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WOW - (New) Ways of Wondering: Storytelling in a Double 360 Degree Context

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Abstract: Classic film provides the viewer with a straightforward view, an ideal viewing position connected to an ideal viewing experience. The newest image technologies do not only provide the possibility of a different position of the maker, but also (and this is revolutionary) for the viewer. This shift is comparable to what happened to narrative film footage due to the portable camera. Suddenly a whole different array of images and angles became possible. Now, with technologies such as 360° camera's and projections, the viewer has the possibility to choose his own point of view.

The article analyses a case of 360° projection in an interactive installation: "Round a Roundabout #2". Because of the 360° constellation and the use of a dual, translucent screen, there is no single angle from where a viewer can overlook the whole image. There are always elements escaping your view. Thus, there is no single narrative. Each viewer has to actively participate, rebuild the story from scratch. Since, as Jerome Bruner suggested in "Actual Minds, Possible Worlds" and "Acts of Meaning", our psychological model for processing the world around us, is based on narrative principles, the encounter with new narrative possibilities in a 360°-degree context instigates new ways of looking at the world.

Keywords: Image Thinking, 360° projection, interactive installation, layers of meaning, interspaces, viewing position, active viewer, (re)construction of narrative



Figure 1: Round a Roundabout #2
Source: Sofie Grondelaers 2018

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*A story has no beginning or end: arbitrarily one chooses that moment of experience
from which to look back or from which to look ahead.*
(Graham Greene – The End of the Affair)

Classic film provides the viewer with a straightforward view, an ideal viewing position connected to an ideal viewing experience. The newest image technologies do not only provide the possibility of a different position of the maker, but also (and this is revolutionary) for the viewer. This shift is comparable to what happened to narrative film footage due to the portable camera. Suddenly a whole different array of images and angles became possible. Now, with technologies such as 360° camera's and projections, the *viewer* has the possibility to choose his own point of view.

Graham Greene's splendid novel *The End of the Affair* opens with a memorable quote: "A story has no beginning or end: arbitrarily one chooses that moment of experience from which to look back or from which to look ahead." (1951/2004: 7) In 2018 we made *Round a Roundabout #2*, an interactive video installation filmed with a prototype 12k 360° camera developed by prof. dr. Philippe Bekaert of the Expertise Centre for Digital Media (EDM) at Hasselt University³. This project translated this quote into an experience. Because of the 360° projection and the use of a dual, translucent screen, there is no single angle from where a viewer can overlook the whole image. There are always elements escaping your view. Thus, there is no single narrative. Each viewer has to actively participate, rebuild the story from scratch over and over again.

Technological innovation incites artistic experimentation

Of course, technological advancement that influences the way images are made and experienced is not a new phenomenon. In the early 1960's experimental filmmaker Chris Marker presented two remarkable cinematographic projects. The increase in quality of images shot by a handheld camera, inspired filmmakers in that period to experiment with different ways of storytelling (think of the Nouvelle Vague movement with directors such as Jean-Luc Godard, Agnès Varda and Robert Bresson).⁴ Chris Marker used this qualitative portable camera to shoot the documentary *Le Joli Mai* (1963 - The Lovely Month of May) based on 55 hours of raw footage of Marker interviewing people on the streets of Paris in 1962. The result is a lively cross section of real Parisian lives in the early 1960's. Although here it is still the director who chooses the angle and order in which the story is presented, it is a much rougher, and therefore more lifelike version of documentary than the classic format.

Earlier, in a sequence from *Lettre de Sibérie* (1957 - *Letter from Siberia*), he had already mingled with the experience of the viewer in such a way that it affected the truth of the narrative: the same footage was mixed with three different sound tracks – each suggesting a different angle.

At about the same time he experimented with the extremely mobile technology of the handheld camera in *Le Joli May*, Chris Marker also decided to try out a very static form in his short science fiction film *La Jetée* (1962 - The Jetty) about a time traveler who discovers love. The film is made entirely of still shots, combined with a voice-over that tells the story. There is only a slight sense of motion which seems to be caused by a hand holding the camera that shoots the images.

³ <https://www.uhasselt.be/edm>

⁴ See, for example, Bordwell & Thompson 1979/2004: 486-489.



Figure 2: Round a Roundabout #1
 Source: Patrick Ceyssens 2014

Paths Leading to Focus

Traditionally, we regard movement as one of the basic characteristics of film. Movement is one of the traits which separate film from photography, for example⁵. But in fact, most of the movements in films are purposeless, in the sense that they are not essential to the development of the story and could easily be replaced by stills while attaining the same narrative effect. *Io sono l'amore* (2009 – I am Love by Luca Guadagnino), for example, relies on imagery contrast to set an atmosphere. The story is about a woman who is torn between two emotional worlds that translate quite literally into different settings that colour the atmosphere: composed, muffled tones, versus lively, happy colours. In a superficial way the woman looks the same, wearing a comparable red-orange dress in several scenes, but she radiates totally different emotions due to the colour scheme of the different settings, corresponding to her inner struggle. It is perfectly possible to strip one of the visually rich scenes of this film of movement. Take for example one of the final scenes: in the church, after the funeral of the protagonist's son. What is important in the scene in question is the balance between light and shadow, the alteration of close-up versus long shot. Movement is not essential to grasp the essence of the storyline. You can pay closer attention to these details when the images are not moving because that implies that a certain choice of frame has been made for you. Just like Marker's *La Jetée* reduced motion to a minimum (only a slight zoom in the still images from time to time evokes the notion of movement) in such a way that it allows the viewer

⁵ See, for example, chapter 12 of Bordwell & Thompson 2003 on the evolution from photography to film.

to absorb more of the details in the image. Motion would be an unnecessary distraction without adding to the storyline.

Round a Roundabout #2 does the opposite with a similar purpose: by providing an overload, an array of choices and movements, it forces the viewer to actively take a position and connect perceived details into a meaningful whole. The viewer is not in front of the image, but in the middle, which enhances the immersive experience. Think of classic panoramic landscape paintings – such as the one in Waterloo (Belgium) depicting the famous battle of Waterloo where Napoleon was defeated. The viewing position and scale are similar to the view from the hill next to the panorama building. As you climb the stairs to the viewpoint on that hill afterwards, your head is still filled with the images depicting what went on in the landscape surrounding you. This visual combination secures a content-related connection because the image is almost as large as what you will get to see outside. The spectator interacts with the image and lets their experience and the image come together.

Since the double, circular projection of *Round a Roundabout*, where you see the image both inside and outside of the screen, is new, it is not a recognizable viewing position and yet it also represents a true-to-life-form that allows for a readable reality to appear. You can't see the whole circular image in a single glance, so you'll have to choose if you look in front of you or behind, inside or outside the circle, standing up or lying down. Each choice influences what you perceive and thus the raw material that you then process to mold your own insights and storyline. Viewers do not just use their eyes, but rather their whole bodies as a phenomenological conductor of attention and thus rethink the whole experienced space in a much more complex way. As Jean-Luc Nancy puts it in *Les Muses* (1994), art isolates what we refer to as the sensory to force it to be nothing but what it is, apart from the signifying and practical observation. In other words, art is always multiple, ever changing, because it indicates there is no such thing as the sensory in general.⁶

The goal of *Round a Roundabout* was to develop an installation that is able to manage and stimulate the complexity of the (inter)active visual thinking, in line with what Gilles Deleuze indicates in his *Logique du Sens*: “The infinitely divisible event is always *both at once*. It is eternally that which has just happened and that which is about to happen, but never that which is happening” (1969/1990: 8). *Round a Roundabout #2* unhinges the perception of the viewer. You look forward, but there is always something behind, something above, something in-between that disappears behind your back. When you look around in the installation, you are immediately invited to stare at another layer, through the image, between the images... a second glance. ‘In’sight as an inspiration for the most individual interpretation and creation possible. “In [Deleuze’s] philosophical perspective, the mind is a site of thoughts rather than a center of consciousness. These thoughts are not defined by the fact that someone can say: they are my thoughts. Thoughts, in other words, are not defined as belonging to a subject.” (Due 2007: 10) Each spectator will create a unique idea starting from this installation that objectively looks the same to everyone.

New Media as a Playground for Evolution in Image Thinking

To obtain new knowledge we have to interact with what new media can offer us. Technological developments liberate more and more indirect elements that award us a glance behind, beyond and inside the reality we thought we already knew. Our viewing habits, desires, insights and norms are formed by previous experience, but are also subject to evolution.

As Jerome Bruner, research professor of psychology at New York University, argued in *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (1986) and *Acts of Meaning* (1990) our everyday experience of the world is organised and processed in narrative form. He makes a distinction between paradigmatic thinking, that follows the categories of science to structure our comprehension of the natural world

⁶ See Devisch; De Graeve & Beerten 2009 and Nancy 1994

around us, and narrative thinking, which is applied in our everyday form of thinking and social interaction: “our experience of human affairs comes to take the form of narratives we use in telling them.” (Bruner 1991:5) This also implies that the stories we encounter, and especially the stories we produce, influence our experience of the world. “And this is, perhaps, what makes the innovative storyteller such a powerful figure in a culture. He may go beyond the conventional scripts, leading people to see human happenings in a fresh way, indeed, in a way they had never before ‘noticed’ or even dreamed.” (Bruner 1991:12).

Technology trying to influence our minds or at least developing applications that can compute things faster than our thoughts can, is not an abstract faraway fantasy anymore. Through new experiences, encounters with new ways of storytelling, our capacity of image thinking grows. Up until now we have been conditioned to use words and language to explain or gain insight into images. But images and language do not just function in different ways; they also provide us with complementary perspectives. In this sense, image thinking is all about creating connections. The mental space between diverse expressive forms is an integration of sensations that exceeds all possible combinations.

Exactly as we are used to write from left to right, represent history on a timeline in a certain order, we are inclined to approach each image from this conventional angle. Our first look is generally right in front of us, into the depth of the image. There is nothing wrong with that, but so much more is happening, layers awaiting to be linked. The richer and broader these new ideas are, the more expanded this playground for our brain becomes.

[T]he imagery we watch inevitably confronts our sense of reality. Film provides a forum within which we must continually test our vision of things. It follows that if we only experience one kind of film, our testing of our sense of reality is very limited, but if we are present with audiences at a wide variety of types of cinema, the potential is there for the development of a much deeper sense of cinema, of self, and of the communities we live in. Reading a written text which explicates or theorizes about film or a set of films can be interesting and useful, even very exciting. But, no matter how ingenious the text, it cannot provide the same sort of direct revelation that occurs when an audience (student or otherwise), accustomed to a very limited cinematic discourse is presented with a *film* which stands in an aggressively analytical or theoretical relationship to conventional cinema. [...] If the discourse of cinema – as distinguished from the literary discourse *about* cinema – is to remain vital, if it is to have ongoing impact, the theater must remain a dynamic space [...]. (MacDonald 1988: 40)



Figure 3: Round a Roundabout #2
Source: Sofie Gielis 2018

The concept of *Round a Roundabout #2* is a dynamic mental mediator in the adjusted relationship between humans and their environment. This new way of looking needs time to adjust to. Just like we had to get used to reading GPS screens or the many possibilities of smartphones. Complex at first glance, but once you have mastered this way of looking, the double view becomes incorporated. The conceptual image functions as a stimulator and turns the viewer into a designer. *Round a Roundabout #2* encourages the spectator to compose his own philosophy, defined by his own reflections and perceptions. The installation confronts the viewer with ideas that seem impossible to grasp. Within the experiment the interactivity of the viewer, the active involvement by making viewing choices and thus becoming part of 'the game', has a major influence on our way of looking. Once an image starts talking, several senses are triggered, and specific fields of tension from these perceptions are activated and linked. Image thinking compels you endlessly to other ranges (meaning, context, perception) as you have never before learned this language.

Round a Roundabout #2 evokes both the chronological, passing time, the experience of the now and the unlimited time of the mind, the virtual realm of thought. This two tracked consciousness creates a bizarre relation with the duration of things as movement becomes dependent on time instead of the other way around. The installation incorporates several montage techniques that confront our familiar way of reading reality with optical intrigues. Thus, at several occasions, the image itself rotates in relation to the background. By making the camera follow the movement of the actors during the 360° recording, in the final image the background appears to be moving while the actors stay on the spot. In another scene, the characters' eyes are pointed at the same time at both the inside and the outside of the installation. In this way the images become transit spaces, in between representation and mental space. This is where thinking takes over from looking or where they blend together. It is a space created by technique where we can never physically *be*. From the moment you look at the installation from the outer circle; you realise that the image on the inner circle continues out of your sight. Thus, these spaces provide a sort of virtualisation of our view, added on top of what our eyes register. It creates an interval between the images and a mental bridge: a thought space next to the existing experienced space. As Jacques Rancière states in *The Future of the Image*: "The images of art are operations that produce a discrepancy, a dissemblance. Words describe what the eye might see or express what it will never see; they deliberately clarify or obscure an idea. Visible forms yield a meaning to be construed or subtract it. A camera movement anticipates one spectacle and discloses a different one. A pianist attacks a musical phrase 'behind' a dark screen. All these relations define images. This means two things. In the first place, the images of art are, as such, dissemblances. Secondly, the image is not exclusive to the visible." (2008:7)

The viewer becomes much more committed as he sees the world through a different prism. He tackles it using various frameworks simultaneously: a free perception, lively photography, reinterpretation, experiences trapped in their settings, instant rethinking, regeneration of contents, ... In an endless search of wonder and coherence, chaos and understanding. Reality as we know it escapes our grasp and is replaced by a new immersive interface. We become part of this reality experience while we are shaping it. After you have been submerged in *Round a Roundabout*, reality has no beginning or end: arbitrarily you choose that moment of experience from which to look back or from which to look ahead.

*Although it is impossible to translate the experience into a text or a flat image,
here you can get a taste of what Round a Roundabout can be:
<https://vimeo.com/36251639>
<http://patrickceyssens.com/videos/recent/round-a-roundabout-2>*



Figure 4: Round a Roundabout #1
Source: Patrick Ceyssens 2014

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