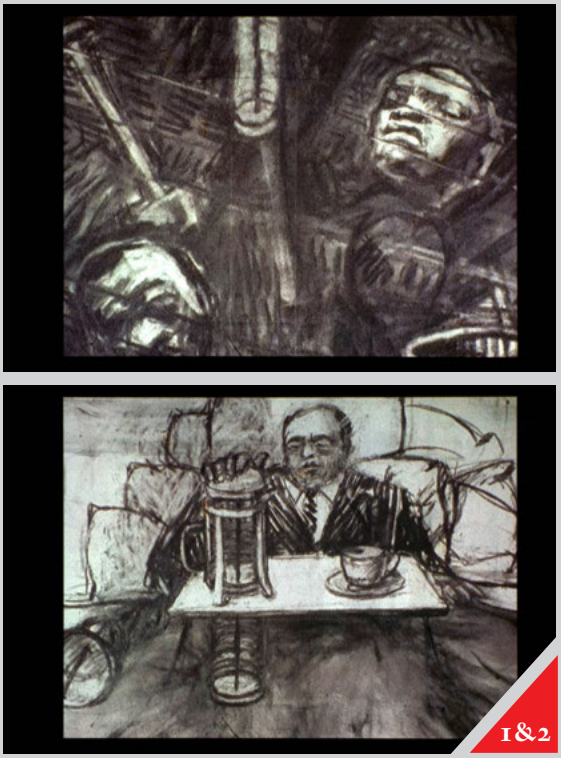
In her recreation, Searle strategically replaces cooking food with boiling water. This substitution of food for water, Murinik (2004:80) argues, alters the potential of the scene, changing it from generous abundance and goodwill, to 'an ambiguous situation to decipher. It appears poised on the edge of possibility and disillusionment: while the general details of the original event are recalled, the overriding sense is of lack and a type of desolation'.

The title *Vapour* itself suggests a state of liminality; the steam rising from the pots is elusive, intangible, and impossible to capture or pin down; it is translucent, transient, ephemeral and ethereal; 'that which exists and builds, accumulates quietly, creating pressure until it is allowed to escape, or bursts, or alternatively dissipates' (Murinik 2004:80). The ambiguity of the scene is heightened by its being filmed at dusk, that liminal time when it is not yet night and no longer day, and by its location in Athlone, a suburb of Cape Town located on the eastern margins of the city centre known as the Cape Flats. The combination of the ambiguous elements of fading light and the billows of boundaryless steam – which exist in an in-between state of being neither a liquid nor a gas – from the pots, are visually suggestive of folkloric and popular representation of ghosts as spirit entities, who are neither fully visible nor fully invisible. This metaphor echoes the limited social visibility experienced by the inhabitants of the peripheral location in which the work is set.

The underground

As Nuttall and Mbembe (2008:22) note, "the underground" is not to be understood simply in terms of an infrastructure and subterranean spaces, but includes 'the underworld' of the 'lower classes, the trash heap of the world above, and subterranean utopias'. We suggest that, in addition to these elements that comprise 'the underworld', the underground can function as a metaphor for that which is repressed, or lies beneath the surface of consciousness and therefore for the disquieting strangeness of the uncanny. David Bunn (2008:135) eloquently summarises this in his comment that,

> [w]hat distinguishes Johannesburg from the metropolitan norm … is that the rhetoric of the surface has been implicated in an act of historical repression: in an inability to come to terms with the real origins of surplus value, in apartheid labor practices, and especially in the buried



Figures 1 & 2: William Kentridge, *Mine*, 1991, video still, duration: 6 minutes, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and the Goodman Gallery.

> life of the black body, instrumentalized and bent into contact with the coal face, or ore seam, in the stopes far below.

Two works on the programme that are deeply evocative of Bunn's words are William Kentridge's *Mine* (1991) (Figures 1 & 2), and Johan Thom's *Challenging Mud – After Kazuo Shiraga* (2008) (Figure 3). *Mine* is the second of the *Nine Soho Eckstein Films* that Kentridge produced from 1989-2003 which form part of series titled *Drawings for Projection*. These films feature three of Kentridge's stock characters, namely, Soho Eckstein, the randlord who embodies greed, avarice and world-weary pessimism; the anxious and guilt-ridden Felix Teitlebaum (Eckstein's alter ego), and Mrs Eckstein, who cuckolds Soho with her liaisons with Felix.

In *Mine*, the dialectic relationship between surface and depth is metaphorically articulated by the image of the coffee plunger through which Soho Eckstein, propped up in a quilted bed with pillows under his head, 'initiates a violent descent, as it becomes an elevator cage, passing through an older stratigraphy' (Bunn 2008:141). As Bunn (2008:141) observes, in using this image, Kentridge binds 'different areas of merchant capitalism, colonialism, and imperialism, base to superstructure, post-object to whole machine', as the cage, rather like a pneumatic drill, descends to the underground levels of the mines, and thereafter ascends back to the surface. Along the plunger's subterranean journey, the artist conjures up images of the heads of the miners sleeping in their bare barracks, while Eckstein languishes in his plush bed. However, its metaphorical path through the earth also suggests that the heads are buried deep underground; that beneath Eckstein's capitalist dream, a trove of oppression and exploitation is submerged. 'The buried life of the black body' is clearly depicted as the foundation of white capital gain.[4] The content of this work slips between personal and public histories in the years of transition leading up to the official demise of apartheid. Kentridge (cited by Christov-Bakargiev 1998:[s.p.]) notes that, 'I have never tried to make illustrations of apartheid, but the drawings and films are certainly spawned by, and feed off, the brutalised society left in its wake'.

Performance artists Johan Thom and Anthea Moys also adopt the motif of burial in representations of contemporary Johannesburg. Thom, like Kentridge, traces the history of the city to deep-cast mining. However, in *Challenging Mud – After Kazuo Shigara*, Thom enacts the burial of gold rather than its extraction. Thom himself, entirely clad in a sheath of gold-leaf, lies in a grave-like hole, as what initially appears to be soft brown earth but later becomes apparent as earth mixed with gold-dust, is shovelled over him until he is completely

Figure 3: Johan Thom, *Challenging Mud – After Kazuo Shiraga*, 2008, video still, duration: 10 minutes 42 seconds, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.

buried. In placing his body under threat in this performance, Thom highlights the inseparability of Johannesburg's gold economy from human vulnerability. This act of burial also alludes to a common fear – associated by Freud with the uncanny, and explored time and again in Gothic literature – the fear of being buried alive. Freud (1955:12) writes that, '[t]o some people, being buried alive by mistake is the most uncanny thing of all'. In *Challenging Mud*, Thom's voluntary burial, and the visible reflex to resist it that becomes apparent as his face is gradually covered, enacts this particular manifestation of the uncanny.

In her video *Gautrain Series: Ophelia* (2008) (Figures 4 & 5), Anthea Moys also stages interactions of vulnerability, in which she is at the mercy of giant construction machines being used to create a tunnel for the Gautrain.[5] The performance is filmed on a building site – a liminal, transitional site which points to the "in-betweenness" of being in construction and in processes of becoming. In *Gautrain Series: Ophelia*, Moys references the character of Ophelia in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, whose sense of alienation from her beloved Hamlet drove her to drown herself. Moys also refers to the Pre-Raphaelite John Everett Millais's painting, *Ophelia* (1851-1852), which famously imagines Shakespeare's character partially submerged, or buried, beneath the surface of a pond. In the video *Ophelia*, the artist lies in a self-dug "grave" of sand in the construction site, appearing almost doll-like in relation to the scale of the heavy-duty graders around her. In an artist's statement, Moys (2008:[s.p.]) speaks poignantly of the futility of digging a hole in which to lie while being surrounded by heavy-duty graders, and the sense of powerlessness that this evoked for her. Her powerlessness and vulnerability are conveyed to viewers watching the mechanical shifting of earth taking place at close proximity to her body. The smallness of her doll-like scale enhances this sense of

Figures 4 & 5: Anthea Moys, *Guatrain Series: Ophelia*, 2008, performance photographs.

Courtesy of the artist.

helplessness and draws attention to her femininity, referencing the incongruity of her female body in a conventionally masculine environment.

Moys (2008:[s.p.]) likens this sense of powerlessness that she evokes in the work to a broader sense of powerlessness which she believes many 'South Africans are feeling at the moment'. She wears a hard hat and safety clothing for protection, which she sees as a metaphor for the need for protection when walking in the streets of Johannesburg. Yet, within this seemingly hopeless, or even suicidal act (taking the reference to John Millais's painting *Ophelia* more literally) of "burying" herself, lies what she acknowledges to be quiet acceptance of her own powerlessness. For her, it is through 'acceptance of uncertainty and change that we manage the world we live in. In this acceptance … is also a quiet celebration of the potential, of what is to come' (Moys 2008:[s.p.].

The surface

We now move from the observation of a comparatively concrete language of representation of the three spaces, as evident in Kentridge, Thom and Moy's work, to a more metaphorical mode, exemplified in the works of Minnette Vári, Mocke Jansen van Veuren and Theresa Collins, and finally, Steven Cohen.

The medium of video shares with film and other lens-based media an undeniable oculocentrism. The lens of the camera, which acts as a prosthetic monocular eye, directs '*how we see, how we are able, allowed, or made to see*' (Foster 1998:ix, emphasis added). The transmutation of raw video material into an artwork, as a shift in perceptual and philosophical context, in turn frames how this seeing is seen, and the unseeing therein. Video automatically prompts the viewer to engage in and reflect upon the processes of vision and the lexicon of the visual, and, in this sense, it is bound up in the surface world of the visible, with revelation and with spectacle. Attempts to undermine this natural or default oculocentrism are well-established in the genre of video art, but the point holds that in video, one must always grapple with a surface of visibility.

In Vári's *Quake* (2007) (Figure 6), the integrity of the city's visible surfaces is shown to be under threat through the introduction of a veil of fluidity that intervenes between the raw visual data of the city and the surface of presentation witnessed by the viewer. Elements such as the solidity of earth, the stillness of cityscapes, unified subjective identities and the eventuality inherent in an understanding of linear time are visually and analogously destabilised as ordinarily solid entities on the surface of the city melt and disintegrate into each other. In *Quake*, viewers are presented with the 'restless, autophagic architecture of the city' (Vári cited by Sey 2007:[s.p.]) in which the creaking and grinding cityscape mutates, momentarily solidifying only to disintegrate as new buildings manifest themselves, exist briefly and then turn to shadow and fade away. At times, this city is identifiable as Johannesburg through certain iconic buildings that appear in the fleeting skyline. As the edges of the buildings and the figures flicker, their boundaries blur and are, thus, metaphorically transgressed. The familiar is hinted at, and then irrevocably disturbed, evoking the disquieting strangeness of the uncanny. In this 'uncertain, slightly hallucinatory landscape' (Rennie 2010:151), cloaked and silhouetted figures appear to be travelling across a vast, desert-like space. Vári performs the role of these travellers, providing 'the template figure' upon which images of 'female bodies and faces from every possible human predicament ... age, culture or location' are projected (Vári cited by Sey 2007:[s.p.]).

Figure 6: Minnette Vári, *Quake*, 2007, video still, single channel digital video installation, duration: 3 minutes, audio 6 minutes 23 seconds, looped. Special edit for a screening to an audience, duration 6 minutes. Courtesy of the artist and the Goodman Gallery. Quake© Minnette Vári 2007.

This desert-like landscape does not appear to be solid, as the sand is in constant writhing motion, appearing to reference 'highly charged electrical particles' or the 'white noise' of a signal-less television screen (Vári cited by Sey 2007:[s.p.]). In the work, Vári plays on the pun of "static", observing that, '[t]here is an ambiguity to the sand field, a "static" field that is never static' (Vári cited by Sey 2007:[s.p.]). The imaged figures appear to travel from the edges of the metropolis towards the viewer and then out of the frame, thus always occupying the marginal, "empty" places between cities. In the soundtrack, which comprises what Vári (cited by Sey 2007:[s.p.]) describes as 'disembodied voices, carried away by the wind whipping through the desert, like sonic semiotic ghosts who dwell on the far limits of some great, semiotic metropolis', the artist further emphasises the uncanny, ambiguity of the landscape.

Writing about urban regenerationists's perceptions of the lives and 'loose citizenship' of migrants in "marginal" areas such as Joubert Park in Johannesburg, Bunn (2008: 156) describes these existences as 'horizontal affiliations', upon whose rapid expansion Johannesburg's future seems to exist. These views of migratory "citizenship" contrast with more conventional understandings of what citizenship means, given that 'their lives are not directed toward the making of phenomenologically lived spaces' (Bunn 2008:156). Bunn (2008:156) describes this lifestyle as 'flickering – a mode of living "lightly on … [the] surface"' in his description of how urban regenerationists might view these migrants. And, as Christy Rennie (2010:156) observes, perhaps the flickering, migratory figures of *Quake* can be seen as analogous to that marginalised part of the city which Bunn (2008:156) describes as being 'like a screen, across which flickering desires track', wherein representation becomes,

Figure 7: Theresa Collins and Mocke J van Veuren, *Minutes 2010*, video still, duration: 12 minutes, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artists.

> a kind of frottage: a rubbing of a new layer of meaning against an indirectly perceived texture below, without direct sight of it. Amnesiac in nature, the present acts of being encounter the older urban footprint very indirectly; the ash of the present is bedded down on the recent past, showing vague outlines.

Rennie (2010:156) proposes that these flickering, mutating anonymous figures of *Quake* traversing a constantly shifting wasteland of "static" are evocative of Bunn's imagery. As they appear to move towards the viewer, the background is shown as a restless cityscape that is constantly in processes of creation and transformation.

In *Minutes 2010* (Figure 7), Mocke Jansen van Veuren and Theresa Collins treat the visible urban environment with a similar veil of motility and flux to that which Vári applies to the city in *Quake*, albeit through a markedly different approach to the medium of video. *Minutes 2010* is a triptych depicting diverse public areas of Johannesburg photography observed in real time, and then presented as a time-lapse animation that highlights the tides of activity in specific urban locales. Taxi ranks, parks, libraries, cemeteries, swimming pools and other spaces of leisure, function and contemplation, initially appear as dynamic, ever-changing scenes. In the editing process, these scenes are superimposed upon each other, creating the sense of, for example, an underwater taxi rank. The undercover space of the taxi rank and the underwater space of the swimming pool merge to form a liminal, subterranean space that can be read as a metaphor for that which is repressed or lies beneath the surface of consciousness. Through the artists' use of time-lapse photography and experimental sound recordings, the city is shown as being in constant states of fluidity, motion and transformation; its workings and dynamics captured on video as transient and random temporal moments. Their compression of time reveals rhythms of everyday life that are ordinarily

invisible, "buried", as it were, in the slowness and clutter of lived real-time. This "invisible" data is brought to the surface in the traces of flux – meeting points and human interactions – with each other and the city space. In this sense, viewers may be prompted to re-evaluate their daily experiences and assumptions around patterns of spatial usage, as these hidden moments and spaces are brought into the spatial field.

Van Veuren and Collins's approach to videoscopic sight subjects apparently opposite terms – visibility and invisibility, hiddenness and revelation – to a paradox. In *Minutes 2010*, city life is rendered both more and less visible. While the camera reveals the hidden rhythm of the city, it also obscures the material of this rhythm, the faces, lives, actions and intentions of individual people. Through mechanical engagement with and translation of a perceptual surface, in this work, Van Veuren and Collins, just as automatically, uncover the subtext of the city. In this regard, the artists underscore the collusive, mutually porous relationship between the surface and the underground or subterranean – and the resultant activation of the strange, liminal spatiality which we call "the edges" that is at play throughout the selection of works that comprise *The Underground, the Surface, and the Edges*.

The edges

Whilst Searle associates geographic and social marginality, or life on "the edges", with the more provisional, existential condition of liminality, Steven Cohen, in his performance video *Chandelier* (2001-2002), approaches an informal settlement in Johannesburg in such a way that he recasts this ordinarily peripheral site as hegemonic.

In extreme drag costume, Cohen performs a character that is both physically precarious and socially unwelcome in this site. Dressed in a carefully wrought heavy crystal chandelier fashioned into a tutu-like skirt, corset and stockings with suspenders, and with his head shaven, his face whitened and his buttocks exposed, Cohen walks (or, to use Bunn's (2008:165) phrase, 'tinkle[s]' 'like an angel') through an informal settlement of illegal squatters in Newtown, which is being demolished by municipal workers (Figure 8). Of this performance, Cohen (cited by De Waal & Sassen 2003:71) writes:

> [a] white man in high heels wearing an illuminated chandelier tutu and improvising movement amidst a community of black squatters whose shacks are being destroyed by city council workers in their own ballet of violence … is very South African … I felt displaced (hectic in heels and a strange place to be near naked).

The video piece shows excerpts of responses to Cohen's presence from the residents of the settlement about to be bulldozed. Some ridicule him, others threaten violence, and still others deify him or sympathise with and try to protect him. Cohen's performance of his 'queerness' and deliberate (dis)placement of himself as a marginalised queer in another marginalised community is provocative. He is at the mercy of a community whose immediate vulnerability is heightened through their displays of power in relation to him. The community of squatters are being literally displaced through removal of their homes, yet the kind of displacement Cohen speaks of is social, cultural, and political. Intertwined with displacement is its corollary – belonging – which raises questions such as: who has a right to public space? What signifies a claim to space? What signifies cultural "belonging"? In larger trajectories, this work highlights the complex problem of dwelling and being "at home" in Johannesburg. Referring to the contradictory views of citizenship raised by

Figure 8: Steven Cohen, *Chandelier*, 2001-2002, video still, duration: 15 minutes 54 seconds, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and Michael Stevenson.

urban squatters and illegal land occupation which are being fought out in regenerated inner-city spaces such as Newtown, Bunn (2008:164) notes that, 'Cohen brings the spectacle of the perverse into spaces and situations associated with the limits of the new democracy', because the forced removals instituted by the neo-liberal agenda of the Mbeki government 'are fuelled by a wider public paranoia about illegal work seekers. Quite literally, these are haunted civic programs, in that they both evoke and are fearful of the return of the ghosts of forced removals from the apartheid past'.[6] The appropriation of space by the city's homeless and immigrant populations contrasts markedly with the security enclaves of Johannesburg's northern suburbs. Squatter camps and sprawling informal settlements around the city's periphery speak of changing ways in which homes are being made under conditions framed by insecurity, fear, migration and an increasing sense of 'not-at-homeness' (Bremner 2004:20).

Cohen's performance emphasises the contested nature of home, or homely, spaces in Johannesburg's liminal zones, and his own aberrance in relation to the community he encounters positions him as the embodiment of the foreign or the "unhomely". He is an other of indeterminate identity, perhaps ghostly, perhaps messianic.[7] Again, this position resonates with the uncanny, for, an encounter with the latter is an encounter with that which lies beneath the surface of consciousness; and, in the context of Cohen's work, it is partially the

spectre of apartheid, which cannot be ignored or repressed. For, as Couze Venn (2010:332) observes, the affect of the uncanny can

> [bring] to mind the out-of-jointness that ... Derrida ... related to an 'hauntology', that is, an ontology haunted by disjunct, invisible-yet-present traces of a traumatic or troubled past, and the disquieting figure of the other. In the context of displacement, one can relate it to the process of the reinvention or refiguring of oneself which is shadowed by a recalcitrant and disorientating memory of place and space that must be worked through for newness to emerge.

Seen in this light, Cohen's performance is an imaginative refiguring of the self that brings in tow the memory of apartheid-induced spatial and social traumas. The shared experience of threat that plays out in Cohen's exchange with the inhabitants of the informal settlement catalyses a "working through", and bringing to the surface, of this 'troubled past'.

Conclusion

Rather than an attempt to represent the essence of a city as spatially and socially complex as contemporary Johannesburg (if this were even possible), in *The Underground, the Surface and the Edges*, we highlight a set of spatial relations, or rather, modes of spatial relating that give rise to this state of complexity. Perhaps this tripartite spatiality is characteristic of the city, which, according to our reading, picks out the recurrence of this spatial motif of constant oscillation between that which lies beneath the visible landscape, the surface of the metropolis and that which is concealed or embedded in other orders of visibility. Thus, in this project, we merely aim to open up this reading of Johannesburg – a reading that, almost paradoxically, demonstrates the insufficiency of reading the city according to any singular perspective.

We suggest the recurrence in certain interpretations of Johannesburg of a spatial motif of constant oscillation between that which lies beneath the visible landscape, the metropolis's surface and that which is concealed or embedded in other orders of visibility. By opening up a reading of Johannesburg across these zones, we point to the emergence of a socio-spatial reconstruction of Johannesburg that is particularly post-apartheid in its orientation.

Notes

1 This video programme is an extension and revised version of the video compilation titled *Too Close to Comfort: Belonging and Displacement in the Work of South African Video Artists* (2008), curated by Leora Farber and Lee-At Meyerov. This initial programme was shown as part of the *Johannesburg and Megacities Phenomena* conference, hosted by the Research Centre, *Visual Identities in Art and Design*, University of Johannesburg, on 11 April 2008, at the Lister Building, Johannesburg. *Too Close* to Comfort was thereafter screened as part of the *Performing South Africa* festival, held in Berlin from 18 to 27 September 2008. The screening took place on the 20 September at the Hebbel Theatre in Berlin. Thereafter it was shown at the Goethe Institute, Johannesburg, on 28 November 2008. The programme was recurated by Buys and Farber in 2010 and featured as a once-off screening as part of the exhibition, *Afropolis.City. Media. Art*, which took place at the Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum-Kulturen der Welt, Cologne, and at a special screening at the Free University of Berlin, both in January 2011.

A reconfigured version of the programme, which includes video installations as well as looped works, was shown at the Michaelis Gallery, University of Cape Town, from 15 June to 2 July 2011.

The programme features 15 video artworks by South African artists William Kentridge, Johan Thom, Maja Marx and Gerrit Marx, *Die Antwoord*, Berni Searle, Minnette Vári, Zen Marie, Leora Farber, Theresa Collins and Mocke Janse van Veuren, Nina Barnett, Steven Cohen, Stephen Hobbs and Marcus Neustetter, and Anthea Moys.

2 Freud puts forward a semantic study of the German adjective Heimlich and its antonym *Unheimlich* that suggests that a negative meaning close to that of the antonym is already embedded within the positive term *Heimlich*. *Heimlich* can denote that which is 'friendly, homelike or comfortable', yet can also signify that which is 'concealed or kept from sight'. 'Canny' in English means 'deceitful and malicious'; 'to go behind someone's back'. Thus, as Julia Kristeva (1991:182) observes, "in the very word *heimlich*, the familiar and intimate are reversed into their opposites, brought together with the contrary meaning of 'uncanny strangeness' harboured in *Unheimlich*.

3 *Vapour* was initially going to be included in the programme, but was replaced with Searle's work *Moonlight* (2010).

4 Kentridge's technique of erasure of charcoal images from the paper surface leaves traces which suggest temporal shifts between event and memory. These temporal shifts are enhanced by the non-linearity of the scene sequences. The constant erasure of an image as it is formed on a page, and its transmutation into something else, speaks of the partiality and fragility of memory, as well as of the fluidity between political and personal expressions of struggle.

5 A high speed train running between Johannesburg, Pretoria and the OR Tambo International Airport.

6 This contemporary paranoia is strongly echoed in South Africa's apartheid past, wherein the framing of race in social/geographic terms was engineered to create Johannesburg as a white suburban city. Particularly from the years 1900 to 1940, Johannesburg became a city of boundaries determined by class and race. As Nuttall and Mbembe (2008:20) point out, in these years, the discourse of race was translated into a discourse of health and urban sanitisation. Cleansing the city of the poor and those deemed "undesirable" – whilst simultaneously subjecting them to the reality of exploitation – required ridding of the inner-city area of its slums. This entailed forced removals of working-class and lower middle-class white families (which included impoverished Afrikaners, to peripheral townships in the western areas of Johannesburg such as Vrededorp, Burgersdorp and Brickfields.

7 Upon Cohen's arrival in the squatter camp, a spectator announces that 'Jesus has come' (Cohen 2001-2002).

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