

Paysage, panorama and panopticon

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*Human beings do not perceive things whole;
we are not gods but wounded creatures,
cracked lenses,
capable only of fractured perceptions.
Salman Rushdie*

In June 2010 I spent my first week on the island of Terschelling with artist Karl van Welden, in preparation for the first in a series of site-specific projects, titled *SATURN*. A conversation on dramaturgy takes a different course when it is able to stretch itself over time: from the preparations for *INTRO /SATURN* (OEROL Festival 2010), through the presentation of *SATURN II - Cityscape* (THE GAME IS UP 2011) to *SATURN I - Landscape* (Oerol Festival 2011). Moreover such conversation takes a different course when it is able to unfold in a landscape of dunes, instead of a rehearsal space or theatre venue. You look at your environment as a very concrete world that consists of sky, horizon and earth, with an occasional trace of human presence. Starting from this tangible environment you then take imaginary steps into the world outside it. The conversation becomes a stroll through a landscape of ideas, associations, memories, literature, and film. And while talking you become conscious of your own gaze. The text below is an attempt, an essay, to write this shared promenade.

Seated on a throne, binoculars at hand

Two young men in grey suits are dancing together to the sounds of an old radio receiver. They shuffle around stiffly and uneasily, as developing teenagers tend to do. The sedate jazz tune resounding from the radio is aptly titled *Son tanto triste*, for it is the harmonious, almost comforting final chord to an otherwise violent, almost inhumane piece of cinema. Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma* still fills people with a mixture of scepticism, revulsion and fascination. In hellish circles that become ever narrower, Pasolini fires a bloody iconoclasm of images at its audience. The inferno of *Salò* stages historical fascism as a horrendous phantasm, which is able to run wild when power and imagination become equally unbridled. Aversion, anger and revulsion awaken when seeing the humiliating abuse of power. Feelings of resistance against the four sadistic 'Lords' who give rein to their passions with sixteen young victims, maybe even against the film and its creator. How can a filmmaker portray such abhorrence? And furthermore implicate a group of young people in the staging of it?

Moments before the scene with the two dancing boys – they are collaborators of the *signori* – the climax of the film has taken place. Through the window of their villa the four Lords take turns watching how the three others subject their victims to beastly torture. Seated on a throne, binoculars at hand. Framed by the circular eyepiece of the binoculars we join them in watching the details of the torturing ritual. The series of images unfolding for our eyes pushes us outside the fiction, outside the frame of the movie screen and – fortunately – outside identification.

For a contemporary audience this distance is even greater. Pasolini's last project feels out-dated to some; today its baroque aesthetics and semi-historical narrative seem to evoke indifference as well as disgust.

However, beyond the storyline Pasolini proposes an altogether different content. Not what we see but the fact that we are watching is put centre stage. We are regarding the – staged – pain of others. The spectator is made an accomplice and can no longer hold on to their limited role of onlooker of the spectacle. In this reading of Pasolini's inferno questions arise that burst the banks of the grotesque – and maybe even tasteless – scenario. Who or what is actually being shown? Who is showing? And who is watching?

A false position

The final scene of Pasolini's *Salò* is one of the paths we walked on during the creation process of the *SATURN*-series. In the open-air installations, *Saturn I - Landscape* and *Saturn II - Cityscape*, a sober set-up with binoculars and performers is used in a cunning game of close-ups in an urban or natural panorama.

The term cinematic certainly applies to the images in the *SATURN*-series, but apart from that they couldn't be more remote from Pasolini's phantasm of horror. They lean closer to its harmonious, almost melancholic final image.

The lens of a telescope reveals a scene, which the naked eye can hardly perceive. As a drawn-out variation of Pasolini's final chord, a young man dressed in black is rotating around his axis. His movement is tantalizingly slow, his shuffling almost unnoticeable. And he's dancing alone. The musical score that accompanies him doesn't sound from an old radio but through the headphones you are wearing while

peering through the telescope. The music is not the post-war melancholy of Italian cinema, but the modern melancholy of a minimalist soundscape. With his back turned to the spectator, he briefly brings to mind one of the *Rückenfiguren* (back figures) in Casper David Friedrich's furious-romantic landscape paintings. But he keeps circling incessantly and he seems to be looking for someone. Could it be the woman in white in the distance in the opposite direction, who in turn is making a slow and lonesome circle?

These two scenes are part of a series of eight tableaux-vivants. Six of these are created by performers, inscribing themselves into the landscape through minimal, repetitive movements; the other two zoom in on – and give new shape to – details in this landscape. Someone is digging a hole. Someone climbs up resolutely and then scours the horizon. Someone seems to be looking for someone else. They are frozen moments of movement that nearly fall silent. The melancholy of bodies that seem headed to immobility and lifelessness – or perhaps they are returning to life? Are their actions a confirmation of their existence, an attempt to claim a place in the world through their bodies?

They seem to be held captured by the circular frame of the lens, and by their own circular motions. The soundscape that guides your gaze sounds minimalist and slightly gloomy. Long, sustained bow strokes on a cello, sombre hums and high-pitched notes are stacked in paper-thin layers and accompany these uncanny images. They invite you to stay seated, to keep watching. Until suddenly the woman who was seemingly looking for someone, directs her gaze directly towards the lens. An uneasy feeling of having been caught awakens. The game of voyeurism, to which *SATURN* has seduced its spectator, suddenly turns against us. We are watching people who are watching. They shift our glance towards the landscape or cast it back – on us.

Have we inadvertently ended up in Paul Auster's Ghosts? In the role of Blue, the private detective who loses himself in the life of Black, whose moves he's been spying on and reporting on for months? In the role of Black, who fills his days reading the reports that the Blue has unknowingly been writing on his request? In Auster's New York Trilogy the borders blur between characters, author and audience, between reading and writing, between watching and being watched. "We are not where we are," says Blue, "but in a false position. Through an infirmity of our natures, we suppose a case, and put ourselves into it, and hence are in two cases at the same time, and it is doubly difficult to get out." [1]

Are the roles of the detective and the 'shadowed' interchangeable? And those of spectator and performer? Karl Van Welden's *SATURN* circles around a series of questions which remind us of Hans-Thies Lehman's description of watching in post-dramatic theatre. The centre of gravity shifts from what is happening on the stage to that which is taking place between stage and audience. In post-drama the spectator is taken out of the safety of darkness. Who or what is being shown? Who is showing? And who is watching?

Panorama

The eight scenes of *SATURN* reveal themselves to the eye when the spectator takes position in one of eight wooden cabinets equipped with binoculars and headphones. From a distance these wooden observation posts form an alien configuration in the landscape, a contemporary Stonehenge of eight monoliths in a circle. Placed on top of a hill or a high building the installation offers a panoramic view on the surrounding (urban) landscape. Like the staged images, the landscape invites you to stand still, to keep watching.

"Where else than in a panorama can one discover real space? Even walkers who are lost look for a view of their surroundings for orientation. If space wants to unfold into a landscape, it needs a broad perspective." [2]

Ton Lemaire's *Philosophy of the Landscape* explores the history of the world becoming landscape, when the artist, the philosopher or the walker, rest their eye upon it. Beyond a 'post-modern sentiment', the sight of a panorama still incites feelings that take your breath away. Philosophers like Edmund Burke and Arthur Schopenhauer gauged the depths of this 'experience of the sublime' and at its base they found pleasure. Pleasure as fullness and as lack, as an inclination towards life and towards death. The overwhelmingness of nature, in all its glory and infinity, confronts humankind with its own finiteness. Schopenhauer describes the steps from the 'beautiful' to the 'sublime' as increasing degrees of fear, the will of man losing against the omnipotence of nature. [3] The ultimate experience of the sublime is that of facing an unconquerable storm. Experiencing the world as Odysseus, bound to the mast of his ship to resist the sirens' call to death. Pleasure as utter powerlessness and surrender. The 'I' resolving into the 'all'.

"The extent to which panoramas can be enjoyed betrays the extent to which one can support the experience of non-identity, of deferment." [4]

The counterpart of this attraction to nothingness is pleasure as the experience of power. Who has never climbed a hill and felt almighty for a brief moment? For sure, this feeling springs from conquering the mountain by reaching the top. But doesn't something of that feeling of power rest in the sheer sight of a landscape, in the brief illusion of seeing the whole picture, of seeing everything and everyone?

Somewhere in the back of my mind: Leonardo di Caprio on the prow of the Titanic, his eyes fixed on the horizon. "I'm king of the world!"

In that sense, the panorama, both in a natural and an urban environment, fundamentally determines a spectator's experience of *SATURN*. Placed in the vast dune landscape of the Dutch island of Terschelling or in the disorienting view of the city of Ghent (one spectator described her experience of the cityscape as *being lost in translation*), the panorama offered by the central installation is an integral part of the work, as a ready-made, a 'found landscape'. The placement of the *SATURN*-installation on a high point in the landscape doesn't only serve the practical purpose of the panorama; it also brings other associations to mind.

As described by Paul De Vylder in *De pantoptische blik* (The panoptic gaze), a mountaintop is pre-eminently the archaic *topos* of the divine. It is the emblematic point on earth that reaches closest to the sky, the home of the Olympic gods, the forbidden place which only Moses can enter when Yahweh speaks to him, the summit of Mount Purgatory from which Dante can enter Paradise, the place Nietzsche's Zarathustra descends from to tell humankind of the *Übermensch*. It is the place par excellence of power, of the all-seeing and all-knowing eye. [5] High buildings and towers are the manmade counterparts of that divine power: from the Tower of Babel, over the Twin Towers, to the Burj Khalifa in Dubai.

Holiday memory. When the German Empire – after the Venetians, the French, the Ottomans, the Russians and the British – took control over the Greek island of Corfu in 1908, Emperor Wilhelm II ordered the construction of a stone curtain wall on the highest point of the Ionic island, where he could withdraw in quiet meditation. The panoramic view from this 'Emperor's Throne' is breath-taking and much recommended to anyone who wants to escape from the rattraps for tourists on the coast. The Emperor's Throne offers a view on all sides of the island itself, but also on the Albanian and Greek mainland and the Ionic Sea. So it is not only a pleasant spot for spiritual exercise, but also a highly strategic vantage point on territory at the gates to the East. As such the Throne of Wilhelm II on Corfu formed the topos of both his personal pleasure and of his symbolic and military power.

Panopticon

"They are like so many cages, so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible." [6] Not a quote from a review of *SATURN*, but an excerpt from Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1971). He is describing the Panopticon of Jeremy Bentham (1791), a prison design that allows continuous control by arranging the cells around a central observation tower. The panoptic set-up creates relations of power, which have no need of a concrete wielding of that power:

"Power has its principle not so much in a person as in a certain concerted distribution of bodies, surfaces, lights, gazes." [7] Any individual can keep this machine going, and with the most various motives: "the curiosity of the indiscrete, the malice of a child, the thirst for knowledge of a philosopher who wishes to visit this museum of human nature, or the perversity of those who take pleasure in spying and punishing." [8]

Foucault utilizes the panopticon as a historical basis and as a social metaphor for contemporary disciplining society. Disciplining, for it no longer regulates by punishment following the medieval model; but it enforces its norms proactively through the inconspicuous observations and corrections of the doctor, the teacher, the police officer, the social worker. The all-seeing eye as the subtlest form of biopolitics, of invisible power that is wielded through the standardization of biological and social life. The disciplining society no longer displays the visible and violent power of the lord on his throne who watches the punishment of his victims as in Pasolini's *Salò*. It has been shifted to the panoptical gaze of everyone watching everyone, as may be read in the image of the two young guards, masters nor slaves, who avert their gaze from the violence and only have eyes for each other in a dance.

"We are much less Greeks than we believe," Foucault writes. "We are neither in the amphitheatre, nor on the stage, but in the panoptic machine (...)." [9] In the post-drama of *SATURN* spectator and performer have also left the classical theatre set-up and have taken their place in public space. The theatricality of *SATURN* exists only by the grace of peering through the binoculars. Actor and audience need each other like Black and Blue in Auster's *Ghosts*.

Does he know you're watching him or not?" "Black turns away, unable to look at Blue anymore, and says with a sudden trembling voice: "Of course he knows. That's the whole point, isn't it? He's got to know, or else nothing makes sense." [10]

Watching and being watched, as the waking eye of a village community. But perhaps hopeful gazes as well, in search of someone else's gaze, in search of recognition, of confirmation, of a question.

Reality check

Pasolini, Auster, Foucault. Passers-by on our imaginary walk in the dune landscape of Terschelling. Subtext, dramaturgical nourishment for the creation process of *SATURN I – Landscape* and *SATURN II – Cityscape*. Layers of meaning moving around in a stately environment. Sometimes they pile up to create new dunes.

The performance/installation leaves much to the visitor's own imagination. The panopticon is an entrance, a possible reading. However, during the realisation of *SATURN I & II*, some small incidents arose that might reveal something of the relationship between seeing and power.

A few anecdotes of negotiations with the Dutch Forest Service are attached to the work process of *SATURN I – Landscape*, realised with time and effort on the Frisian Island Terschelling. A nature reserve is a public space with its own particular laws, resulting in meetings with swallows that had decided to nest beneath the location of the central installation and seagulls that could possibly start brooding in places that initially seemed ideal locations for one of the performers.

The temporary implantation of *SATURN II – Cityscape* in Ghent revealed to be a course with different obstacles altogether. On the first day of *SATURN II* during THE GAME IS UP! we suddenly received notice that the game had to be stopped. The police of Ghent had received some ten telephone calls concerning a woman on the rooftop of an apartment building on the Afrikalaan who wanted to take her own life. An error of judgement, the actress in the long white dress had been visible from the ground and from the windows of the neighbouring apartment building. The neighbours hadn't been notified of our activities. This could in fact have been set right by informing and reassuring the concerned neighbourhood residents about the strange presence on the roof. However, the competent authorities demanded an immediate migration of the performer or an annulment of the whole event.

The performer's presence on the rooftop proved to be problematic in two aspects. The actress's activity apparently fell under the denominator 'street theatre', and no permission had been requested for such activity. But does the name street theatre still apply when the spectators are more or less 2 kilometres away from the performer? Moreover, her act was insufficiently recognizable as 'theatre' for neighbours and passers-by (doesn't that contradict the first argument?) and led to a series of anxious yet unfounded warnings to the police, therefore: 'disruption of public order'. A compromise was negotiated, disaster was averted and the lady in white was moved to the roof of art centre Vooruit, from where she would only be visible to the spectators for whom her appearance was intended.

On day three of the run in Ghent, it was the siren of an ambulance that broke the contemplative atmosphere of *SATURN II*. This time concerned neighbours had informed local authorities of the presence of an endearing young lady, dressed as in a Hitchcock film. For some days she had been hanging around purposely and dazedly on a stretch of wasteland underneath the Keizerviaduct. It cost the performer in question some effort to convince the EMTs of her sanity – "I'm sure someone is watching your moves from two kilometres away, Miss, now if you'd come with us." A second time the spokes were kept out of the wheel and after some negotiations the Hitchcock lady could continue her task.

Day four proved problematic for the performer in the black suit, who was slowly turning around his axis on the rooftop of the ICC by the Citadelpark. For this implantation in public space the necessary considerations had been made: this Casper David Friedrich figure was not visible from the ground. Yet the police had still received a call concerning a worrying appearance. An overenthusiastic concerned citizen had spotted him from his window with his own personal set of binoculars.

Perhaps then *SATURN* does not exist solely by the grace of its intended audience. Interventions in public space have been part of artistic practices for quite some time now. From Augusto Boal's 'invisible theatre' and the Situationists' idea of 'dérive' in the 1950s and 60s to the multitude of contemporary 'artactivists', 'interventionists' and other playful infiltrators of public space. Artistic/activist devices such as the flash mob have already found their way into popular culture and marketing. Not that long ago, supermarket chain Carrefour surprised their customers with a slowly growing synchronized choreography of shop employees. Dance as entertainment is a clearly readable convention, even in a place and time that might not (or no longer) be intended for this purpose. But do the same codes apply to stillness, to immobility?

In Franz Müllers Drahtfrühling, Ursachen und Beginn der grossen glorreichen Revolution in Revon [11] verhaalt Kurt Schwitters hoe het titelpersonage, dolverliefd op Anna Blume, plots blijft stilstaan in de straten van Revon – Schwitters' fictieve versie van Hannover. Müller geeft geen uitleg, gaat niet in op de verwonderde vragen van een kind, de verbale agressie van voorbijgangers of opgedrongen interviews met de pers. Zijn loutere aanwezigheid is een provocatie en escaleert in een rel.

Is a young lady wandering around on a stretch of wasteland for a couple of afternoons a reason for public concern because her performance – or rather: her lack of performance – threatens to subvert public space by an improper use of it? Or is the subversive element situated in the non-productiveness of the act itself? None of the passers-by or neighbours felt called upon to approach her and simply ask what was going on. Reality and staging start blending considerably when the melancholic game of the performers cannot be broken by a spectator nearby. The merit of a good actress? A sense of public responsibility or a lack thereof? A symptom of a community that watches, that measures, that doesn't ask questions but regulates?

Minor incidents, very small storms in a teacup in the end. Somewhat funny even when you are observing the reactions of passers-by as seen through a candid camera. The presence of the performers in public space is disrupting for some, surprising for others. With their silenced movements the players mark out a space, a different kind of space, a temporary heterotopia that is governed by different social codes. Presence in ambiguity.

The empty throne

If Pasolini could still subvert the prevailing visual culture in 1975 by staging the excesses of the power relations it creates, then today the impact of this aggressive visual language seems to have weakened. The small incidents surrounding SATURN II in the city centre of Ghent suggest that the potential of subversion lies in the refusal of a conventional production of images; in stillness, in movements which are not progressive nor productive, but aimless and circular.

The first circles observed by humankind were the sun, the moon, and the stars. The circle represents perfection, infinity and divinity.

To fully absorb a panorama, we rotate our bodies in a circle. American poet and essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson describes the relation between the circle, the landscape and the divine as follows:

"The eye is the first circle; the horizon which it forms is the second; and throughout nature this primary figure is repeated without end. St. Augustine described the nature of God as a circle whose centre was everywhere, and its circumference nowhere." [12]

Dante Alighieri's *Paradise* and *Inferno* are both built up out of nine concentric circles – these also inspired Pasolini when he divided his hell of *Salò* into the Circle of Manias, the Circle of Shit and the Circle of Blood.

From a bird's eye view the constellation of SATURN consists of two concentric circles in the landscape: the smaller circle of observation posts in the centre, surrounded by the performers in a larger circle. Like the planet Saturn, orbited by satellites and rock fragments. Like the old god Saturn, king of the Titans, seated on his throne and watching his brothers and sisters.

No one is seated in the centre of *SATURN*'s circle. No mythological deity, no all-seeing supreme being, no emperor, no sadist lord. The throne is empty; the spectator is invited to ascend it and to watch. And his gaze is all but neutral. The thematization and subversion of the medium cinema, as used in *Salò*, is carried through and transposed in *SATURN* as a panoptic machine of spectators and actors. The way we watch determines what we see – our relationship to others, to a community, to the world. And the world looks back.

[1] Paul Auster, *The New York Trilogy*, p.171-172.

[2] Ton Lemaire, *Filosofie van het landschap*, p.15. (my own translation)

[3] Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, p.315-317.

[4] Ton Lemaire, *Filosofie van het landschap*, p.82. (my own translation)

[5] Paul De Vylder, *De panoptische blik*.

[6] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, p.276.

[7] Idem, p.279.

[8] Ibidem.

[9] Ibidem, p.299.

[10] Paul Auster, *The New York Trilogy*, p.183.

[11] Franz Müller's *Wire Springtime, Causes and Beginnings of the Great and Glorious Revolution in Revon'*

[12] Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Circles*. In: *Essays, First Series*, p.93.

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