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THE BLIND DRIVE OF THINGS

Thomas Demand's Pacific Sun

In his classic text *Theory of Film. The Redemption of Physical Reality* (originally published in 1960), the photography theorist Siegfried Kracauer waxes lyrical about aerial reconnaissance images taken by automatic cameras during the Second World War. In this practice, cameras were mounted to the body of aircraft in order to record a particular field of observation; the resulting images were not intended to reflect a human sense of perception. Only this device, Kracauer believed, was capable—without the intervention of cognitive or moral categories—of registering processes that confuse humans. Kracauer held that the camera could penetrate deep into "the blind drive of things."[1] In contrast to language or images, which by their very natures segment their environment, dissect it, and construct themselves, the camera could submerge itself beneath that perception, which was already fractured by the terms of language or the logics of other sign systems. The camera could go beyond the sharply defined compass of perception directed by the needs and objectives of human orientation; it could capture a realm of uncertain signs that human perception is forced to overlook if it is to remain capable of action. The camera can record humans in action as things among other things. This is the great dream of being observed by an alien gaze with no sense of shame. Today, Kracauer's theory is far from old hat. It continues to enthrall us as we sit in front of televisions, YouTube, or in the cinema. And now we, too, have begun to produce a storm of authentic images on our mobile phones.

THE PLAYER'S PERFORMANCE

Nothing is more alien to the player than ontological certainty. On July 30, 2008, when the cargo ship *Pacific Sun* was caught in a storm, the security camera on board recorded the blind activities of things in the ocean liner's dining hall as the ship was tossed to and fro by the waves. That security footage was then broadcast online, becoming an entry in our collective memory.[2] And it is that footage that comprises the raw material Thomas Demand worked with to make his film *Pacific Sun*.

"Play" with the stuff of the surveillance camera is, like every artifact of culture—and following Johan Huizinga's concept of universal elements of play[3]—a tool in a context of action. The "magic circle" of play, according to Huizinga, possesses an unbeatable property: the player is never entirely serious, whether in an everyday, pragmatic sense or in an ontological sense. Science and the law, too, possess a playful character. However, the contrast of "serious" and "not serious" is not the same in play as the contradistinctions "true/untrue" or "authentic/constructed." Play encompasses both poles. "Being other than the given reality" can be achieved in play without undermining the relationship between appearance and reality.[4] As the game or war theorist would say, the camera on the *Pacific Sun* narrowed or enclosed the "playing field." The inaccessible natural power of the ocean lies beyond the field of play. Only the trace material—the image residue—is accessible.

THE LABORATORY AS AN AREA OF PLAY

The laboratory as the site of scientific experimentation is an open space detached from the mysterious "noise of nature." It isolates specific factors and allows them to interact with each other in an artificial, controlled environment.[5] Chance cannot be eliminated here, but it can be minimized. The smaller the formats involved, the greater the certainty of homing in on the phenomenon in question and making it accessible to scientific observation—far removed from the activities of life, but all the more tangible nonetheless.

Demand treats the footage of that harrowing event on the *Pacific Sun* as if he were re-enacting scientific procedures in a laboratory. First, he subjects the material to a procedure that mirrors the processes of cognition in our speech: he segments the environment of moving objects recorded by the surveillance camera into 2,944 frames. Witnesses to the work that went on in Demand's studio describe the process: how each element in the swarm of objects in the frame had to be isolated, fabricated on a 1:1 scale, and positioned to recreate

Previous page: Thomas Demand, *Pacific Sun* (video stills), 2012
Top: CCTV footage at www.youtube.com/watch?v=VchsHhPIx_s, frame 2273
Bottom: Thomas Demand, *Pacific Sun* (3D simulation still/ Camera view frame), 2012

Thomas Demand, *Pacific Sun* (production photograph), 2012

every moment of their complex movements in each and every film still. And thus, after this disenchantment of the "authentic," or of the original film material, a choreography of the swarm of objects was conjured with the aid of a dozen animators. Michael Fried comments on the processes in Demand's studio: "Good art theory must smell of the studio!" However, Rudolf Arnheim provides a qualifying statement that is frequently forgotten: "Although its language should differ from the household talk of painters and sculptors."[6]

Demand sees his production of models as analogous to the processes of science:

"We understand things by making models of them [...] Without models we would probably all go mad. The way our brains reduce the billions of sensory impressions we receive down to just the few with which we can work, that's the real model according to which we construct our models."[7]

While Kracauer argued for ascribing the camera with the capacity to record the "madness" of a non-modeled reality, Demand re-enacts the process of modeling—the process by which we comprehend things. He drives madness out of things by reworking them as models, so as to expose them to the camera again. This in turn imbues them with the appearance of authenticity. Demand takes on the self-assurance of a modeling scientist, only to leave himself to the "madness" in his artwork. Friedrich Nietzsche described this kind of player as a "liberated intellect," for whom the "enormous timber and framework of concepts" to which the human clings are "toys" for bold works of art.[8] He dissects the models of reality and reassembles them ironically, to demonstrate that he only requires them as temporary, makeshift aids. In this way, Demand creates a sense of distance from the "madness" of the images of our collective memory.

A TOPOS IS BROKEN

Significantly, Nietzsche likened the fate of model-building science to the image of a turbulent ocean, in which the human clings to a framework of definitions. In his work, Demand enters that tradition of the *topos* of the "shipwreck with spectators." Hans Blumenberg first formulated the portrayal of the genesis of this "nautical metaphor for existence."[9] He points out that in the writings of Lucretius, the human, a creature of *terra firma*, observes that sphere of unpredictability from a distance. The sea represents something raw and all-encompassing that can be studied by an observer who is uninvolved with it but consumed by the thrill of fear. As he himself is always rescued, he enjoys the "transcendence" of the event. For Lucretius, this is a fundamental experience of science: it stands on solid ground and relishes its self-consciousness "outside the maelstrom."[10] Johann Gottfried Herder applied the same *topos* to political history: "We can observe the French Revolution as if it were a shipwreck on the open, foreign sea witnessed from the safety of the shore." Admittedly,

to this comfortable vantage point he added a discomforting afterthought: "as long as our evil genius does not throw us into the sea against our will."[11] This afterthought, formulated at the end of the 18th century, contains a premonition of the possibility of a fall. There was a growing awareness at the time that humans could barely occupy a comfortable place of peace for long. The sea of inaccessible history no longer washes the subject up on the shores of an island, where it may establish itself, Robinson Crusoe-like, as an autarchic land power.[12] The subject, instead, has become the object of the maelstrom, surrendering to the self-created catastrophe as if to a force of nature. Jacob Burckhardt was still able to identify that yearning for a place of peace: "We wish to get to know the wave on which we are swimming in the ocean." Toward the end of the 19th century, however, he knew: "we ourselves are these waves."[13] One can, cold-bloodedly and out of sheer defiance or stoic resignation, allow oneself to be overcome by that wave, steel oneself, and describe the suffering that the inexorable process generates, by suppressing empathy. One can seek out an aesthetic place of peace, "as if" (as in play) one could engage in the anonymous process that has long ceased to be understood as a process of raw nature—as in the image of the sea—but instead is increasingly understood as an unfettered tide of capital. Nobody can remain outside the maelstrom.

The fatalism expressed in this experience of history was subsequently answered by Karl Marx and, later in the 20th century, by individuals fighting for the reins of control because they knew the economy of world history. They free themselves from skeptical resignation and, in the name of the "proletariat" or the "people," set themselves against the anonymous course of history. The 20th century became the era of the "heroic modern."[14] Many large-scale political projects attempted to *control* history, ending up as part of a much larger process that nobody could predict. Thus, political strategies became the jetsam of a process that was carried out behind the backs of project leaders.

The play in Demand's studio varies the *topos* of the shipwreck with viewers in a strange way. The helmsman, anchorage, tools of navigation, compass, and captain are all missing. Even the contrasting elements of land and sea are gone. The camera occupies the position of the observer, which remains static, secured to the spot, and records the events "objectively," i.e. without the mental shock that an eyewitnesses might feel. Its images are ordered, mathematically fixed, perspectivally rearranged. There can be no talk of the "raw nature of the sea." Instead of the darkness of unexplained natural processes, Demand's film is dominated by the artificial, magical brightness of the frenzy of functional objects. Higher powers move the furniture hither and thither. The collisions are ghostly in effect. The force of gravity on the objects is expressed in the varying speeds of their respective movements—the cupboard comes into motion much more slowly than the fragile chairs[15]—but without pain, for human actors are absent from the field of play.

HIDDEN WORK

The sweat sits upon his brow. The officer in the dining hall of the *Pacific Sun* resists the urge to panic; he is an experienced assessor of risk. He permits himself a short break and wipes the sweat with a handkerchief. Workers can be discerned in the surveillance camera images; to the left in the background, the kitchen staff in white uniforms, sometimes forming an incomprehensible pack, at other times scattered; a steward bracing himself for the next wave against a cupboard, refusing to desist from his Sisyphean task; in the foreground a barkeeper who, with vaguely desperate gestures, attempts to save a laptop from succumbing to the force of the waves; a female passenger, caught in the arms of a fat steward. At the back on the right, individuals in the salon, who are not—at first—fazed, are later gone. The flow of time is tangible: the tumult stops abruptly, there is a brief pause for breath before the next wave arrives. The movement swells, dams up, disperses, only to be suddenly and very physically present once more.

The images recorded by the surveillance camera capture a last, technical articulation of the metaphor for humanity—"the shipwreck with viewers": humans and things are tossed to and fro by an anonymous force, while a technical device, itself part of the ship, records the situation, unmoved. The boundaries of the field of view are transgressed: the telephone at the bar is answered—either a status report request or an instruction from the bridge—then passed on and the receiver replaced. This chaotic event remains embedded in the invisible communication structures of the ship, the footage from the camera becomes an element of the World Wide Web. There, it can be viewed with peace of mind, in which the thrill of fear and comfort come together. All is safe in the hands of the trusted net.

But Demand has made this stance impossible by accentuating the artificiality in his reconstruction. Actors and their actions have been removed; all the objects are presented with the same depth of focus. Demand observed that if people had been seen behaving in panic or indifference, the video could easily have been viewed as "slapstick." That would not be the worst reaction; after all, slapstick in early cinema was a response to the historical experience of being at the mercy of the devious conduct of the object. In his photographs of models of crime scenes and other charged locations, Demand never represents perpetrators or victims, so this explanation for the lack of humans in the case of *Pacific Sun* seems to me to be misleading rather than enlightening: the reason must be sought elsewhere. By eliminating the work and the workers, Demand removes an element that the observer might use to identify and thereby intervene in the proceedings. The fate of the workers and victims amidst the chaos was part of the original picture of this barely averted catastrophe, which, as an image disseminated millions of times on YouTube, took root in the collective memory. So what was the artist's logic in eliminating the workers?

Representations of work are part of a long tradition. The appearance of working figures in numerous historical sites and contextual situations has always been a means of identification. Work is that form of history "in which it produces its continuity, beneath the appearance of change, its continued existence beneath the appearance of conquest."[16] Work has been and is still carried out, and ineluctably so: by a train driver, scientist, pilot, stewardess, captain, soldier or engineer... in spaces that appear in hindsight to be the sites of catastrophes. The perception of work makes identification easier—it enables a sense of continuity in the fractured nature of history. What happens, then, when it is missing? It becomes shadowy, ghostly, abstract, like financial flows of which we only experience the repercussions.

DISSIMULATING THE MAKING

A force, originating in the disappearance of effort, seems to emanate from Demand's film. Things move delicately, as if by magic. This is one reason that comments about *Pacific Sun* tend to focus on the element that cannot be seen: the work in Demand's studio.[17] Demand's process of data collection is not readily obvious. Data specialists describe the two possibilities for gathering information in the following image: you enter a room filled with a multitude of things lying all over the place. In what's known as the "brute force"[18] algorithm, data is gathered by picking up each object, weighing it, measuring it, and inserting it into a given framework. The method first categorizes the information by class (volume, weight, etc.), then proceeds to define the items and bring a sense of order to the messy piles of statistics. Demand works using an analogous method. Each object in the animation—for example, each of the 55 chairs—is reconstructed in paper or cardboard on a scale of 1:1. Demand's film was created over a period of one and a half years. The cost of the work ran to the same sum as that for a normal feature film. Hard work, high costs, a result as light as air.

Thomas Demand, *Pacific Sun* (production photograph), 2012

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THE HUMILITY OF LATE ARRIVAL

Michael Fried has interpreted Demand's works as "allegories of the intention" of the artist—as if the artist could recapture the power of definition over the things. This, interestingly, presents the counter-thesis to Kracauer's camera myth in film theory, according to which, in the process of filming, the human loses the power of definition over things.

I recognize another characteristic of Demand's work: humility. Notoriously too late to the scene of the crime, generally in the wake of an act without a perpetrator, he draws his work retrospectively from the media echo-chamber of the event. Yet this seems to be tangible only in the form of the paper model, which ensures a new presence for the incomprehensibility of the missed event. In his lateness, he brings up the rear, as it were, and so his work ironizes the hybrid pretensions of the avant-garde.

The play with paper models is different than experiments with models in the scientific laboratory. When Demand says: "We understand things by making models of them. [...] Without models we would probably all go mad," he represents the futility of comprehending reality through models, and renders them as fascinating sculptures.

1—Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film. The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1997), p. 58.

2—In the description of the context of Thomas Demand's film, *Pacific Sun*, I follow Michael Fried's scrupulous descriptions in *Thomas Demand's Pacific Sun*, a seminal lecture presented for the first time at The Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles (March 29, 2011).

3—Johan Huizinga, *Das Spielelement der Kultur*, Knut Ebeling (ed.) (Berlin: Matthes und Seitz, 2014).

4—*Ibid.*, p. 24.

5—Philipp Felsch, "Das Laboratorium," in Alexa Geisthövel, Habbo Knoch (eds.), *Orte der Moderne* (Frankfurt/New York: Campus Verlag, 2005), pp. 27–36.

6—Rudolf Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception: A Psychology of the Creative Eye* (Berkeley/Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1974). As cited in *Hiding Making–Showing Creation. The Studio from Turner to Tacita Dean*, Sandra Kisters *et al.* (eds.) (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013), p. 249.

7—"Die Hybris unserer Arbeit," interview by Arno Widmann in *Frankfurter Rundschau*, August 17, 2012.

8—As cited in Hans Blumenberg, *Shipwreck with Spectator. Paradigm of a Metaphor for Existence* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1997), trans. Steven Rendal, p. 20.

9—*Ibid.*

10—*Ibid.*, p. 26ff.

11—*Ibid.*, p. 46.

12—Michael Dominik Hagel, *Fiktion und Praxis. Eine Wissensgeschichte der Utopie 1500–1800* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag 2016), p. 282ff.

13—Hans Blumenberg, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

14—See Heinz Dieter Kittsteiner, "Jakob Burckhardt als Leser Hegels," in *Id.*, *Out of Control. Über die Unverfügbarkeit des historischen Prozesses* (Berlin/Vienna: Philo Verlag 2004), pp. 75–102.

15—This is described more precisely in the lecture by Michael Fried (see note no. 2).

16—Werner Hamacher, "Working Through Working," in *Modernism/Modernity*, vol. 3, no. 1 (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), pp. 20–60.

17—Michael Fried, in his lecture (see note no. 2).

18—My thanks to Mario Wimmer (Berkeley/Bern) for this suggestion.