

In a conversation with  
Pieter Van Bogaert,  
artist and filmmaker  
Anouk De Clercq reflects  
on her practice.  
Taking four of her recent films  
as a starting point  
— Swan Song (2013),  
Thing (2013),  
Black (2015) and  
Atlas (2016) —  
the conversation takes us  
from the dot, to the pixel,  
to space and beyond.

# WHAT IS CINEMA

Your two-part project sets out with two questions: ‘What is Cinema?’, (about your practice as a filmmaker), and ‘Where is Cinema?’, (about the practice of the presenter, about where your films – and other films – go from there, where they end up). The first question has been a classic in the history of 20th-century film. Indeed, it is the title of a collection of texts by André Bazin. The history of film also immediately plays a major role in the programme with which you launched Monokino, your project to organise film screenings in the city of Ostend. You show two films, *Moana*, by Robert Flaherty, and *My Crazy Life* by Jean-Pierre Gorin. Flaherty’s film, made in 1926, was the first for which the word ‘documentary’ was used. For his part, Gorin has always insisted that his film ‘is no documentary!’ So you could say that you are introducing Monokino with the first documentary film and ending it with the last. That brings us back to Bazin, for whom the idea of the documentary film is very important: film as a window onto the world, without editing, with everything as real as possible. So here is my first question: how important is the history of film for you, and how important is Bazin’s idea of film as a window onto the world?

The history of film is incredibly important. It was where I started, my first source of inspiration, and indeed still is. I studied film, which of course includes the history of film. Bazin’s *Qu’est-ce que le cinéma?* was obviously part of that. He was writing in the age of Neorealism, just when Nouvelle Vague (French New Wave) was making its entrance – an extremely exciting time in the history of film. Bazin’s question, ‘*Qu’est-ce que le cinéma?*’ was also once put to Agnès Varda. Her answer was, ‘*De la lumière qui vient de quelque part et qui est retenue par des images, plus ou moins sombre ou coloré.*’<sup>2</sup> It’s a wonderful answer.

I love the idea of film as a window onto the world, one that enables the viewer to make a journey of discovery. Not just to strange countries, the way Flaherty’s *Moana* does, but also the reality of the unconscious, as with Luis Buñuel. You can also reveal reality through the power of illusion and imagination: building and offering possible worlds as an alternative to reality, as a mirror and a learning process for both the filmmaker and the audience. My kind of cinema is sooner situated here.



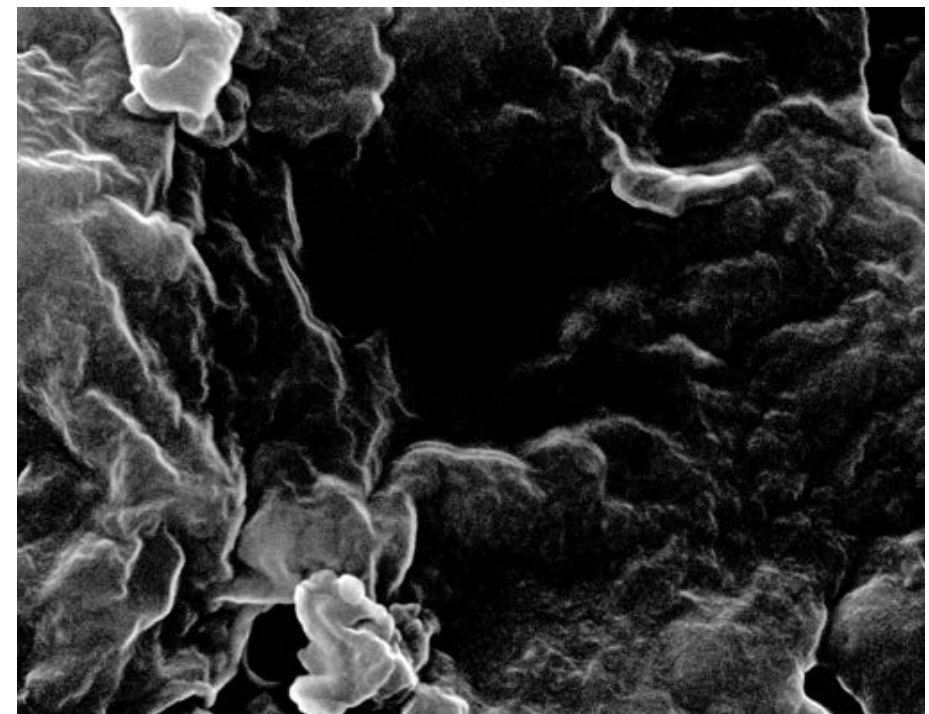
I especially remember the essence of what Bazin was asking: What is cinema; what can it mean today, for me and my audience? If you are searching for a visual language that tries to go further than the dominant contemporary movie culture, you keep coming back to this essential question. It pushes you to the limits of what film can be.

Two of my recent works are a direct reflection on my medium, as well as attempts to answer that question. *Black* (2015) is an ode to the darkness of the cinema or movie house, and in *Atlas* (2016), I use an electron microscope to explore a single frame from a 16mm film.

Monokino, the nomadic film platform that I initiated in Ostend, was conceived in and for a harbour city, a port onto the world, with the comings and goings of people from Ostend and beyond. At the same time, Ostend also has a tendency to fold in on itself. It is here that Monokino wants to break something open, for example, by illuminating that part of cinema that runs parallel to the mainstream. By showing such classic films as *Moana* alongside more contemporary work – to the degree that you can still call *My Crazy Life* contemporary, of course – and consequently generate the friction. It is not just showing *Moana* as an aesthetic view of the exotic – ‘Oh, just look at how beautiful that white sandy beach is, the palm trees waving in the wind; just look at how captivating that exotic culture from a bygone time is’ – but sharpening the viewing experience by presenting *Moana* alongside a film that raises questions about migration. In this sense, Monokino absolutely intends to be a window onto the world. And as a fallow ground for cinema lovers, Ostend has a lot of possibilities.

Today, we can all watch a film at home, on our own screens, alone. So what can cinema still mean? What can cinema still offer, other than that individual experience at home? That is something we want to ask in the context of Monokino, and with every projection, try to offer an answer. We are seeking out the limitations of cinema, the frontiers that film reveals, and trying to go as far as possible within those borders, with an eye to the seemingly endless sea as an inspiring perspective.

*This brings us to the second question: ‘Where is Cinema?’ It makes me think of another film critic, Serge Daney, whose work also regularly refers to Bazin, and who, like you, liked to travel, to meet people. In his autobiography, he reflects on the days when he and his mother went to the cinema and what he experienced there. For Daney, the cinema was first and foremost a place, a particular space. He wrote, for example,*



*about his experience of the entr'acte, in between the shorts and the main programme – we are talking about the 1950s here – when those dreadful actors appeared in the theatre and confronted him with the reality of the space and the people around him, when he had really gone there to dream himself away with the film on the screen.*

*Daney also talks about another spatial experience: that of travelling, which for him as a film journalist, was essentially bound to cinema, to all those festivals, to watching films, as well as to presenting films – introducing films was part of his job as a critic. For Daney, cinema was about meetings. That is a part of the cinephile culture for which Daney has been such an important figure. This was not only true for someone like me, who grew up with the cinema of the 1980s, when Daney was writing his most important texts for Cahiers du cinéma and Libération (Daney died of AIDS in 1992). The essence of his story – and of the love of film in that period – was that the cinema was the place where you met people. For Daney, 'Where is Cinema?' was about a great deal more than just the place where you were sitting. It reached much farther than the moment itself.*

An individual viewing experience is completely different than a collective experience. The potential of cinema to serve as a meeting place is the reason why Monokino exists, the most important argument for organizing a film viewing. Bazin said, 'Just as a house only makes sense when it is habitable, so too does the film need an audience.' We want to make contact with an audience through the medium of film. That is in principle a very sensual exchange. It is about being willing to tell each other something, to pass something on and to share. Seeing a film on your own and sharing a film are two completely different things. If I watch a film in a group, in the theatre, I remember that film. If I watch a film on my own, I don't remember it, because watching alone on a small screen is a very superficial, cerebral experience. It can be informative, but it does not sit in my body. Very literally, watching a film in a theatre is an *empreinte*, an impression, something that makes an impression on me. It is a bodily, sensory and sensual experience. I lose myself and give myself over to the image, together with others. The discussions before (the introduction) and after a film (what have we seen, mixing points of view) are a part of that experience. So cinema is there as well.

I have just come from the Berlinale: there is nothing as wonderful as a festival where everybody passes information on to everybody else. 'You have to see this,' or 'You have to see that.' 'Why?' Because of this or that,

or because.... You are pushed towards films you might not go see on your own, alone. I like to travel that way as well: without a guide, but listening to what people tell me on the way. Every place I visit is coupled with those encounters, adding greater depth to what I then see.

There is something else as well. For a city, an urban fabric, cinema is incredibly important. In Ostend, I hear an awful lot of people talking about their memories of Cinema Rialto. About how they got to know their partners there, in the back row inside the cinema, as so often happened. There are so many stories making the rounds about that place. They are all things that were really important to people. Getting to know your life partner in the cinema, even if that cinema no longer exists, means that that place will always hold a very important place in people's memories. I find that beautiful: the cinema as a ghost of the past.

Cinema has shaped me as a person. Cinema can shock me, can show me the very opposite of what I think. I can talk with someone about a film and realize that it is possible to see a film in a totally different way. That is a fabulous learning experience. So it is true: cinema is much more than just a place.

*What is so beautiful about Daney, when he tells about his mother and how they each in turn chose either a romantic film (his mother) or a swashbuckler film (himself), then the conversation was often also about his father. He is the huge absence in the story, the elephant in the room, because he too was inextricably bound to the cinema: he was a voice actor. It makes me think of something like phantom pain, as does talking about people going to a cinema that has long since disappeared.*

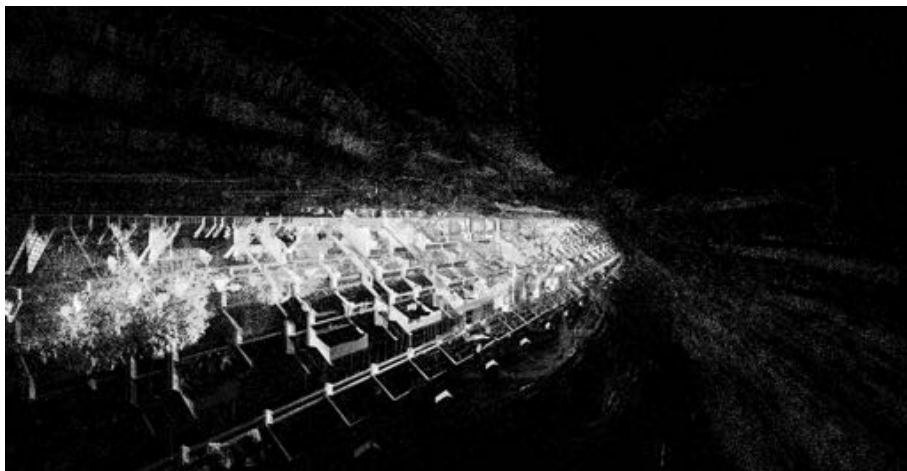
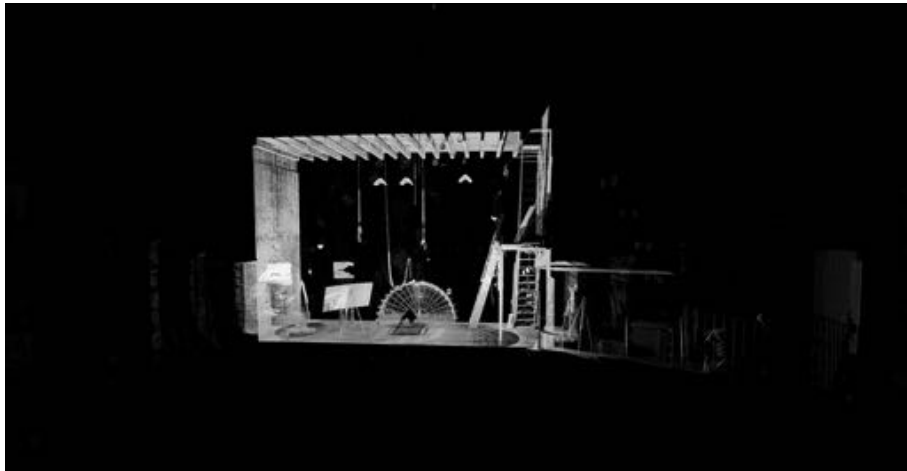
Phantom pain was my central idea when I was working on *T h i n g* (2013). But perhaps you wanted to ask something else.

*Yes, if I remember correctly, you dedicated *T h i n g* to your father.*

That's true – or actually, the book, not the film.

*Which made me think about Daney's father.*

I will first talk about something concrete, then something personal. The starting point for my fascination with phantom pain was a conversation



I had with architect Paul Robbrecht and Professor Dirk De Meyer, about never-completed buildings, such as those designed by Boullée, Terragni's *Danteum*, the architecture of the Futurists, Kenzo Tange's master plan for Skopje, and so on. These were all suggestions for possible buildings, which can be compared to the virtual places in my videos. When I was doing the research for *Thing*, I visited an incredible number of places – in Rome, Florence, Berlin. All of that was in connection with a kind of phantom pain: lost places, lost buildings in Berlin, the continuation of the past in urban patterns, and in the form of old and new buildings in Rome and Florence. These are all things that suggest a sort of parallel, imaginary city, and that inspires me enormously.

All in all, I was in Rome for nearly two months. I had been given a list of places to visit by Dirk De Meyer, who teaches architectural history at the University of Ghent. Rome is history. The city is like a book that you can read, and every location is a full chapter. Take the San Clemente Basilica, for example, where you enter a door and find yourself in a 12th-century church. You walk down a stairway, and there you find the ruins of a secret church from the first century. Take some more stairs down and you find yourself in a pagan temple. You literally take that stairway down into history. It gives me the chills even now as I tell it. That was a very special experience. Or the Roman Forum: I sat there in among the ruins, with a guide and some books, and tried to evoke the life of the past, and discover what suggestions you needed in order to do that. I asked the guide to help me envision what had gone on in this place. That was also a very strange, impressive experience.

In Berlin, you have just the opposite. A whole lot that has not survived, obviously because the city was bombed to bits, and you sometimes look at a building that has nothing at all to do with the sign that hangs on the façade, which tells you, for example, that there had once been a Jewish synagogue at that spot. I find thought exercises like that extremely compelling. Oradour-sur-Glane also made a very strong impression on me. It was completely burned down by the Germans in World War II. Almost all of its inhabitants – women, children and men – were locked up in a church and burned alive. It is an improbable place, completely empty but intensely laden. You enter through the town gates and find only a few ruins. At each destroyed house is a sign: 'Here lived Mr. and Mrs. X, with their two children, shoemaker', and so on. You still see a sewing machine lying there in the rubble. Everything has apparently been left just as it was. All those things that you see or read make you hear all kinds of things. They suggest

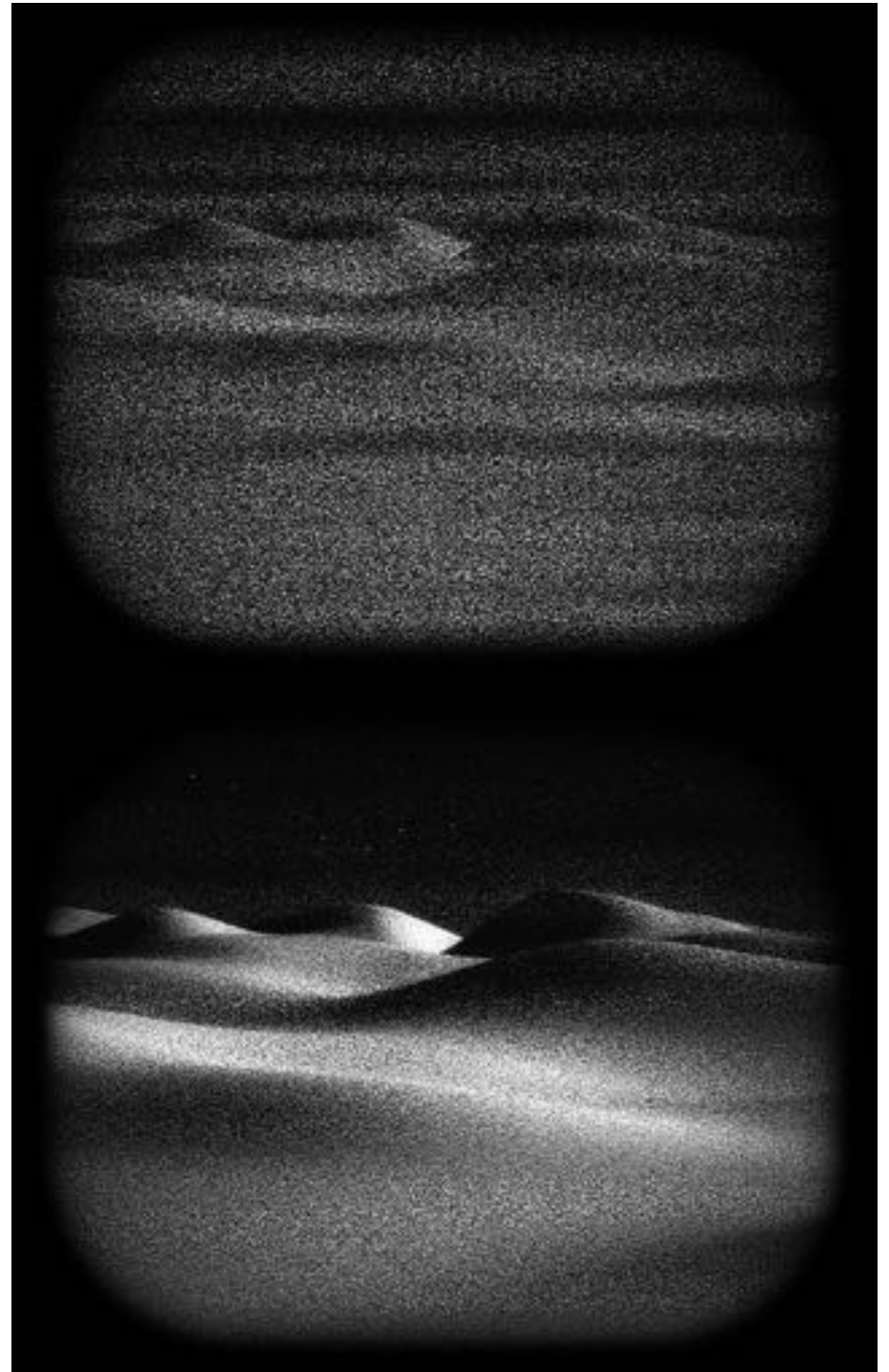
a soundtrack: you hear the horrors, you hear the crying. That visit left a huge impression on me: how little information a place has to give in order to create a film in your head. How the abstract becomes concrete.

I have also spoken a lot with Christian Hajer, an urban planner in Berlin, who was the first to introduce me to the idea that a city can have phantom pains. It had not occurred to me before that. 'Imagine', he said, 'you live in Berlin, your neighbourhood has been bombed, and you have survived. The next day, you see all the rubble in the streets in front of your house. The baker is still there where he had always been. In principle, you could walk through the ruins of other buildings to get to the baker's – it would be much shorter – but you do not do that. You follow the familiar trajectory, the way it is still in your mind.' I found that powerful. All those stories, encounters and experiences ultimately helped me make T h i n g, both the text and the images.

Where the more personal factor is concerned, there's my father. Gosh – I always tell it differently, depending on the person I am talking to – usually very carefully. My father is schizophrenic. He often loses himself in his own imagination. Aside from the fact that he is schizophrenic, or maybe because he is schizophrenic, he is also very spiritually inclined. He is very interested in everything that is esoteric, in the ephemeral. His world view, his reality, is always on shifting sands – constantly. That is linked to his imagination, to his psychoses, his delusions, his longing for a connection between higher things and the reality around him. He remains, we could say, in the in-between zone between what reality is and everything I have just been talking about. So it is not such a stretch to see why I dedicated T h i n g, the story of an imaginary architect who talks about his imaginary city, to my father. My father is a kind of architect of his thoughts. You could call that delusional, or you could call it power of imagination: they are almost synonymous, although the words carry different weight. This is why I am sometimes selective about how I tell this. I sometimes say that he is a poet, which he is, too.

*Is he also the person with whom you correspond in O o p s W r o n g P l a n e t (2009)?*

No, that is an autistic man who refers to himself as Landship. The invitation to make O o p s W r o n g P l a n e t was from someone who understood that I might be open to an investigation into autism. At the time, I think I was ready to speak to that part of myself: my experience both as



a child and as an adult with the spiritual world of parents, which diverges from what is generally considered normal. In *Thing*, I went on to explore that further, connecting it to my experiences in Oradour-sur-Glane, Rome, Florence and Berlin.

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As a basis for this conversation, you proposed four films, which in one way or another always form pairs. There is the digital (*Swan Song* and *Thing*) and the analogue films (*Black* and *Atlas*), the black (*Black* and *Swan Song*) and the gray (*Atlas* and *Thing*), and films for large screen (*Black* and *Thing*) and small screen (*Swan Song* and *Atlas*). Herein lie the contrasts that you play with. The digital and the analogue are also reflected in the locations where you show your work: the 'white cube' and the 'black box'. You let these things guide you – the tensions between different media and the translations between those media.

Each work is a kind of answer to the previous work. *Atlas* and *Black* form a bridge between that single 16mm film image that we explored in *Atlas*, to the 35mm in *Black* and the darkness on and around the screen. In *Swan Song* (2013), there is the single pixel, as opposed to *Thing*, with its millions of points and pixels.

The digital factor in *Swan Song*, in relation to the title, is about the swan song of cinema. It seems to be, as it were, inspired by André Bazin and Serge Daney. Bazin believed that cinema existed until it made itself redundant. Its window onto the world ultimately became so realistic that cinema was no longer necessary. For that reason, Bazin was actually striving towards the end of cinema. With Daney as well, this played an ever bigger role. Just before his death in 1992, together with Raymond Bellour and others, Daney started a new film magazine: *Trafic*. After Daney died, we drove to Paris with a few other cinephiles to talk with Bellour and the other *Trafic* editors. We had set out expecting a conversation about the end of the cinema, the end of an age, but afterwards, we all had to admit that *Trafic* was on the threshold of a new beginning.

Those were the days, weren't they? All that was relevant when I was studying at the film school.

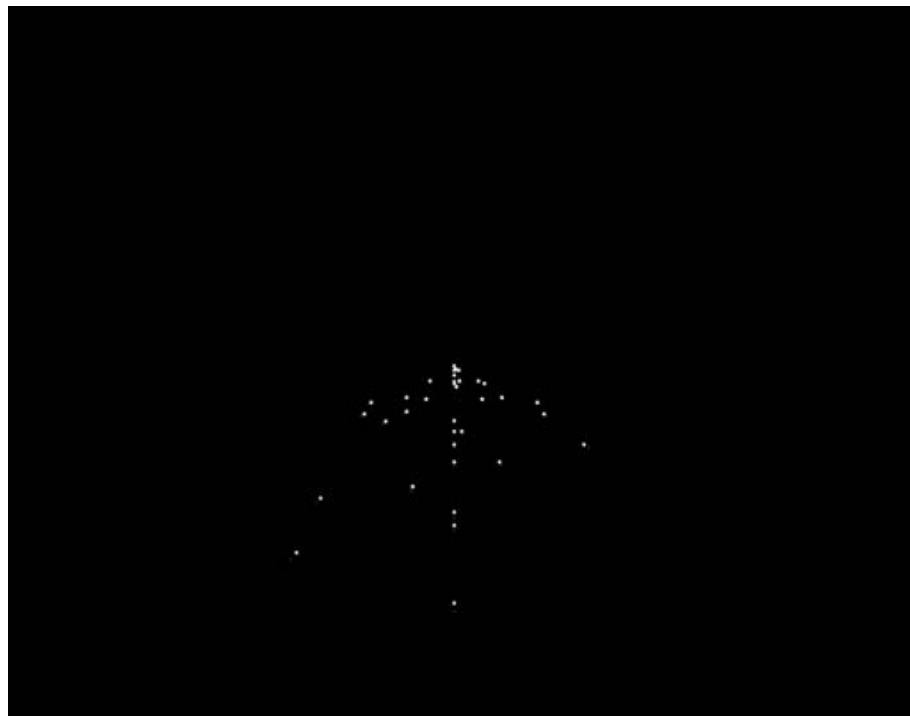
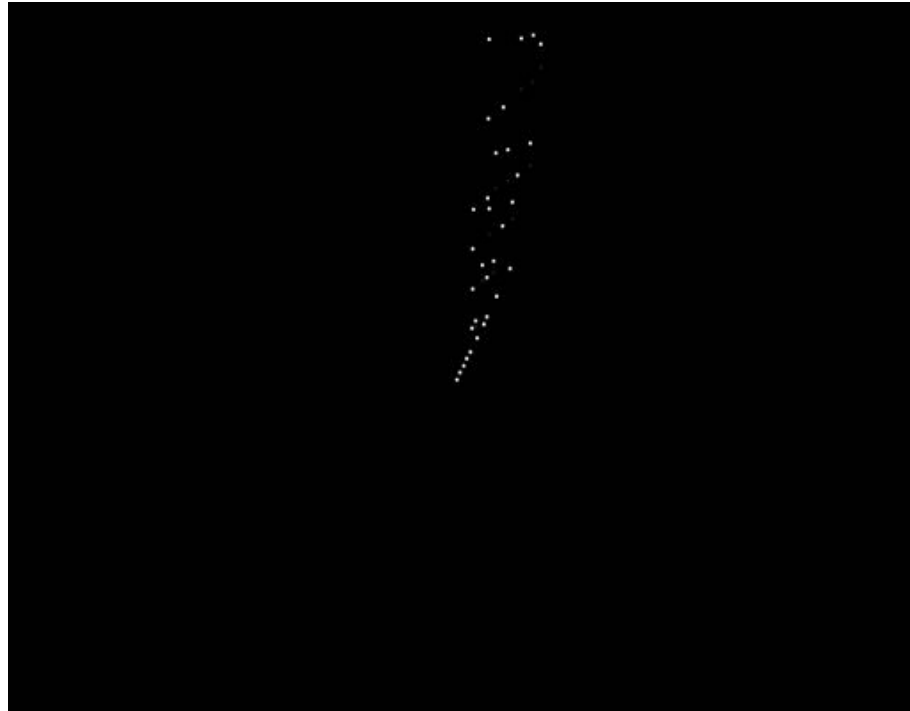
Yes. In the meantime, that magazine and the whole cinephile culture that is associated with it is still with us. Or, take such initiatives as *Sabzian.be*: even today, they are still reinventing cinephilia, and political cinema. All those things that we were concerned about in the 1980s are still urgently in need of an update. In this context, that idea of a swan song for cinema takes on an ironic twist, I think, something that will always keep coming back in one form or another. In the case of your *Swan Song*, it has to do with the fact that the film is really very digital, that it is actually about pixels, that you use the format of the video clip. That is very different in *Thing*, where you resolutely decided on a large screen and a true cinema experience. With *Swan Song*, of course, I also have to think of *Pixelspleen*, which came before it.

Of course, *Swan Song* is an answer, or a sequel, to *Pixelspleen* (2007). Both were collaborations with Jerry Galle. In *Swan Song*, we went a step further than in *Pixelspleen*, by investigating how a single pixel could be an image on its own.



In *Pixelspleen*, you still have two pixels that attract and reject each other.

Yes. For *Swan Song*, we asked ourselves a question worthy of a pataphysics congress: what song does a pixel sing before it fades? Perhaps it was an act of love that we wanted to render into an image. The underlying idea that motivated us to make *Swan Song* was the single pixel that separated itself from a grid, a system. So that it could dance. To be free.



So that just once, it could simply be an image in its own right. Even if that meant death. The three minutes of fame that this single pixel receives in *Swan Song* is nothing more than an abstract translation of the theatre of the absurd that life is. This stage that we set up for it is a big black space with no edges: a good setting for a sentimental song. All of that is connected to the idea of a swan song. A title like that immediately activates a metaphor in people, a projection that can animate something as abstract as a single pixel. It is very simple. For me, it also touches on my endless fascination with the extremely small and the extremely large, and that keeps coming back.

*The way you describe it, it almost sounds like a film by Andy Warhol.*

How?

*His 'fifteen minutes of fame' that you organized into three minutes was about television, about the small and the large: everyone deserves his or her fifteen minutes of fame. The way you speak about a pixel sounds like Warhol speaking about his characters, or his co-workers at The Factory: a pixel as a co-worker.*



'The Voice' for a single pixel (laughs). In a certain sense, it has something political about it: supporting something that is too quickly forgotten. It relates to the images I made for B'Rock Orchestra's *Tears of Melancholy* (2013). I filmed portraits of the musicians in the ensemble. That was all about looking extremely closely and intimately at an individual who was there to form part of a larger whole. I filmed each of them listening to music. When the images are projected during a concert, it looks like they are listening to themselves. I have an extraordinary respect for

musicians. I made S w a n S o n g around the same time, so perhaps that had some influence: letting the working elements of the image – which is what a pixel is – shine. You don't have to look much farther than that.

*Part of your work is also searching, for the pixel as a projection. T h i n g is a scanned film. You used a scanner that didn't really work the way a scanner should work.*

Yes, or that is to say that we totally perverted the parameters, in order to create a kind of visual noise, and not a perfect image.

*With the result of even more pixels, even more co-workers...*

Power to the people.

*...who make up more and more of your image, and that is an image that falls apart even more, and needs yet more work.*

I began building T h i n g in 3D programmes, together with a colleague, but that was not what it really needed to be. It was not something that should evolve out of nothing: it had to be something that was already there, in order to be reduced. Because, what it is about is someone's stream of thoughts, someone's imaginary world. So it had to be images in the process of becoming something. As if the voice makes those images exist as it speaks. In this sense, it could also not be something finished, but had to come on like a flood, a stream, something organic. Sometimes we combined two shots in a single image, so that a given point in one runs into the other. I found that very compelling. That was exactly what I was looking for in the quality of the image in T h i n g. It does look like you are pouring an image through a sieve. It creates a fragility: everything is constantly becoming something, but also constantly about to fall apart.

*It has a lot to do with decay. The idea of a ruin is very present.*

As we've said, T h i n g has a lot to do with history. In Florence, I wanted to see where perspective started out. I went to see Masaccio's *Holy Trinity*: one of the first frescoes painted with perspective. What I found so beautiful in Masaccio is how you can see the perspective lines. It looks as if Jesus is not hanging on his cross, but on the perspective lines. It was Brunelleschi,

the architect, who built many fantastic buildings in Florence, who showed Masaccio how perspective worked. They drew those perspective lines together, and then Masaccio painted in his picture. The result – that image – strikes me as very fragile, while it is a true monument in the history of art. There is also another perspective drawing, *Funerary Monument to Sir John Hawkwood* by Paolo Ucello, of a rider on horse that is standing on a pedestal. The rider and the horse are two-dimensional, a totally pre-perspective painting, but the pedestal is an attempt at 3D. It is a bit unsuccessful and naïve, and therefore so beautiful. All that was very inspiring for T h i n g.

*It concerns the construction of the image and the fragility that comes along with that. You actually achieve that by building in a handicap with the scanner.*

It is naturally also linked to the idea of evoking images, to my experiments in imagination in Oradour-sur-Glane, Berlin, the Roman forum.... There, you keep having to deal with an image that is not there. You see images in your inner eye, in your imagination. But it is not there. With just a chunk of stone, you can think up a whole castle, simply with a couple of small suggestions. These are also very fragile images. I do not necessarily mean that in a negative sense, but they are without weight, they are not grounded. I was interested in juxtaposing that visual language with the text of an architect, an evocation that is essentially about gravity, matter and structurally supporting walls.

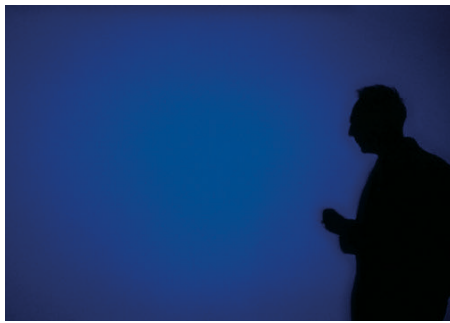
*You sometimes speak about 'listening' to images, referring to experimental filmmakers from the 1920s and 1930s who made films as music. Here, that idea of history keeps coming back, in the film technique as well as in the architecture.*

One of the first really powerful film experiences I ever had was with Len Lye's *Free Radicals*. When I saw it, I thought, 'At last! This is my language.' I still remember where I first saw it. It was in Paris, at Pip Chodorov's, in the mid-1990s. For his work for Lightcone and Re:Voir, he had a film copy, and he installed the 16mm projector



in his home. That was already wonderful. I was such a young thing, totally captivated by film. He started up the projector and projected the film onto the wall of his apartment. It was a good thing that I was sitting on the floor, or I'd have fallen out of my chair (laughs). It was so fantastic, so physical. Purely because of the writing on that reel. A dancing line. And then, of course, there was that contrast between black and white: so explosive, such a bomb of energy. I think everything in between black and white is fantastic – but you know that only too well.

*In order to understand that film, it is also really important to see it on its real medium, on 16mm film.*



Absolutely. Around the same time, I had a similar experience with Derek Jarman's *Blue*. That film also made a real impression on me. At the time, Bavo Defurne and I had a cinema club in De Parade, a small theatre in Brussels. When *Blue* was released, we decided to organize a retrospective of films by Jarman. I was on duty as projectionist. It's also a great experience to have the films of your heroes rolling through your hands. I admit that I occasionally stroked that reel as it wound through the projector, in the intimacy of the projection box (laughs). And then you look at the screen that what you've been stroking. Eyes and hands. Again, it's all very physical.

*Not so long ago, I showed Blue on video for a group of students.*

And?

*The impact is always very powerful. That is really strange. It has a lot to do with totally immersing yourself in that colour, as well as with the duration. Total immersion for 90 minutes. Even in such an unfriendly and inappropriate space as a classroom.*

*Blue* is an impressive film. It is concentrated essence. It is life and death, really simple: you cannot get more essential than that. The first time I saw *Blue* again was two years ago, when a student asked me to show it at KASK-

cinema. I hadn't seen it since 1994. I did have the CD at home, together with a blue postcard. The BBC had broadcast *Blue* on the radio and printed a postcard to look at while you were listening. I thought that was a fantastic idea: how a film can gently transform, can exist, in a different medium.

*Jarman talked about showing the film on television.*

On television?

*Yes, that he could imagine that at a certain point, the film is broadcast on television, and how he could then walk down the street and see all those blue sitting rooms all around him. He tells it as a kind of memory that still has to happen – totally imaginary.*

It's a great image – that blue light spreading out through the city from the intimacy of individual sitting rooms. Very subdued. I spoke above somewhat dogmatically about analogue film, but actually I have enormous love for the kind of generosity that Jarman had in allowing and encouraging all those different forms. Still, I continue to find that experience of the film, that colour, with those scratches in the reel, important. It is all about time, about physicality and transience, and that adds extra layers to the way you experience *Blue*.

*Absolutely, it is a different experience. But it works in different ways. For Monokino, you went so far as to 'show' Blue with no image, with just the sound, on the beach at Ostend. That also makes me think of Cinematek, when you said at the presentation of Moana that it was on 2K. That is totally different than the original medium: a restored film, along with that sound. It is beautiful, and the sound works really well, but you have a totally different film.*

Experiencing *Blue* like that on the beach was enormously affecting. We set up loudspeakers along the beach and people sat in beach chairs or in the sand, and looked up at the clouds, at the sun setting in the sea. And that while the soundtrack associated the colour blue with eternity, with life and death. I also



did not think it bad when, at a certain moment, 'I'm a cocksucking lesbian boy' blared out of the speakers. In my imagination, that sentence went dancing through the streets of Ostend, West Flanders and the whole country. But that's beside the point. It is indeed interesting how a film like *Blue* can work in different ways and still continue to have such a compelling effect on the feelings of the audience. A lot depends on the power of the soundtrack and the link with the colour blue: you can anchor the eyes of the audience on different kinds of eternal blue as they listen: looking in order to listen better.

*Moana*, our first presentation at Monokino, is a different case. After I showed it at Cinematek, I had a serious discussion with someone who felt that it was wrong to show the film on digital media. In the case of *Moana*, there are two films. You have *Moana*, Robert Flaherty's silent film from 1926, and I do indeed believe that for that, it would be best to use the film copy in the Cinematek collection. But there is also a version with sound, with a 1980 soundtrack, and that is a completely different story. What I find so beautiful about that version is that the soundtrack was made by a daughter for a film by her father. Not only is it a daughter's gesture towards her father, but it is also a gesture towards her own childhood memories. That really touched me. It is moreover a gesture from one time period to another. In this sense, it does not bother me that it is a digital copy, which is very clean, with no scratches, because it is also about something entirely different. It is much more about Monica Flaherty than about Robert Flaherty's *Moana*, just as Monokino is not the same as Henri Storck's Ciné-club d'Ostende back in 1928, but instead forms a kind of wormhole – a connection through time – between Monokino and the Ciné-club d'Ostende. They are two completely different things, two completely different times, but there is something between them that touches them both. And that is also why we ultimately chose that film, because of those fields of tension.

*By juxtaposing the two films, Moana and My Crazy Life, you immediately get a very different historical experience.*

They are two worlds that touch one another through a wormhole. They each say something completely different, from a different epoch and spirit of their age, about the same theme.

*After the first film, or after the second, you look differently. That is an essential part of your programming: it changes the experience of*

*the cinema, which is a collective experience, where things are shared between the curator and the audience.*

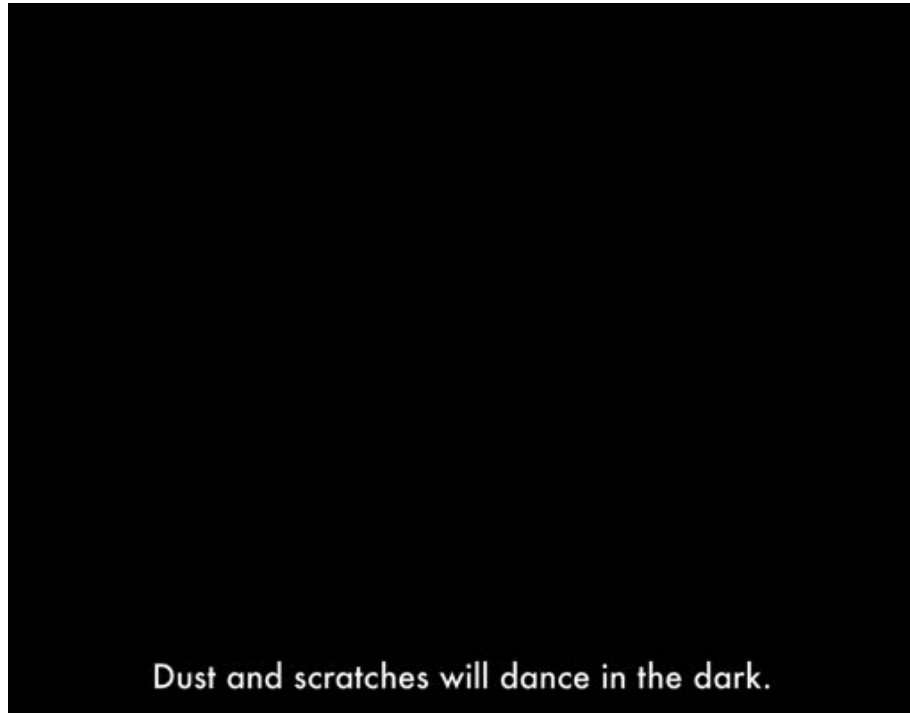
Gorin's *My Crazy Life* seems to unmask the film by Flaherty. There is a continuous spark between the two. Making and sharing reflections of that kind is not what my work does, as such, but it is something I find important in the context of Monokino. We initially selected *Moana* because it was the film that kindled Henri Storck's love of film. It was also one of the films that motivated him to establish a club of cinema lovers, the famous Ciné-club d'Ostende. Henri Storck was a pioneer of Belgian cinema, so the reference matters. We wanted to point out the importance of Ostend during those early days of Belgian film, and put it into sharp contrast with the situation today, namely that the only thing there is space for in Ostend today is a multiplex cinema. Monokino is a thorn in their side. In the 1990s, Eric de Kuyper tried to set up a film hall, but ran into serious headwind. It is strange how maintaining norms has such a forceful grip. I see it as our task to stand firm, to bring cinema into the 21st century and illuminate the adventurous side of film. The enthusiasm and the openness of the public is in any case totally heart-warming.

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*The four films that we are concentrating on here are connected to your research project into the image as landscape.*

As I work mainly with the digital creation of images and visual landscapes, I have paid close attention to the basic elements from which an image or a virtual space is built. In my work, the pixel, the dot, light and darkness – black and white – are brought to the fore as essential components of animated images and volumes. As a result, such components often become the very subject of a work.

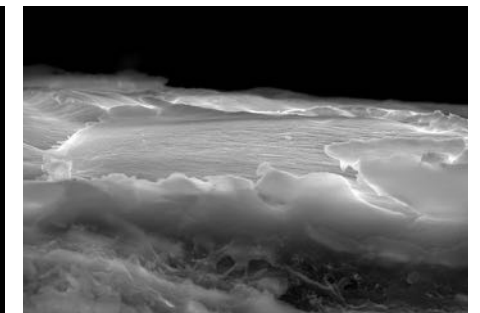
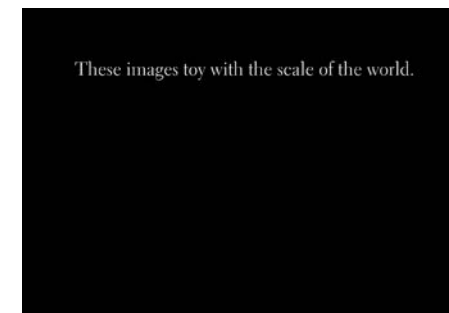
B l a c k, the 35mm film, is a tribute to black, or rather to darkness. It is not so much about the colour, but about its event: the instant of darkness as it occurs in cinema spaces, the instant in which the screen and the room fold into one indistinct and limitless space; the instant in which the screen, the room and the bodies share a sudden invisibility, while perception and feeling remain.



Literally in the dark – in the black – the spectators read in silence. The film's preference for text over voice dramatizes darkness and proposes a mode of concentration that is at once personal and collective. It is both isolated and united by and in the dark.

In S w a n S o n g, I draw on what might be called the smallest unit that makes up the digital image. In A t l a s, I zoom in on a single frame from a 16mm film. In a certain sense, both are the other end of the spectrum from B l a c k: from the great darkness to the tiny pixel or the single frame. You could easily watch S w a n S o n g on television, for example. I would in any case prefer to see A t l a s projected on a small screen, because it is about a different, more intimate kind of watching.

The trajectory of my PhD research has helped – if that is the right word – in the dialogue between these different works. For the first time, I imposed, or better said, granted myself a much more long-term thinking. That means that you can work in a completely different way, and I really like it. Not that you can see all those steps along that trajectory in advance. But you do set out a perspective of the landscape, and that is the area in which you will be operating. Each work is a kind of answer or a reaction to the previous work, in the way that A t l a s is absolutely a reaction to B l a c k, but perhaps also and especially to T h i n g, in the sense of the broadness and largeness of T h i n g, and then there is the complete opposite: the small, the very smallest in A t l a s. But okay, with me, small never remains small.



*No. It is once again a staggering landscape.*

Do you know the Virginia Woolf story, *The Mark on the Wall*? It is so wonderful and very important for A t l a s. She describes sitting at her writing table and noticing a spot on the wall at the other end of the room. And she thinks, 'I could stand up now and go look to see what it is. But I'm going to stay seated instead and try to think what it could be.' Her text goes on about

all the possible things that she thinks it might be. All because of a tiny, insignificant little spot on the wall. I enjoy that so much – a meeting between the small and the large, something as insignificant as a spot that can set an entire machinery of imagination going. It produced a phenomenal text. The way Virginia Woolf writes is also very important for me. I am perhaps even more interested in the spirit of the age and how that influenced her writing than in the content or emotional weight of what she writes. It was in her day, for example, that the Hubble telescope was invented. That notion of technology and the new perspective it brings is a palpable presence in her writing. She also wrote another story, *Solid Objects*, in which she looks out her window and observes ‘a small black dot’ moving on the beach. As she writes, it is as if she were using binoculars and beginning to zoom in. It becomes sharper and sharper. Until it looks like something on four legs, and it ultimately turns out to be two people. Her translation of the way she watches into her writing is super-interesting.

*One of the most interesting film experiences I ever shared with you was the presentation of B l a c k at the Cinematek. It began with an interview with a blind woman, in the dark. Then the film was projected. We all watched in a completely different way, primarily because there was nothing to experience, except just looking. There was no sound. But the cinema experience becomes unbelievably more intense because of that introduction with the interview. We go far deeper into the film than we would have otherwise. It really spurs you on to have that cinema experience.*

I am intrigued by that sluice between the cinema and the outside world. Let’s call it the sluice between the minute you walk into the cinema, purchase your ticket, and then sit down and the lights go out. You need time, before you can put yourself in that world up there on the screen. You need to make a passage; you need an overture. That is true in music, and I think it is true in film as well. What I wanted to do with that conversation with the blind woman was to wash ourselves clean, especially our eyes, as if in a ritual. After that, you could watch the film with new eyes – be aware of what you were looking at. The programme that I put together for Cinematek was called *Seeing in the Dark*. It ran for a month, and that conversation took place on the first night. We are all so happy to have all of our senses, but if you point out the lack of one of them, in this case of sight, then you set out a different perspective. That is also why I sometimes talk about ‘listening to images’, for example, or

‘making music with images’. It may sound like just a clever quip, but it is always about pushing against the limitations of seeing. For example, in A t l a s, or T h i n g, I did not work with a camera, but I can still show something.

*You haven’t made a single film with a camera.*

Barely, indeed. The fact that we can look without a viewfinder fascinates me. I did the same with LIDAR technology for T h i n g.<sup>3</sup> The scanner is like a blind body, without eyes, without a viewfinder, but it still observes everything. You cannot see what it is doing, because you cannot see the laser beam as it is reading. It is as if it is looking with its eyes closed, being incredibly empathic, or something like that. It makes a kind of impression, a physical impression, from its environment. It was the same with the electron microscope with A t l a s. The microscope looks at what we cannot see with our naked eye. I find all that magical, just like the ritual of going to the cinema. As a child, I promised myself: ‘Anouk, you will never lose your sense of wonder. You must work very hard not to lose that.’

*That sounds very grown-up.*

Yes, but I think I also made a shift in the other direction. I am younger now than I used to be. In any case, I see it as my joyful task to look at the things and the people around me with open eyes, and not through too many filters or curtains. As well as to seek out different ways of looking, allowing different perspectives.

*And frequently by way of some sort of handicap: For S w a n S o n g, what can I do with a single pixel? With T h i n g, it was what can I do with a scanner that is programmed differently, and with B l a c k, what can I do with no image at all?*

Well, in principle, if you want to arrive at a kind of essence, then you do not need a lot of space.

*Where limited terrain is concerned, A t l a s is of course the pinnacle. How far can one go in a single 16 mm frame?*

I drove the University of Antwerp scientist I was working with crazy. I was fascinated by the new perspective that the electron microscope offered

me, and I saw it really quickly: here, you had completely lost all foothold. As soon as you have zoomed in to 100 times magnitude, you have no more references. Everything has disappeared. You have no idea where you are. You do not know who or what you are looking at. I was able to lose myself in the poetry and the aesthetics of those images, in that landscape, but it drove that man crazy. He said, 'You have to give me an element that I can look for. I need something to get a purchase on.' So I said, 'OK, let's look for silver.' Because there is silver in the emulsion. So then we were able to continue the journey: no gold rush, perhaps, but definitely a silver rush...

*That says a lot about how difficult it is to look without any guidelines, to look with no perspective and no reference point. In a film such as B l a c k, there is the text and that is where it ends. That's the moment when you wonder how that blind woman experienced that film. We can read a text, but she can only listen to the reactions in the room, wait for the moment when the room begins to work. Did you ask her what that experience was like for her?*

That evening was not meant for her: it was for you, the audience. I needed her in order to perform a ritual. She understood that, but for her it was looking without direction or guidance. Most of the films were silent, so there was nothing for her to hold onto. I expect she was really bored.

*You have no ambition to make a film for the blind?*

I do. It is something I have been thinking about for a long time. There is the fantastic story of Joao Monteiro and the film that he made at the end of his life, *Branca de Neve*. He writes a scenario, and starts the production on a long feature film. He has a cameraman. The cameraman has an assistant, lights are rented, sets are built, actors rehearse and so on. Day one on the set: the actors are ready in front of the camera, the lights are in place, the camera rolls, and just before he says 'Action!', he takes his jacket and throws it over the camera lens. Everyone was perplexed, but he shot the entire film that way. Fifty shades of black. Sometimes a different jacket, that totally covered the lens or maybe didn't. Fantastic. He was booed out of the room during the premiere. In addition to being a filmmaker, he was also a poet, but perhaps most of all, a rebel. But that film did prove to be a source of inspiration and a reference point. I think it was his last film.

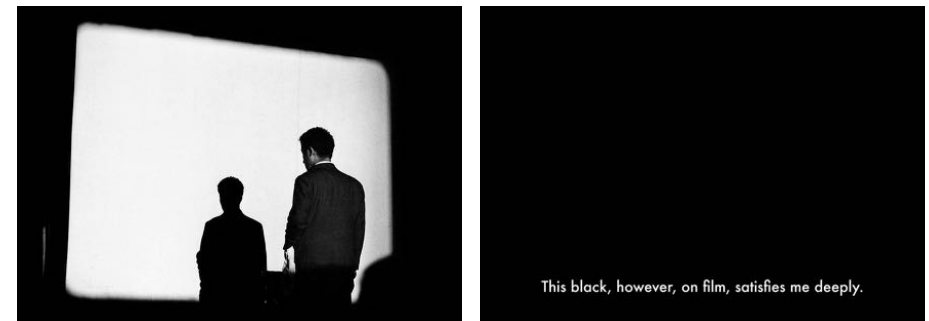
*I always have to think of Jean-Luc Godard when I think of cinema for the blind. Godard, who distributes films on CD, including Histoire(s) du cinéma and Nouvelle Vague. That last CD also includes a review by a blind person.*

Ah, I didn't know that.

*I also noticed that B l a c k is 4 min. and 33 seconds long. If we are talking about the dematerialization of the film image, that refers to John Cage's composition, '4'33"', which makes music without music, the same way you make images without an image...*

I was coincidentally already in the general neighbourhood of that length, but then of course you give it a push in the right direction. It was simply too good to miss. When I experienced that work by Cage for the first time, with the environment being the music, the people around you and yourself as well, I found it such a beautiful sensation. I think it also has something to do with empathy, with the fact that you are listening to what is around you, to the others and to yourself.

*There is in any case the Fluxus reference in B l a c k, by way of Nam June Paik's Zen for Film, which is unexposed film with the projector as a co-creator, putting scratches on the film and adding character to the images. For Paik, it was all about the material character of the image. Think of the way he used magnets to work with the electrons in the image.*



Absolutely. For Paik, Buddhism was also very important. That went deeper than the questioning of the medium or the exploration of a new medium. It is also about something else, about connecting your medium to something that is higher or farther.

*A broader consciousness.*

Yes, and that sensitivity is no stranger to me. While you are exploring your medium and interrogating your medium, and reflecting on it, at the same time, you open a portal to something different. You sometimes act as if you are talking about your medium, but you're actually talking about something else. Take, for example, *Pixelspleen* or *Swan Song*: you behave as if it is about a reflection on a medium, but it's actually about really essential things that concern something more than that medium.

*Emotions?*

About the spiritual, about life, death, about essential things. But it's not as if everyone needs to pick up on that. You don't need to feel that. Although people sometimes do feel it really strongly. Someone who had visited *Echo* (2008) my installation at the Dhondt-Daenens Museum, kept coming back in order to meditate there. Someone else came up to me after seeing *Oh* (2010) and thanked me for the spiritual journey. Recently, in a completely full theatre, someone asked me if I knew what happened to our consciousness after we died.

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*I would like to hear more about Atlas. Is that film really intended as an installation?*

Yes. I think it comes into its own better that way.

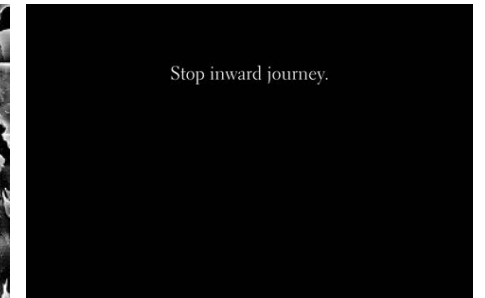
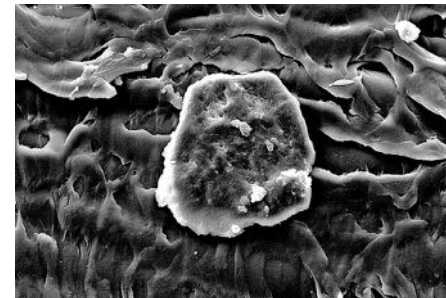
*And in a loop?*

Yes.

*And there is only one copy of it?*

No, with Atlas, it was not necessary to go about it the same way as with Black. There are copies. But I find the loop important. The film begins with the instruction: 'Start outward journey', and at the end, you see: 'Stop

inward journey. Go off-screen and look again.' Then it starts again. That is the way I intended it. With the exception of Pixelspleen, it is the only work that has that loop in its DNA. It was not self-evident to do it that way – because I so love building the beginning and the ending of a film – but sometimes the work or the context in which the work has to find itself requires you to think and work in a different way. However much I adore cinema, I sometimes need to escape from it.



*Atlas also says something about how beguiling cinema can be, through the exploration of that 16mm image and the way you lose yourself in it. But then, stepping in and out of the film is already an immediate part of the film. It again makes me think of Daney, when the lights in the cinema went on and the spell was broken, and those annoying actors showed up.*

Yes, and that always brings tears to my eyes. I always have to cry at the end of a film.

*It is something that comes back in the different films: that spellbinding character, together with the breaking the spell, as if the bewitching would not really work on its own.*

When I am editing, and that is often together with other people, I frequently use the metaphor of the old magician's trick with the tablecloth. I would really like to be able to yank off that tablecloth and have everything stay exactly in its place. People often laugh at my saying that, because they don't immediately understand what I mean. But cinema is the art of magic. It is about something very aggressive happening, something very radical. Something is undermined, but it is magical. It is the same, but it is different. I like a slow beginning – which explains the idea of a sluice – but I especially love fast endings. It is the same as death always being abrupt or inappropriate, and never knowing when it is going to strike. Except, of course, when you decide on it. You build up a kind of life on the screen, a different world, and then you suddenly pull out the plug, like *Alice in Wonderland* or *the Wizard of Oz*. The way they come back into the world is abrupt. It is almost always that way with stories of that kind. You are usually able to be gently transported to that other world, but the return is usually abrupt.

*A shock effect.*

Yes. Nothing excites me more than to try to condense a world of thought into the density of a neutron star. It's a potent activity, an attempt to bring the absolutely miniscule and the utterly massive together. To bring the 'inside' world together with the 'outside' world, into an energetic, small thing. I really like the idea of standing on a single stepping stone, being able to set out in any direction. I take a limited territory – a thought, a feeling, a concept, a pixel, a frame – and then set out on an adventure. But I need a fixed and precise vantage point.

*That is the definition of cinema. You sit in your chair and let the world come to you. Cinema as an unmoved mover.*

As Gaston Bachelard said: 'As soon as we become motionless, we are elsewhere.' He also said, 'The exterior spectacle helps intimate grandeur unfold.'<sup>4</sup> I have always associated those statements with the adventure of cinema.

*The handicaps in your work are also a way of getting to know yourself, understanding your limits. That is also the purpose of an atlas. There are many artists who create atlases: Richter, Broodthaers, etc.*

I devoured Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas*. He talks about an image as something that receives and emits energy, and compares it to a body: '... comme le corps n'est pas seulement une masse en mouvement, il est l'apparence extérieure d'une animation intérieure – l'émotion.'<sup>5</sup> Anyway, that book is just full of notations and comments, and was part of the ground work for A t l a s.

*If I say that in much of your work, you seek out your own limitations and consequently also position yourself somewhere, then it seems obvious that you would create an atlas. Because that is also a way of positioning yourself, of saying, 'Look, this is my place in the world.' That is also what Richter does, what Broodthaers does, what Warburg does – position themselves in a collection of images.*

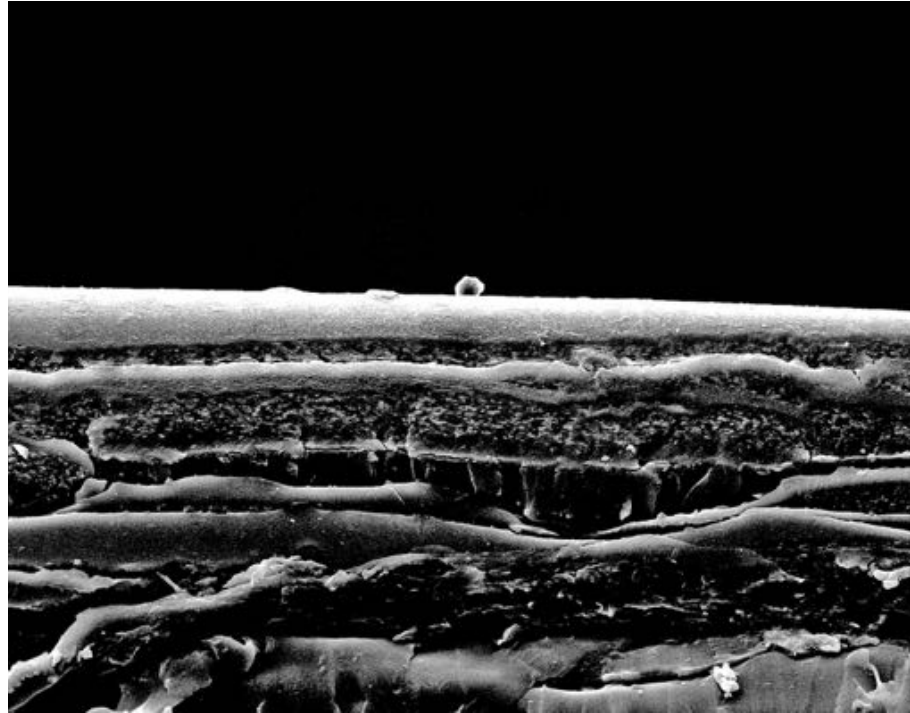
It is also a creation of order in chaos, in nothing, in everything. But in T h i n g, I say that once the order has been found, everything can be turned around. But you first have to have that order. For me, making films has a lot to do with that.

*And watching films?*

I had not looked at it that way. I look at that order more when I am making films than when I am watching films. Actually, quite the opposite: if I am watching a film, my order can be totally disrupted. Films can present, or show me something, or offer me something that is the opposite of what I think. Or it can undermine or betray something in me.

*You discover something totally different than what you started with.*

Regularly. A t l a s, for example, was like that. I found it one of the most difficult films I have ever made. A t l a s looks inside. I am used to looking from the inside to the outside, so I found it very oppressive. That electron microscope shows the innermost inside of something. You cannot get any more closed than that. You seek a way out in the images, but you are constantly banging your head against a wall: you continue to stare at a surface,



Let us look at the world through the wrong  
end of the telescope, as well as the right one,  
see things inside out and backwards.

and I so love a view, a vista. The text tries to counter that: 'Let us look at the world through the wrong end of the telescope as well as the right one'. In that text, I tried to create a kind of broadness, but it was constantly clashing. I do not know if you experience that if you are not aware that they are electron microscope images, but for me, it is as if those images are vacuum packed. I had a very hard time with that.

*I always forget that I am looking at a single image, because the universe from that single image becomes so large and expands in every direction.*

Oh, that's good. I cannot shed my own experience of how it was made. A bit claustrophobic. We really went to the limits in that image, down to where you couldn't see anything more at all. Enlarged 1000 times, and we were completely lost in space. That was all you could do.

In the 1960s, Charles and Ray Eames made a film for IBM, *The Power of Ten*. That was another milestone for me. They started with an overhead shot of a couple picnicking in a field of grass, and the film keeps expanding to a power of ten, in a really long zoom, until you see where you are, in Chicago, on Lake Michigan, in the United States, and so on, until you have gone past the Milky Way. Or at least as far as you could go in the 1960s. Then the film just zooms back in, until you return back to that couple. You then continue to move in, to the hand of the sleeping man, into the hand, down to the smallest atom that could be seen in the 1960s. That film, and Len Lye's *Free Radicals*, were absolutely formative and determining factors for me.

*That says a lot about your place in the universe. It sounds like an ecological film.*

It also simply says that you are the universe.

*That you make up part of the universe, how ridiculous you are to hold on so tightly to yourself.*

That is also something that I find so fascinating about the spirit of the age in Virginia Woolf. That shift took place at that time. From the moment that you can see the universe, everything becomes relative. That happened at that time. Thanks to technology – and this perhaps explains my fascination with it – your entire being, your entire vision of yourself, of your surroundings, of

the world, of reality, totally shifts, and your entire belief system is affected and has to be adjusted. I find that fantastic.

*Georges Didi-Huberman writes about Aby Warburg and his Atlas. He very explicitly situates it after a psychosis. Warburg died in 1929. He made his Atlas in 1926, after he had just been discharged from a psychiatric clinic in Switzerland. Didi-Huberman writes that this was how Warburg put himself back together: it was making a place for yourself in the universe. All those images that he used, from that history, were not just about him. They were him. That entire Atlas is actually one big self-portrait, one that gave him a place in the universe.*

It is as if you are scattered in pieces on the ground, like a broken vase, and then you pick up all those shards and patch yourself back together again. I had that impression as I was reading his book. A broken man who rebuilds and reinvents himself.

*You can look at the film that way as well, as a kind of reconstruction of the cinema following a psychosis. That is actually something that keeps recurring in Swan Song: the swansong of cinema, the digital film, the single pixel, and now again, as you let your thoughts run free.*

I am good at that (laughs).

*You put cinema in the place of Warburg, and you look at that film as a self-portrait of the cinema after its psychosis. And that way you once again build an atlas of cinema, put the pieces back together. Do you follow me?*

Yes, I do. It registers. It's beautiful: it has something healing about it.

*But once again, there you are, with the end of cinema, which is always a presence. I cannot say that a psychosis is an ending, but it is in any case a new beginning.*

Absolutely. It shakes everything up together.

*That's actually what I learned the first time I wrote about your work. I had to make that shift with Kernwässer Wunderland*

*(2004), which doesn't present a nuclear winter, but a digital spring. That is actually the connection that we always have to make with your work: instead of seeing an end, seeing a new beginning.*

What if we were to do away with everything that we know? The world as we know it ceases to exist: we do a reset and start all over. I really like that premise. That is why I like working with 3D animation, because it departs from nothing. The starting point is always an empty space that has to be filled. There is no reality. There is nothing. It is just an empty box. You don't even see that box, because it is virtual infinity. There is a kind of database of prefabricated forms, which of course I prefer not to touch. But for the rest, it's the absurd, a Beckett-like nothingness. Not as an end point, but as an ideal place to let something come into being.

*Godard's story in the 1990s, with Histoire(s) du cinéma and Nouvelle Vague, was the death and the rebirth of cinema. In the same period he made King Lear, where he puts his film together on the editing table with safety pins. That really pushes through to the material of cinema.*

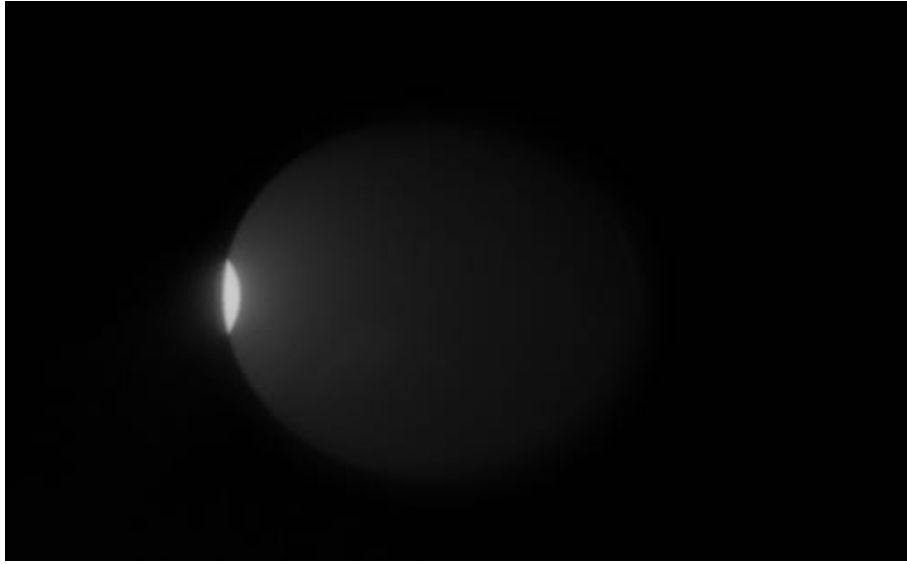
Godard is a good example. His entire body of work is an unravelling, until you can't go any farther.

*It's not about the end, but about a new beginning, as it is with you. We have to watch his works the way we watch your films.*

I recently watched Bande à part again. It seems as if the rinse is growing thinner and thinner, or as if he is always going closer to what it is all really about.

*Can you imagine that people have the same feeling watching your films? When they go to see Black and no longer see any image, or if they go to see Atlas and all they get is a single 16mm image?*

That sometimes scares me, because I think, so what now? You are suddenly down to the bone. Then I think that it hurts because there is no skin left. That's why it was so satisfying to make It (2017). Firstly because of the collaboration with somebody who thinks and works figuratively. Part of my invitation included working with Tom Callemin, in order to be challenged not to work digitally, but as analogue as possible, to stand in the world. It was a meeting of minds and worlds. Even though it was also about a blind



man who talks about how he experiences an eclipse. In response to what I learned then from the conversation and the ritual with the blind woman at Cinematek: what if we stop depending on how we look, but someone else teaches us to see in a different, new way?

*But every film is like that. It starts with a meeting.*

Always. I like those meetings – exchanges, collisions and fusions. I think that's the biggest reason why I do what I do: making contact, sharing visions.

*So in that sense, you shouldn't be surprised. Because, if you ask, where cinema is, it is here, while we are talking about it. That's where cinema is. As long as you keep moving, new encounters keep coming. A new beginning every time.*

And every time, an abrupt ending.

- 1 The conversation was held in Pieter Van Bogaert's living room, on 6 March 2018.
- 2 *Les Plages d'Agnès*, Agnès Varda (2008, 110')
- 3 LIDAR (Light Detection and Ranging, or Laser Imaging Detection and Ranging) is a technology that uses laser pulses to determine the distance to an object.
- 4 *The Poetics of Space* (La Poétique de l'Espace), Gaston Bachelard, 1958
- 5 *L'Atlas Mnémosyne*, Aby Warburg, published by L'écarquillé in 2012

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