

Land of the Enlightened Alix de Massiac

In 2008 the commercial *Where Will Life Take You* directed by Bruno Aveillan for Louis Vuitton struck a chord with me. On a purely visual level the commercial featured smart albeit clichéd imagery, which emphasized the relationship mankind has to travel, and more specifically global nature. A well-dressed man walks barefoot through the desert, rays of unmerciful Saharan light sweeping over the sand dunes. A couple of oxes cross a valley, surrounded by mountains overgrown with lush greenery and a snake of mist crawling through its nooks and crannies. Since 2008 Vuitton has made several spin-offs effectively communicating the idea of the art of travelling in the most far-flung locations. It is about the journey, not the destination. Silent Light opens with *Curtains* by Raúl Ortega Ayala. The work plays with our expectations and desires, as it unfolds with seemingly endless image of curtains coming to the foreground and opening. Peering into darkness makes us none the wiser. Rising expectations are curbed by a sudden reversal of the movement. Now the curtains close and recede and what has been shown in between remains aloof and we are left to wonder what on earth has happened in between. *What is a journey?*

While trying to find the author of the concept, if not the direct quote, which inspired Louis Vuitton's commercially viable strategy, I stumbled upon several authors, one of them being the poet and writer Ralph Waldo Emerson, and specifically his 1836 essay *Nature*, which laid out the groundwork for Transcendentalism, a belief system closely linked to Romanticism, its better known cousin. Emerson explains how the perception of our surroundings is made up of many individual components. Our delight in the landscape, which is made up of many particular forms, provides an example of this integrated vision. By seeing everything of which nature is composed, and realising that all elements are beautiful within their own right, we are able to experience a 'pure' perception unburdened by intellectual construct. *A journey is not a trip. It's a process. A discovery.*

Film has a linear beginning and ending in real time the way a painting never has. The eye can travel in all directions and has an endless amount of time to consider what is in front of it. Film stands in sharp contrast to this. The maker forces a rhythm and a timeframe upon the viewer. There is not much flexibility, let alone the rear of it in sight. As such it emulates Emerson's thinking, where the journey leads to a non-existent destination, the process is the result. Sybren Renema's work 'Elective Affinities (Stanley)' questions

this rationale while putting a spin on the extraction from nature so visible in Natural History Museums all over the world. A scarlet balloon filled with helium slowly empties itself, giving up on the notion of eternity, the very proof of its sheer absurdity being the Tyrannosaurus Rex skeleton, to which it is tied. The time traveller has been dug up, scraped together, assembled and reassembled, making the trek and becoming an artefact in the laborious process. All the assemblages are man made in this museum, 'natural' history as a souvenir and more specifically as a memento mori. It is a whimsical reminder of the futility of holding onto something, let alone to a species which has been extinct for such a long time, while also being a subtle readjustment of what a film can be. The frames seem to be immutable during nearly nine minutes, thus challenging the notion of a moving image, when finally the balloon gives way to reality and free falls. *It's a process of self-discovery.*

In the first 20 seconds of Puck Verkade's film *Solitary Company*, icy scenery passes by through binoculars accompanied by the sound of a passing car. A steady hand walks us through the landscapes and minds of the inhabitants on the remote island of Hrisey. The illuminated crosses of the local graveyard blink at us from a distance: the white light of the LEDs echoing the white light of a land so aptly named Iceland. In the circular frame(s) the horizon functions as the pointer of an internal barometer. The line wavers, the lens moving in circular motion around it, but here it is, firmly present. At one point the camera is laid down and forced to be a single observer of waves rolling in and crashing on the shore, making it tumble over. Collateral damage. The frostbitten face and hands of Verkade soften the loss of this magnificent landscape by intervening and resetting the camera. Hence, the artist acts as receptive, transparent eyeballs through which we experience nature and its inhabitants. The dwellers are rendered faceless and dependent on the energy of the island. It lifts their spirits, cleanses their minds and gives a counterpoint to human chaos instead of the so often assumed solitude a barren landscape imposes on people. Verkade doesn't seem to be so sure about it. She checks in on us and herself multiple times, reaffirming her position as an outsider, the snow relentlessly falling down on the lens. Are you still alright? *A journey shows us not only the world, but how we fit into it.*

Emerson carries on stating every object in nature has its own beauty, which is magnified when perspective allows a comprehensive vision of the whole. Pieter Paul Pothoven gives us such a vision in his installation *Lapis Lazuli from Serr-i-Sang*. Paper thin slices of the lapis lazuli stone are seen through the light of a projector, offering us a vision of what comes about when slivers

of humanity's endeavours are projected on a scale reaching far beyond its real size. It paints the picture of limited resources when aesthetic fever hits hard, inane matter forcing to dig deeper and deeper, hollowing out mines whose material is subjected to the fickle inclinations of the human eye. But it also delves deeper into the significant political consequences of these projections. The Belgian movie made by Pieter-Jan de Pue¹, from which I have borrowed the title of this essay, examines these geo-political consequences as American troops prepare to exit the roof the world. The film starts off with an origin myth told by an Afghan boy. God handed out land at the beginning of the world and forgot the Afghans. So he gave them his garden and instead of doing trade with other countries they decided to keep all of it. Soon, they were invaded by greedy foreigners and lost their king. Since then, history repeats itself. For this projection, a formalistic point of view is developed, opening up a host of possible visual associations as well as historical consequences. The apparent simplicity calls attention to the narrative being held back. *Does the person create the journey, or does the journey create the person?*

The realization that our perception is in constant flux is extensively featured in Alexandre Lavet's *Sunset*, which consists of a screencast of an editing programme. Altering the suggestive appearance transforms it into a stunning natural phenomenon, effectively underlining the simplicity of the digital process and suggesting the eternal rise and fall of light in consonance with Emerson's views. As humankind comes closer to nature, limiting concepts such as space and time lose their significance in light of the larger picture. Each object is perceived as a microcosm of the universe. Each human is a point of access into the universal spirit which in turn gives us access to all and every other human being. *Sunset* could be a boundless experience, if it weren't for the digits on the outer edges of the screen reminding us not only of the lines of demarcation surrounding a field of gradient colour but more importantly of the everlasting quantifiable aspect pervading our senses and the projection in the shape of a pixel. *The journey is life itself.*

Commercials couldn't be more concerned with the constant reminder through physical analogy that they are made for a target group, the buyers. Nearly every frame features a human of some kind, preferably dressed to the nines in the most improbable locations. The absence of humans in *Silent Light* and the negating of recognizable characteristics besides the voices in *Solitary Company* stands in stark contrast to this. The self and its natural extension, revelling in pure consciousness is not explicitly addressed in any

of the works, but the mechanics revealing human nature, what it means to be alive and a conscious, seeing being are all the more so. The inner workings of how we see, gather and play are innocuous enough, yet we often fail to consider our actions and their effect as a whole, both in time and place, causing damage which cannot be undone. The artists choose to be the conductors of their activism and our perception leading us into the land of the enlightened, defying traditional filmmaking *en passant*. Life provides a stage on which to perform. Ortega Ayala gives us the opportunity to ponder on the unwritten in between, paving the way for the emphasis on process. Beware, for failing to do so might bring you one step closer to Stanley the T-rex, a sinking balloon tied to your tail. *Where will life take you?*

¹ The Land of the Enlightened premiered at the 2016 International Film Festival Rotterdam and can currently be seen in cinemas throughout the Netherlands.

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