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Lydia Debeer: The Posthuman Gaze

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The *Posthuman Gaze* is a general overview on Lydia Debeer's work. It has been published in the catalogue of *The Empty Fox Hole. HISK laureates 2016.* HISK, Gent, 2016. Translated to English by Rubén Verdú

A platform moves across the river. The viewer waits, literally. *In Languor, I merely wait* (2016). This is not a metaphor: the camera narrows its focus on the interior of a waiting room. The sun's glittering moves across the windows as the floating platform advances at a mechanical pace along the bends in the river's course.

"You see that can? Do you see it? Well, it doesn't see you!" It was on top of another boat, around 1920, that Jacques Lacan placed the words of one of his friends on a can of sardines that was blinding them with the sun's reflection that was shining off it. Decades later however, the psychoanalyst, in his seminar on the gaze, concluded that the can was indeed watching them: "It was looking at me at the level of the point of light", he said, "the point at which everything that looks at me is situated". (1)

Since the golden years of semiotic theory, movies have been seen as a great trick. To talk about the work of Lydia Debeer, it is best to follow Lacan and accept that, in relation to the visual, everything is a trap. As he himself exemplified with the glittering of the can, vision always has two sides: the subject is never sovereign in its relation to the gaze; on the contrary, it has to be watched and invoked by the Other. It cannot be constituted as a subject unless in the eye of the Other.

The Debeer's river platform is also Lacan's can: to what degree does that which we see make us? To what degree is that end of the waiting room, which does not even let us observe the surrounding landscape, a point of light, a point of view that reveals us as passengers on a barge, or, in the lack of a barge, of the visual field itself? The ambiguity of representation not only makes evident the media or the filmic device; in this case, it does it through the clear relationship that is established between the screen and the subject: the platform is setting us up as viewers.

The viewer's blind spot is also the protagonist of *The View* (2014). In this case, the work is a voyeuristic invitation to contemplate the absurdity of the human body when it is constituted as a subject of the gaze. If, traditionally, lookout points and panoramas open the conquest of the world through the image and therefore allow humans to achieve their sovereignty through vision, in this case, the command of the gaze becomes an impotent demonstration, even a fallacy. Two persons with downcast eyes are the protagonists of the comedy, strolling exhausted from one end to the other of a lookout point that is covered in fog.

The beholder's stand and body is also the centre in *Alexandra* (2016). There the subject is a woman who stares towards the horizon from Walden 7, a building located in Barcelona's outskirts, that remains as one of the final attempts of architecture to align with the social utopias of the 20th Century. The comedy is replaced here with a more elegiac tone, when Debeer's camera starts to circle around the woman, surrounding her body within such a labyrinthine architecture. A building from which a new kind of community was expected to burst forth has simply become a maze where the subject's gaze is yet again retained.

In *Offing* (2015), chance dictates the point of view of the camera, which swings hectically along the horizon line. The horizon is perhaps the greatest metaphor in Western visual culture, the fine line that allowed the construction of the visual field in perspective and therefore organized the gaze both in its spatial and temporal dimensions. The horizon was also inserted into the utopic thought of the twentieth century when it was depicted as the destiny of all peoples. In this case however, the horizon line has been pictured as being aimless, without stability, like a continuously swinging pendulum. Here the landscape, as well as the gaze itself, has become completely de-anthropomorphized; the horizon relinquishes its role of sovereign gaze. Once again, the camera returns to the viewer as a failed attempt to accomplish agency through vision.

The appearance of Debeer's video works is as austere as it is effective in its results. With no obvious tricks and seemingly without editing, with her camera Debeer tracks a collection of blind spots: those of the camera, but also those of human vision. She thus achieves a gaze that is not even human: it is the gaze of objects, of technology and of architecture, which, not being human, constitute themselves as humans. It is therefore a posthuman gaze, that of matter itself. Matter is in charge of organizing the daily life of the human species, which will never again be able to proclaim itself to be autonomous or omniscient.

Notes:

1. Lacan, Jacques: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book 11. Edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, translated by Alan Sheridan. New York & London: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., p. 95