

WHEN TIME BREAKS: THE HIATUS OF REFUGEE STATUS

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INTRODUCTION

“In the first place, we don’t like to be called ‘refugees.’ We ourselves call one another ‘newcomers’ or ‘immigrants.’” Already here, in the first sentence of Arendt’s essay “We Refugees,” does the hiatus of refugee status become manifest. A divide already opens up between different habits of reference. Refugees refer to themselves in one way, non-refugees refer to them in another, and so does the projected or desired possibility of one world in which both refugees and non-refugees might find accommodation, split into two very different realities. Consciousness of the split is of course solely that of the refugees, at first. Initially, the hiatus is theirs only. Others – non-refugees – remain soundly oblivious to this fundamental split until such time as it brutally breaks into their world too, for instance, when the corpse of a four-year old child washes up on a beach, and washes up on every doorstep in a succession of media waves. And then the hiatus is suddenly everywhere and no one remains exempted.

As the last sentence of Arendt’s essay contends forcefully, the split begins with the refugee status of some, but it ends with the bigger split of a world that begins to falter and fall apart: “The comity of European peoples went to pieces when, and because, it allowed its weakest member to be excluded and persecuted.” The comity of European peoples show all signs of going to pieces again today. When the comity of peoples goes to pieces, it is not only common space that cracks up, but also common time, the common time that warrants common space according to Kant’s *Schematismuslehre*. It is ultimately this breaking of time – the hiatus of time – that Arendt thematises elsewhere with reference to “the desolate aimless wanderings of Israeli tribes in the wilderness and the dangers which befell Aeneas before he reached the Italian shore.” “[T]his hiatus,” she continues, obviously creeps into all time speculations which deviate from the currently accepted notion of time as a continuous flow.”¹

The aim of this paper is to engage with the hiatus status of refugees that becomes manifest in Arendt’s essay “We Refugees.” It will elaborate this hiatus status as it becomes manifest in the political, legal, social and personal situation of refugees that are (1) torn from the worlds within and around which they have constructed stable patterns of existence through a process of foundational familiarisation, (2) thrown onto faraway shorelines, and/or compelled to cross regional borders that they never contemplated to cross, and 3) compelled to overcome their own resistance to relocation and re-familiarisation with their new circumstances, as well as the

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¹ Arendt, *On Revolution*, New York: Penguin Books, 1990, 205.

resistance of others (local citizens and other established residents) who fear this re-familiarisation and consider it a de-familiarising threat to their own sense of familiar belonging.

The hiatus that becomes manifest in the course of this uprooting event and the process of double de-familiarisation concerns the way in which a form of life gets terminated and gives way to an interim phase of formless life until such time as re-entry into a new form of life ensues. This re-entry invariably requires a re-commencement from scratch that must overcome the twofold resistance to re-familiarisation mentioned above, the resistance to re-entry of the one who must re-enter, and the resistance of others who perceive this re-entry as a threat. In other words, once a form of life gives way to formless life, the re-commencement of formed life becomes a double ordeal, the dimensions of which are close too insurmountable. This, then, is the hiatus of refugee status with which this paper will be concerned. The paper will also show, however, how this hiatus status of refugees comes to contaminate the formed life and well-arranged spatial and temporal coordinates of regular citizenship and lawful residence. It will show, in other words, how the lawful comity of peoples also breaks down when it fails to accommodate the refugee; when it fails to facilitate the re-entry into formed life and well-ordered spatial and temporal coordinates of those who have fallen into cracks of existence that are devoid of time and space.

Here, then, is where this paper will endeavour to pause: at an event that 1) tears away all conditions of familiarity and familiarisation, that is, tears away everything that gives form to life and 2), catapults what remains – the bigger or smaller rests of “familiar” hominoid form, be it alive or no longer so – into an unformed and unfamiliar zone of existence where the resistance to re-familiarisation and the resistance to form is the only common characteristic that still resembles form and familiarity. This is where this paper will endeavour to pause in the way one pushes the pause button on a DVD reader and/or another digital reading device. The function of these devices is to produce semblances of flows and transitions – motion pictures, in other words – through purposefully selected registers of speed. In performing this task, digital reading machines ultimately aim at nothing but the obfuscation of the hiatus between every frame in a sequence of frames, to use the now outdated metaphor of a pre-digital age. The gaps between the frames may be narrow, but they are irreducible. They secure and safeguard a different zone of existence that the reading machine cannot register, but also not eradicate. The machine ultimately only produces the semblance of erasure and smooth transition.²

² Consider in this regard the video installation *24 Hour Psycho* by Douglas Gordon, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a31q2ZQcETw>. Gordon took Alfred Hitchcock’s film *Psycho* and stretched its duration to 24 hours, thus slowing down the passage of frames through the projector from the regular 24 to just 2. See Nathan Lee, “The Week Ahead” June 11 – June 17, Film, *NY Times*, 11 June 2006 (<https://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9F02E1D81431F932A25755C0A9609C8B63>). Gordon himself described this process as “a slow pulling apart”: “The viewer is catapulted back into the past by his recollection of the original, and at the same time he is drawn into the future by his expectations of an already familiar narrative ... A slowly changing present forces itself in between.” See Russell Ferguson “Trust me” in *Douglas Gordon*, Cambridge: Massachusetts, MIT Press 16. I am indebted to Wikipedia for the reference to Nathan Lee. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/24_Hour_Psycho.

The endeavour to pause the machine will nevertheless just remain an endeavour. It is bound to fail. It is bound to fail because the human mind is itself an unstoppable “motion picture projector.” At stake in this paper will nevertheless be an “against all odds attempt” to pause this projector in order to register the moment that times breaks, the moment that futures and pasts no longer hold together, the moment when an instance of sheer existence – sheer “non-transitional” existence – manifests itself as torn out of time, torn from time, expropriated in the most fundamental sense of the word when expropriation concerns the expropriation of all pasts and futures. Existence without time and out of time. In other words: *timeless* existence.