

TRAGIC REALIST FICTION

'So Here We Are'

(Film Works)



M HKA

Museum of Contemporary Art Antwerp, Belgium

17 & 18 September 2022 / museum opening hours

M HKA auditorium

M HKA – Tragic Realist Fiction – ‘So Here We Are’ (Film Works)

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front page: A Journey into the Land of the 4th Dimension - film still

TRAGIC REALIST FICTION

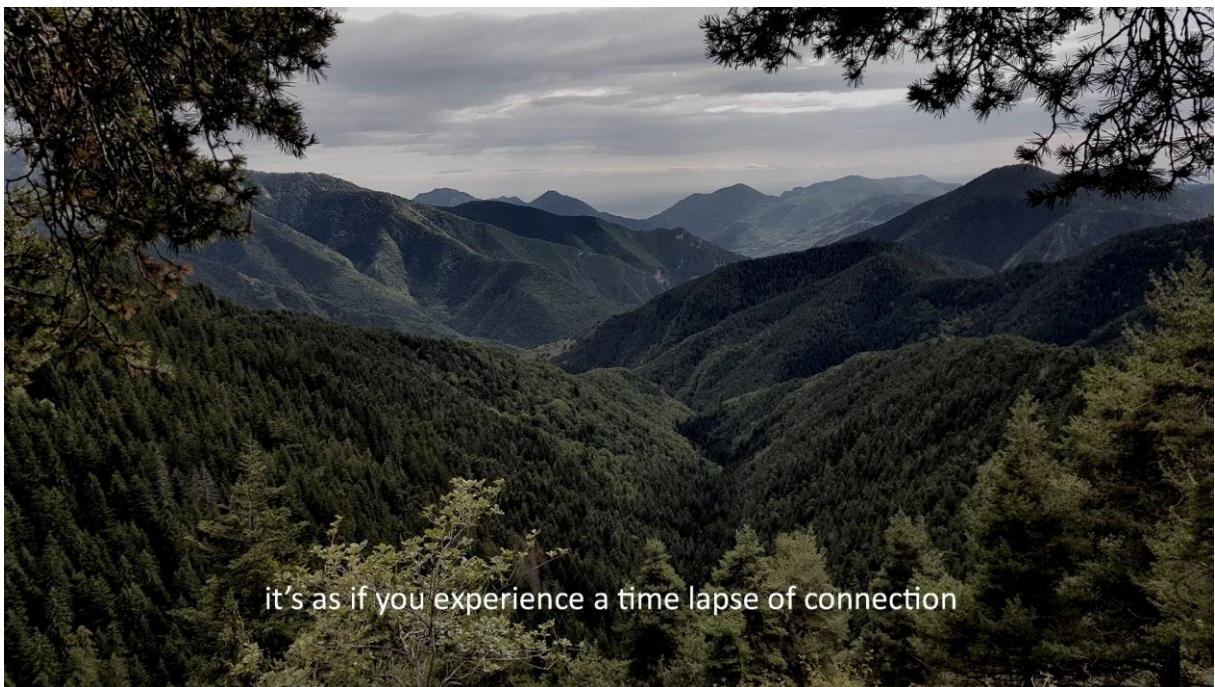
‘So Here We Are’ (Film Works)

Over the past years, the collective TRAGIC REALIST FICTION has created and produced 10 short arthouse films in the context of the research programme of the Institute of Idle Curiosity for Elements of Seduction. All films were made to be shown as part of previous exhibitions at the Art Institute. On the occasion of the M HKA show ‘What’s Wrong With Ideology? Life and work at the Institute of Idle Curiosity for Elements of Seduction’, they will be on view all together for the first time.

The films were made for large screens in dark rooms with optimum sound conditions, and the music, the soundscapes and the poetry in subtitles are essential parts of the films. In general, they could be called realist cinema in the way they create an illusion of reality, but they stretch the concept to the extreme: they not only rely on both narrative and visual realism but they also give the viewer the feeling she or he could have made the film and be ‘in it’ too. Scenes happen in clearly made up décors or unmodified ‘found’ natural landscapes and urban settings, and are filmed with hands-on simple cameras and smartphones and edited without special effects. The atmospheres are created for reasons relevant to the research programme of The Institute, but they are as much in the eyes (and ears) of the beholder too.

TRAGIC REALIST FICTION is the sound & vision collective of Margo Bulgakov, Elian Smit²³, Sarah De Graeve and Gaston Meskens.

The following friends contributed to the films as actors, musicians or technical assistants:
CJ Bolland, Hadewych Cocquyt, Aya De Coster, Shamina de Gonzaga, Fred Dusesoi, Sam Geuens, Klaas Janszoon, Marko Kovac, Gert Larivière, Alejandro Margetic, Torri Nickmans, Mauro Pawlowski, Davinder Valeri.



A Road of One's Own - film still

Programme

*(in continuous loop on view in the M HKA auditorium
during museum opening hours)*

– 01 –

The Dwelling

2013, 13'20"

– 02 –

A Journey into the Land of the 4th Dimension

2014, 51'43"

– 03 –

Twilight Hotel

2014, 24'05"

– 04 –

The Archive of Opportunities

2015, 25'02"

– 05 –

Your Absence was Noticed

2016, 10'00"

– 06 –

Elegiac Falls

2018, 20'09"

– 07 –

Now that the Days Turn Red

2019, 18'25"

– 08 –

The Pleasures Between Us

2021, 20'39"

– 09 –

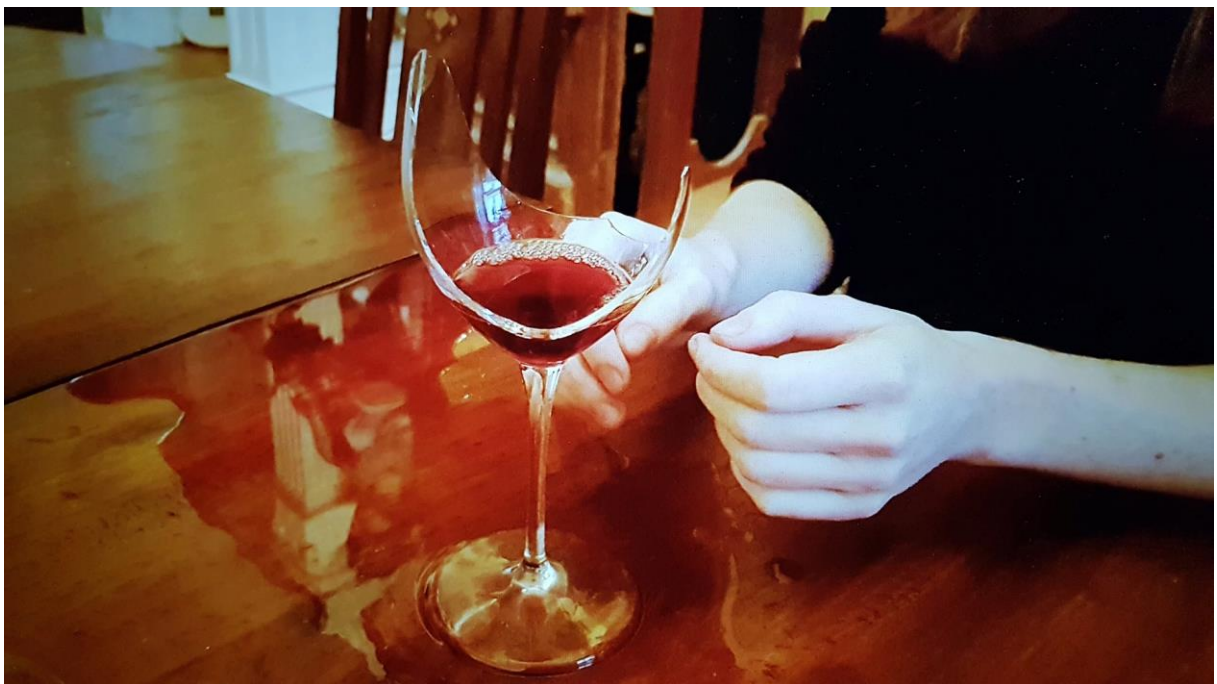
A Road of One's Own

2021, 20'24"

– 10 –

The Spectacle of Facts

2022, 15'59"



Now that the Days Turn Red - film still

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So here we are
Rows and rows of silent trees
Blinded by the stream of consciousness
That stream gives us almost
nothing to see.

Bewildered, it should be
the proof of
everything in me
that was pulled out
that night; the wind
wiped away the rain, ultimately.
No rain, there was no
rain; nature did
not exist, at least
not formally.

However, invisible me
for you, the shifted
blooded sea:
suspected to be
essentially flawed ?
merely...
see

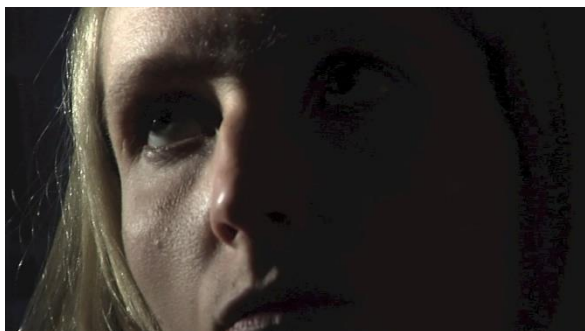
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(from the film The Archive of Opportunities)

The Dwelling

2013 13'20"

performance Sarah de Graeve
camera & co-direction Hadewych Cocquyt
concept, direction & music Gaston Meskens



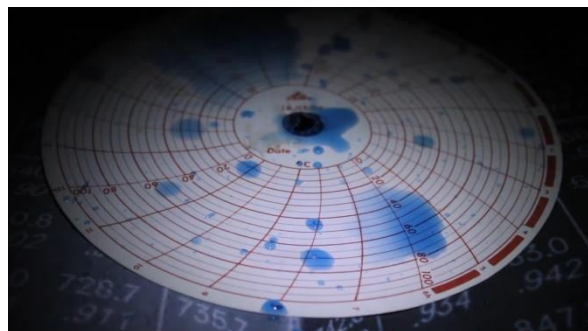
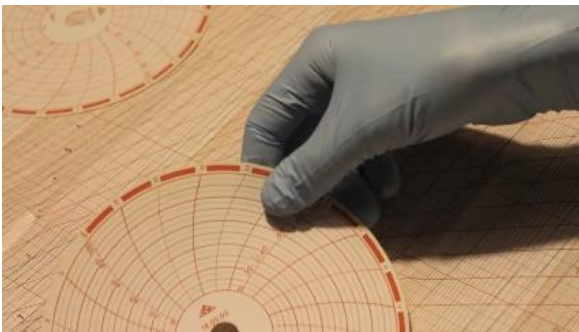
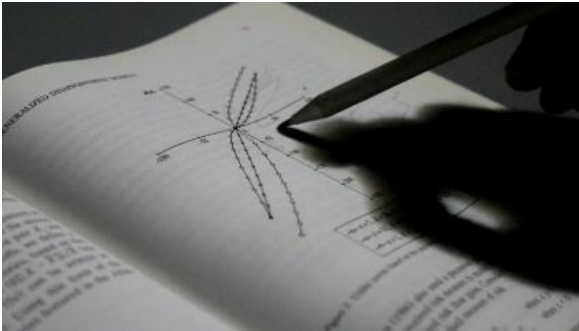
A Journey into the Land of the 4th Dimension

2014 51'43"

performance Mary H. Acker (Sarah de Graeve)
James Dyer (Mauro Pawlowski)
Melvin Shakun (Gaston Meskens)

music Mauro Pawlowski & Gaston Meskens

concept, texts, camera & direction Gaston Meskens



Inspired by the book ‘Journey into the Land of the 4th Dimension’ (‘Voyage au Pays de la Quatrième Dimension’) by Gaston de Pawlowski.

Synopsis

Three scientists go to a conference to present a jointly developed theory. The theory makes sense as it is based on sound logic and mathematics, but none of the three actually believes in it. As they are used to communicate through the scientific language of models, formulas and numbers, they cannot explain their own scepticism and doubt with the theory or understand that of the other. The conference takes place in Rio de Janeiro in June 2012. The three scientists arrive in Rio from their home towns and meet in a hotel to prepare their lecture. Confronted with their inability to construct a credible story to tell, they leave the hotel and start to wander through the city. Ultimately they plan to organise three séances, each led by one of them, to finally tackle the problem of their theory. Looking for locations, they wander through all kinds of strange places while sharing an uneasy feeling that something or somebody is following them. Although, with the séances, they feel they are making progress, they will never reach the conference in time. Too late and in a state of hyperperplexity, they arrive at the deserted conference hotel. Wandering through the place, looking for their fellow conference colleagues, they dissolve in the 4th dimension of reflexivity.

Background reflection

In 1912, the writer Gaston de Pawlowski (GdP) publishes the first version of his book ‘Voyage au pays de la quatrième dimension’. In the novel, GdP paints a vision on the future that is surrealist but essentially critical. He tells the story of the standup of the Leviathan and the ‘Second Scientific Era’, following the scientific modernity of his own time, and describes that period as an idealist era of ‘human progress’ managed by the ‘Great Central Laboratory’. It is a society of total efficiency and connectedness, with no more diseases, no more psychologic suffering and with the promise of immortality. But it is also a world of full mechanisation, clinical functionality and total control. In more recent history, versions of that story have been told many times, but GdP’s early vision is remarkable in the way it is critical to science and technology in a time where the modern belief in their unbridled potentials only began to emerge. GdP describes the rational world of mechanistic and materialistic concepts simply as the ‘world of the three dimensions’ and introduces the fourth dimension not as time (as physicists would start to do in that period) but as a quality of the human mind. In his view, the fourth dimension is that intellectual ‘spirit’ that does not rely on models, formulas and numbers and neither can be reduced to them. GdP paints a bleak and gloomy picture of society in the Second Scientific Era but tells how, despite of the scientific domination over that society as exerted by the Absolute Savants of the Great Central Laboratory, the fourth dimension gradually starts to manifest in the form of ‘imagination’ and as ‘ideas’ that would slowly begin to subvert the mechanisms of the system. In the book, the Second Scientific Era is followed by the ‘Idealist Renaissance’, characterised by the fact that “... people attempted to research, ahead of anything else, aesthetic unity, moral originality and the absolute heterogeneity of material support, and to get closer to the immortal and continuous type uniquely furnished by the four-dimensional mind.” It is the human mind that is able to attain the fourth dimension and, while GdP recognises that the human body is mortal ‘in three-dimensional space’, he is not proposing or defending the idea of immortality of the human spirit after death. On the contrary: in the pivotal 45th chapter of the book, he suggests that immortality can be reached during life as it can be reached in ideas.



The film “A Journey into the Land of the Fourth Dimension” recalls GdPs critical view on modernity’s preoccupation with big ideas of rational social organisation and the role of science therein and transposes that critique to our time. Our society tends to be proud of having overcome the growing pains of modernity, but actually nothing has changed since then. On the contrary: the way science is predicting and guiding our contemporary behaviour is not anymore through the brutal instrumentalisation by GdP’s absolute savants but with the aid of sophisticated mathematical models that inspire strategies in politics and market economics. Behind the visible and engaging tools of politics and the market, being political elections and commercial advertising, run systems instructed by what is known as ‘game theory’, a kind of science that emerged from the second era of modernism and, in that way, a science that GdP would never have been able to predict and criticise in his time.

Game theory or rational choice theory is the study of mathematical models of conflict and cooperation between intelligent rational ‘decision-makers’. The root idea of game theory is that in any challenging situation that involves a group of people, an intelligent rational individual will always make choices that will maximise his own benefit. Although game theory depicts society as a world of winners and losers, the general picture is not necessarily that of a harsh unescapable reality of competition and battle wherein only the strongest survive. As a theory of rational behaviour, game theory develops rationales of competition but also models that prescribe that, in some situations, people are better off with rational cooperation. But game theory is not about innocent play. It applies choice theory to the serious matters of strategic decision making in economics, politics and military conflict. In combination with the economic theories of the Value of Statistical Life, it constructs and delivers the perverse hidden rationales behind the contemporary political and economic systems that treat humans rather as one-dimensional parts of a manipulatable flock instead of as vocal citizens capable to reflect on own and others interests, hopes, beliefs and concerns.

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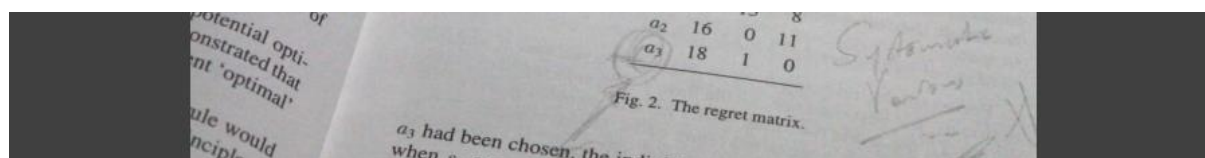
Table 5 -- Descriptive statistics; sample with standard deviations

Paper	Biblio. Ref.	No. Obs.	Publication year	Country	Average VSL	Range	Per capita VSL/GDP ratio
Alberini <i>et al.</i>	[2]	2	2004	United States	1,421,025	1.1 – 1.7	34
Alberini <i>et al.</i>	[4]	3	2007	Italy	3,598,485	1.4 – 6.3	130
Alberini <i>et al.</i>	[5]	2	2006	Canada - United States	1,036,062	0.8 – 1.2	27
Chestnut <i>et al.</i>	[9]	12	2009	Canada - United States	5,142,629	2.5 – 9.4	134
Desaigues <i>et al.</i>	[12] [31]	6	2004-2007	Denmark	2,651,682	1.1 – 4.9	79
Gibson <i>et al.</i>	[15]	1	2007	Thailand	659,955	##	96
Giergiczny	[16]	3	2006	Poland	795,082	0.2 – 1.7	59
Hakes & Viscusi	[19]	2	2004	United States	6,247,816	6.1 – 6.4	150
Hammit & Zhou	[20]	12	2006	China	115,515	0.02 – 0.4	28
Itaoka <i>et al.</i>	[21]	19	2007	Japan	1,280,220	0.5 – 2.8	42
Johannesson, Johannesson & O'Conor	[23]	4	1996	Sweden	4,652,973	2 – 7.1	145
Jones-Lee, Hammerton & Philips	[24]	4	1985	United Kingdom	5,226,967	3.9 – 7.2	166
Krupnick <i>et al.</i>	[25]	8	2002	Canada	1,758,343	1.1 – 3.6	50
Krupnick <i>et al.</i>	[26]	110	2006	China	562,225	0.1 – 1.7	137
Leiter & Pruckner	[27]	24	2008-2009	Austria	3,021,948	1.9 – 5.2	89
Leiter & Pruckner	[28]	4	2008	Austria	2,445,736	2.1 – 2.8	72
Mahmud	[30]	4	2006	Bangladesh	5,248	0.04 – 0.07	4
Leung <i>et al.</i>	[18]	8	2009	New Zealand	2,870,491	1.8 – 4.4	117
Rheinberger	[33]	2	2009	Switzerland	4,362,827	4.2 – 4.5	123
Schwab Christe & Soguel	[34]	6	1995	Denmark	13,600,000	9 – 17.5	404
Svensson	[35]	14	2009	Sweden	7,693,884	3 – 9.6	240
Vassanadumrondgee & Matsuoka	[37]	4	2005	Thailand	1,555,256	1.3 – 1.8	226

Average Value of Statistical Life for specific countries

Source 'The value of statistical life: a meta-analysis', OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development)

In general, game theory recognises that 'knowing ourselves, the world and the future' is troubled by uncertainty, complexity and the existence of unknowns, but it also assumes that individuals and groups are able and willing to integrate these 'factors' in an exercise of balancing 'benefits and burdens' in order to maximise their gain. The problem is thus that game theory ignores the fact that most real-life human challenges cannot simply be reduced to exercises of balancing benefits and burdens. The principal reason hereof is that personal and social life is determined by essential 'valuables' humans actually don't want to use in trade-offs (their own life, freedom, health, loves, friends and relatives, nature,...). In addition, there is the simple fact that people do not always logically reason in terms of benefits and burdens. In that sense, game theory is unable to deal with 'irrational' human behaviour such as altruism, sacrifice, withdrawal, stray, weirdness, escapism, sabotage or (self-)destruction. While obviously most would agree that these 'extreme' behaviours should better not figure at the centre of social organisation, there is also the recognition that the various motives people might have for these behaviours are an essential part of what makes us human. Even more: these behaviours actually give us a better view on what it is to be human, as compared to that 'rational drive of checks and balances' that politicians and economists so much like to theorise, calculate and instrumentalise.



Today, more than ever before, science serves the strategies of power in politics and the economy: bio-engineered seed politics, sophisticated drones terror, biochemics to stimulate addiction for sugar and fat, hard- and software-assisted financial speculation and game theory in support of political and economic policy are but a few examples. While sterile seeds, sugar, fat, drones and financial speculation manifest in the public sphere and are thus fortunately eligible to social critique, mathematical modelling of human behaviour and societal dynamics at the service of politics and the market may be called the undercover operations of science. Although these game theory operations are not entirely useless and may not cause direct harm to humans per sé, their detached and often cynical rationalisations of who we are and what we believe, hope and fear may be

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example of the sadness of how important groups of people see the world today. Against the obsession with rational approaches to total social organisation stands the insight that complexity simply implies giving people the right to participate in making sense of that complexity. We don't need models, formulas or numbers to defend that insight, only science, economics and politics with the courage to be enlightened by that 'fourth dimension'.



Against this backdrop, the film paints a psychological picture of three game theory researchers who travel to the 2012 United Nations World Summit on Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro to present their grand theory of rational social organisation. Struggling with 'scientific perplexity', they know their model would never work, but they cannot explain why not. The 'something' or 'somebody' that is following them on their deviations through the city is their own intuitive sense of melancholic resignation: the understanding that there exist no full objective rationale to make sense of ourselves and the world, although enlightened with the insight that we actually can do without.

Twilight Hotel

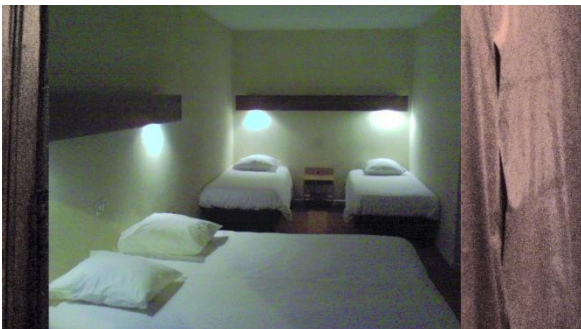
2014 24'05"

performance Sarah de Graeve & Sam Geuens

voice CJ Bolland

music Gaston Meskens, Sarah de Graeve & Gert Larivière

concept, texts, camera & direction Gaston Meskens



Synopsis

The film is a trip in three acts. He dwells through the corridors of politics, science and activism before arriving at the Twilight Hotel. His meeting with her, in the lobby of the hotel, is a crucial turning point for both of them. What follows is a great escape.

Text

The boulevard is swamped with humid thick air and bathes in sunlight. You enter the lobby of the hotel, spacious, air-cooled and dark. You breathe. Outside, life goes on, scarcely populated but in a haze of impatience. Inside, the fumé windows and brown carpets shut out the loud graffiti-coloured scenes from the street. The coolness suddenly unveils the fragrance of the city. The air smells smoky and sweet; a late-afternoon promising odour, announcing life that is waking inside, waiting to come out after sundown.

She stands in the middle of the lobby and waits. She stares at some point behind you. You walk in her direction and she pretends she recognises you. You stand still, in limbo.

‘I am not here’, the woman says. ‘I am not here, you are not here, we are not here. I mean: we did not arrive yet. We wait, dispersed but aware of each other. We try not to look angry. We are not angry’. You think. The soundtrack from the street dims. You put down your suitcase and search your pockets for a business card.

‘We came from different sides’, the woman continues. ‘We came from different fields, backstreets and squares. We have nothing to report. That is: nothing to each other. You may ask us questions, we may know the answers. We will go back, but only when we want’.

You look behind you and your eyes seek the exit. But the woman walks away. You take your suitcase and proceed to the reception desk to check in.

On the way to the elevator, the woman appears again. *‘The Boulevard of Broken Dreams was only a story. It is fiction’, she says. ‘The palm trees were plastic and the street was going nowhere. It was fake, but that doesn’t matter. Every populated physical environment is décor. Also here, outside. The rubbish in the alleys and on the bare zones of the city is fake. It is put there. The animals are dead and stuffed. The shops are full, but nothing is for sale. Taxis drive in circles and trains shuttle back and forth. People are dressed up, but for no particular reason. It is all sculptured, assembled and pretended’.* She pauses. *‘But we can easily take it away if we want, and return everything back to normal’.*

The air in the corridor is damped and the ventilator thrums. You put down your suitcase again. *‘Why would you do that?’*, you ask. *‘The only thing normal here might just be the desert. The desert that connects the cities. The desert that is enclosed by the continents. We travel through it to escape it, and linger in the fata morganas we construct for each other. We set up decors to hide that there is nothing behind them and to enable ourselves to concentrate on pure encounter. So why would you take it away if you need it for us to recognise you in the first place?’*

She stares at you and smiles, for the first time. *‘It is true’, she says. ‘I am here. You are here. And we will come back’.* She steps into the elevator. *‘It was nice to meet you’.* She closes the door. You hear

the elevator going up, and the sound of the ventilator takes over again. You wanted to tell her that she was right; that the normal she referred to is not the normal you had in mind. That with too much recognition one risks becoming a stale artefact of an ordinary world.

You leave the hotel and walk down the street. It is twilight hour. The vivid colours of the day faded and the air smells perfumed but mouldy now. The pavement is crowded with wanderers. They are smiling, chatting and going places. You want to walk and dissolve in them, with them, but the sand blown up by the wind prickles your eyes. You turn left into a side street and turn left again. You are at the back entrance of the hotel and decide to go in, but the glazed sliding door is blocked. A placard stuck on the door attracts your attention: ‘Warning. Temporary zone. No entrance. You are inside already.’

From the song ‘The Consolatory Practice of Leaving’

At night on every street,
Scarified; the daybreak at last heals

Alight on no man’s field, you’d
be around, no matter how I get lost...

At night on every street,
Scarified, I wonder where you got lost...

Alight on no man’s field, you’d
be around, no matter how I get lost...

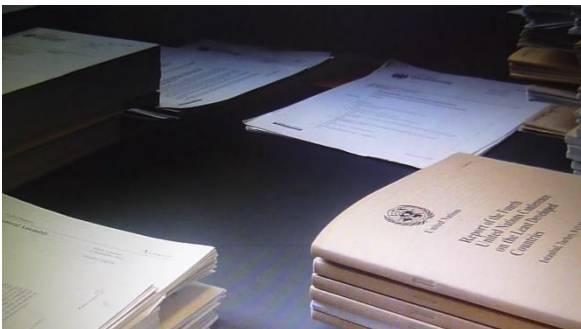
The Archive of Opportunities

2015 25'02"

performance (voices) Sarah de Graeve
(from Toronto) Davinder Valeri
(from New York) Shamina de Gonzaga
(from Ljubljana) Marko Kovac
(from Buenos Aires) Alejandro Margetic

music Gaston Meskens & Sarah de Graeve

concept, texts, camera & direction Gaston Meskens



conversation

- Davinder When I entered the archive for the first time, I was surprised at the sheer simplicity of the classification system. The plan was clear and well-organised. There were no deviant routes, no blind alleys, no confusing crossroads. The numbering of corridors, cabinets and shelves followed a rigid logic and was kept up to date. There were no gaps or jumps, no sudden interruptions. The sense of predictability softened the sinister atmosphere of the immense space. The logic was reassuring and forthcoming. The logic was good.
- Shamina The remarkable thing, I also remember, was that the cabinets in the halls were all empty. Modern in style but empty, as if they had just been installed, waiting to be filled with content. But the striking thing was that the date labels of the shelves, cabinets and rooms didn't go back in time but started counting towards the future. They were not meant to contain historical material, but artefacts that still needed to be created and documented.
- Marko And what was really strange, and in a way scary, was the fact that the first date label of the first shelf of the first cabinet in the first room always had the actual date of your visit to the archive, and that the labels always counted up from that date towards the future, for years and years and ages and ages. Nobody could ever find out where the counting stopped. The space was too big. So although that situation was quiet creepy, it was logic that the shelves remained empty, as their date labels always started counting from the date we entered. That archive could not contain artefacts, as there was never a past to be documented.
- Alejandro It was only after years of exploration that we realised that the archive of the past was somewhere else. The thing was that you had to turn left immediately after entering the first room. There was a stair going down, and nobody ever thought of descending it. It is almost unbelievable that nobody had the intuition to go down to check what was there. I guess we were all too confused about the strange thing with the labels and the empty shelves.
- Shamina It was the doorkeeper who told us that we should go down. For years, he didn't say a word, but then, one day, he stood up and came out of his office towards us. He said that it was time, that it was finally time to go down. We did not understand what he meant with that. We looked at each other, confused, and I remember he smiled. He returned to his office, and instead of waiting for further clarification, we descended the stairs. What we saw, after our eyes had adapted to the darkness, looked like the setting of a classical archive. Again the corridors, rooms and cabinets, and again in seemingly endless rows.
- Marko We started to walk, trying to find our way through the archive. The light was scarce and the whole place looked totally crammed with cabinets, documents and objects. Although it seemed as if there was nobody else present, we heard footsteps and conversations from time to time. Those sounds were immersed in a bed of soft dark noise, as if air was continuously breezing through the corridors, rooms and halls. The smell was mouldy and damp, although with a crispy

overtone of a strange smoky perfume, the same you would experience around a campfire outside, in the woods.

- Alejandro The first rooms we entered were cramped but rather empty. They had prints and diagrams stuck to the walls and on a table in the middle of the space. We could not figure out what they represented. We saw images of a building, and group photos of people. The building could have been the archive itself, but we were uncertain. It looked different from what we were used to see from the outside. But in some way, the displays suggested it was the archive. The group photos seemed to have been taken not so long ago. We didn't recognise anyone of the people, but they must have been colleagues, as we recognised the places where the photos were taken.
- Marko After crossing the first smaller rooms, we entered big halls that were connected through corridors at all sides. The ceiling of the halls must have been very high, as we could not see it in the dark. We were totally amazed by what we discovered. There were several halls with documents on shelves. Most were arranged in box files, but some of them were unfolded and displayed, so that you could read the text and see the images. We randomly took out a document here and there to see what it was about.
- Davinder After a few hours of studying and reading, we understood we were in the middle of a countless collection of ideas, reflections and critiques that once must have been put aside without proper consideration. There were thousands of fragments of conversations still to be set up, and a myriad of suggestions of gatherings that never had taken place. It was all there, waiting to be said and done, and the strange thing was that, just by trying to grasp their meaning and focus, we felt that they were all new.
- Shamina On the higher shelves, there was an extended systematic classification of – what I can only describe as – various ‘manifestations’ of awe, confusion, wonderment, hope and fear, all in their turn documented with both mystical and rational arguments. We tried to understand them, but it was difficult, as it felt as we had never experienced them. The references contained dates, most of them from the middle of last century, and sometimes there were photos of people, always somewhere in a laboratory. There was no explanation of who was in the photo, or reference to where it was taken. The people in the photos were very ‘present’. They looked committed to what they were doing, but not arrogant.
- Marko Other halls had rows and rows of objects displayed. There were strange artefacts that must have had a function in some context, and we found out that many of them were accompanied with comments on their origin and possible use. Other things were unrecognizable and had no explanation. They could have been art objects, but we were not sure. We entered halls with cabinets that only contained printed pictures in every possible form and depicting all imaginable subjects and scenes.
- Alejandro Drawers contained printed schemes and diagrams explaining logics and systems, some of them recognisable, but most not, as extra information on their origin and

use was missing. There were also several halls with rows of tables, presenting scale models of technological and architectural structures, and there were numerous replicas of cities and strange urban settlements. We had the feeling we could recognise a few, but most looked as designs still to be build.

- Davinder At some point, at a crossing of three large and long corridors, there was a big display cabinet with two people in it. It was a woman and a man. They were standing back to back and they were naked. We approached the cabinet with a very uneasy feeling. They seemed to be real and alive, but then this would have been very strange, because the cabinet looked very old, and impossible to open. When we stood close, we had the impression it were life-size wax dolls, but their gaze was penetrating, as if they really saw us. What was really weird was that, while we were standing there close, we were not scared anymore. We saw them, and they saw us. There was a feeling of recognition, but no urge to do something with it. We continued our way.
- Alejandro Who invented, suggested, constructed and formulated all this? Who collected, classified and preserved all these records and, above all, with which aim? It must have been a work of ages, even millennia. The documents and artefacts were physically there, they must have been created in the past. But they had no label indicating the date of their classification. We had the impression they were classified according to themes and subthemes. But it was impossible to understand the classification system by studying the labels, as they only contained letters and numbers and no catchwords. The system seemed at least meaningful but ultimately sophisticated.
- Shamina I don't remember anymore how long we spent down in the archive during our first visit. One moment, we found ourselves standing upstairs in the first, empty archive again. The doorkeeper was gone, and the place was dark. We checked the date of the first shelf of the first cabinet in the first room and concluded that we had been down for weeks. There must have been water and food, and we must have slept down there, but all memories of this sort were gone.
- Davinder Afterwards, in one of the many attempts to make sense of our experience, we had this commonsensical thought that it is unwise to study history with the aim to extract theories for the future, but also that we all felt that this was different. What was kept down there was not history. It was a peculiar consolidation of opportunities, bizarre in its forms and setting and ultimately intriguing. The question of who had ever collected and classified it didn't matter anymore. It was there.
- Marko So here we are...
- Shamina The simple idea is that the pursuit of peace and well-being is not a matter of finding compromise over incommensurable or conflicting interests, as our essential interests as humans are not necessarily incommensurable or in conflict 'by definition'. Our society is inherently complex but not inherently antagonistic. The idea that we have to live with the fact that there exist fundamentally opposing worldviews and conceptions of life is strategically maintained by

religious and political oppressors. Only then can they construct their presumed rational theory of the ‘collective identity’ and decide who belongs and who does not. Their populist oracles appeal to the conformists of the citizenry who can only make sense of the complexity of life by way of ascribing guilt to an enemy. Collective extremism is not rooted in deviance but in conformism. Collective extremism roots in extreme conformism...

Davinder

Every time again, it will turn out that this one night, that one walk, this one conversation, that one morning, ... was not a new reference for a deeper and more authentic life, but simply a meaningful event to never forget. And then you are somewhere, alone or in company, and suddenly you feel connected to some other place, to some moment in the past and to some time in the future, all at the same instant. You experience a time lapse of connection with an undefined set of possibilities. You cannot name this other place and these other moments, but you know you know them, either as a potentiality or as a memory. You know that you might have been to that other place already, and that the moment in the past feels as if it still needs to happen. And you feel already that consolatory kind of melancholy, remembering that time that still needs to come.

Sarah

So here we are
Rows and rows of silent trees
Blinded by the stream of consciousness
That stream gives us almost
nothing to see.

Bewildered, it should be
the proof of
everything in me
that was pulled out
that night; the wind
wiped away the rain, ultimately.
No rain, there was no
rain; nature did
not exist, at least
not formally.
However, invisible me
for you, the shifted
blooded sea:
suspected to be
essentially flawed ?
merely...
see

Your Absence Was Noticed

2016 10'00"

a series of impressions from the life and work at the Institute of Idle
curiosity for Elements of Seduction

music Gert Larivière, Gaston Meskens & Elian Smit23



M HKA – Tragic Realist Fiction – ‘So Here We Are’ (Film Works)

Elegiac Falls

2018 20'09"

performance Elian Smit23
voice Elian Smit23
music Gaston Meskens
concept, texts, camera & direction Gaston Meskens



Film synopsis and background info

Synopsis

A woman and a man live in a 19th century house in a city. Both live with a specific distress that determines the whole of their life and coexistence. The man lives with a permanent fear that he will fall through the floor; the woman has a permanent fear that the ceiling will come down on her. Despite of their maladies, they manage to live together relatively well. One day, they conclude their fear is not some personal disorder but caused by the house itself, and they decide to look for a small house in the countryside with a ground floor only. They start to travel and end up far away from home in a city in a desolated region of the country. They buy an abandoned house and start a new life. The man finds a job as farmer and the woman starts to work at the nuclear facility nearby the city. Together they make long walks in the forests and along the lakes, and they feel completely relieved from the distress they experienced in the old house. One day, the woman tells the man about the sampling programme the nuclear facility has put in place, and suggests he should take part too. After their death, blood and tissue samples of their bodies will be compared, with the aim to find out whether she had lived a higher risk working at the facility as compared to him, not being exposed to radiation. Yes, says the man. Of course, I want to do that for you.

Background info: the Radiobiological Human Tissue Repository

The Radiobiological Human Tissue Repository (RHTR) [1] is located in Ozyorsk, a city in the Southern Urals in Russia. It was established in 1951 to study effects of exposure of workers to the radioactivity of plutonium coming with the production of nuclear weapons at the Mayak nuclear facility. Since 1951, the Repository systematically archives human blood and tissue samples derived from autopsy of workers from the Mayak site and from residents from the city of Ozyorsk and its surroundings. Comparing samples from ‘non-exposed’ residents with those of workers would help researchers to study the health effects of working in a radioactive environment. However, as a consequence of both the Kyshtym disaster in 1957 and enduring discharge of radioactive waste into the nearby lakes and Techa River, the whole of the natural and urban environment of Ozyorsk became contaminated with radioactivity. As a consequence, the collected blood and tissue samples of the residents cannot longer serve as reference for those of the nuclear workers, rendering the original sampling and archiving project meaningless. Up to 1989, the Mayak management and the Russian authorities have constantly denied this, and they left the workers and the local population in total ignorance. Since the disclosure of the nuclear archives (including those about the accidents that happened), the RHTR has been reorganised and now offers its archives of blood and tissue samples ‘of workers and contaminated residents’ for consultation to the international research community. The pollution of the environment by the Mayak facility continues.

References

[1] The Radiobiological Human Tissue Repository: <http://rhtr.subi.su>

Now that the Days Turn Red

2019 18'25"

performance Torri Nickmans & Gaston Meskens
vocals & music Gaston Meskens
music studio assistance Aya De Coster
concept, texts, camera & direction Gaston Meskens



Now that the Days Turn Red – Scene 1 –

Crossing

thoughts
space
sleep
argue - you were there yesterday,
I saw you do you did you see me?

hell
no
way
out of the street that crossed mine
you crossed me do you did you see me?

half
of
a shocking
word - against your word that stopped mine
you stopped me do you did you see me?

inside
your
swampy
body - damn lust that damped mine
you damp me do you did you kill me?

Now that the Days Turn Red – Scene 2 –

Can I use your space?

do you remember
when we first met.
it was, after all, a coincidence;
a time lapse of unconditional curiosity
of two people with no expectations.

you were standing at the right side
of the road.
i deviated from my route,
stood still for a moment
and approached.
i think i remember you.
can i use your space?

there was silence, first,
only the wind.
then there were words
without words, without sound.

you don't have the right to remember me.
there is no space where i can be stored;
there is no place where i can be kept.
i make my own history of absence,
my own story of non-existence.
scratches on the surface should be deep but not
too profound.
i promote the evasion of time through time
and,
to the best of my abilities,
i promise to always stay away from your
position.
i keep on surveying time across time –
not looking at the process of development,
but simply observing the differences.
i record my actions, spheres and situations
and count the days until there's nothing left.

but

one of the days I can remember
was the one I thought would never happen.
it passed quickly, it echoes slow;
slower than it took for you
to walk away.

Now that the Days Turn Red – Scene 3 –

What hope do we have

we knew what we did there,
before and behind the scenes.
time passed, and the days turned red.
unconditionally,
they captured the first sorrow of the morning,
dissolved it into bits of follies
and moved on, innocent but free,
until the end.
there was no mourning,
no memory of grief,
no perspective on despair.

what hope do we have
if all that matters
is us?
you asked.

there was no need for an answer.
we had this mysterious longing for the evenings
and the ultimate relief of the nights.
wet skin, crispy thoughts,
connection and brittle consolation;
all that freedom, and with no reason for guilt
we made our own history of presence
and that story of the past.
gloomily vague, not knowing what to do,
you were so me, i was so you.
our evasion of time through time,
only to be forgotten.
and i couldn't understand that at all.

Now that the Days Turn Red – Scene 4 –

Now that the days turn red

Who wants to hold me
Until the end of time
Who wants to save me
Before the break of dawn

Now that the days turn red,
And the nightlife folds back on itself,
In terrifying pleasure.

Who wants to hold me
Until the break of dawn;
Who wants to save me
Before the end of time;

Remember the words we said,
In our rooms at the end of the day,
Those feelings hard to measure;

As long as our walks on the tracks were
Straight, and the rules of thought were given,
We could ramble the fields and dedicate
ourselves
To terrifying pleasure...

Save me, too much, baby;
Lover, too much, love me;
Illusion, sore delusion;
Magnificent confusion,
Insane

As long as we dwell on the verge of
Hope, and the plains we cross are given,
We can hide from the world and dedicate
ourselves
To sacrificing others...

Baby, too much, save me;
Lover, too much, love me;
Illusion, sore delusion;
Magnificent confusion,
Insane

The Pleasures Between Us

2021 20'39"

voice & vocals Elian Smit23
soundscapes and music Gaston Meskens
texts Gaston Meskens
concept, direction, images Gaston Meskens & Elian Smit23



Scene 1 – The conversation (normal type is she, italics is the other)

That was not nice. And you know that.
I've looked around in all corridors and backrooms,
And then left.

Whatever.

It doesn't matter anymore. I mean of course it still does. But not anymore now.

All walks have been forgotten,
Conversations deleted.
The measures we used to synchronise our lives are now obsolete;
Standard feelings drown in the swamp of the past,
Together with the faded patterns,
The collapsed constructions,
The blown-up agreements.

What's left is everything
Possible.

*Please ...
I can't do this anymore.
I don't know where to go, where to stay
I don't know if I should stay, or go.*

Perfect.

What else do you need.
We're all free to slumber in the corridors and backrooms
And linger on the peripheries of coexistence
As if there was no
Road to nowhere.
Ambivalence is the new certainty,
Desire the new thrill.
We think of heaven and hell;
In dreams, beyond nightmares.
We walk, we grow, we bleed;
Smart hearts for a curious life.

And once at the other side, no one can tell us
Why the night did not wait
for the other day;
Why the sumptuous fever that drove us,
Brought us to the place we feared to want;
Why the greasy lash, slashing through our minds,
Was painful in the end,

but did not hurt.

[...]

But that's ok; we don't need to know.
After all, every landscape, moment, body or thought
Dark or light, moist or chill
– In the name of the damned paths of life –
Will always remind us
Of each other's being
Of our temper and mere disdain
For the rules wanting to destroy
The pleasures between us.

[...]

By the way, they all got poisoned that night, at the dinner.

They had no love.

I mean they didn't have it, as a 'something', in them.

They might be capable of loving, of course, and they deserve it, as humans.
But they never practiced it, never had the chance, streamlined and stuck as they were into their
boring paths of life.

So we had to poison them.

Scene 2 – The Parallax Muse

The morning of the night
Before the day began,
I had poisoned myself
With love,
To near-death,
To full exhaustion of the senses,
Of the mind.
Emptiness, paralysis, apathy although
Refraining from fulfilling the final act of beauty;
Condemned to live, post-mortem,
Hyperconscious of what is.

The morning of the night
Before the day began,
I saw your body,
Locked in the belly of my dreams;
A mere shape,
A deviate remnant
Of a superfluous intensively shaken
Being.
I thought the skin would wane and
Crack
In the middle of my thoughts.

The morning of the night
Before the day began,
I felt your phantom presence
Appearing through the mist
In my veins.
I saw things clear, I even remembered why
I thought this time would never come
Again.

A match of spirit, nature,
Naturally luxuriant,
Naturally condemned.

Scene 3 – The Pleasures Between Us

Hello. This is me speaking.
What happened yesterday was nothing serious.
I just want to tell you that everything is under control.
Please make a call to the Happening hotel.
They will wait for you.
I wish you all the best.
Bye bye.

I heard every shout of want and doubt
In the crashing war of choices.
No matter every promise to treat me well;
You did it, I did it.

I heard every shout of want and doubt
In the crushing avalanche of voices.
No matter every whisper, I could tell,
You did it, we did it.

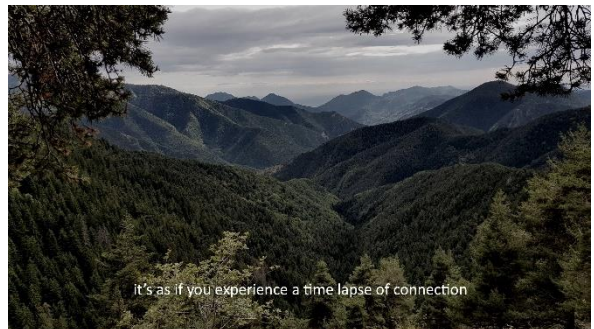
Tell me what you want;
Another day in heaven?
Tell me what you need;
A simple life in hell?

The night is a mysterious bastard;
Sometimes.
There is no sound around;
Your feelings, worries,
Come out.

A Road of One’s Own

2021 20’24”

voices Margo Bulgakov, Sarah De Graeve,
vocals Gaston Meskens
soundscapes music and texts Gaston Meskens
concept, direction, images Gaston Meskens



Part 1 – singing – Last Other in the Room

All along faint and
Quiet roads

You cannot leave here

A mere shape
A deviate remain

They want you
Seduce you
A deviate remain
You're a lost angel

/.../

You get along slick and
Hollow roads

You cannot fade out
You're such a shame

A keepsake
Of deviate remains

They want you
To be you
A sinner in the flames
You're a lost angel

Part 2 – the nightwalk

M Are we getting closer?

S I don't know. It's too dark. I guess we will soon see the lights in the distance. Although for now I have the feeling this path is going nowhere.

M That second stop was so weird. I mean the door was open, and the lights were on, and there was nobody. And then that water. I could hear it running, somewhere in the house, while you were asleep. And then it stopped, and then it started again. Really spooky.

S Yeah and it was so cold inside. In fact it was colder inside than outside.

M The cold came from inside.

S True

M But it had a life. I mean the house, it was alive. I know I said this already, but I felt it was alive, and it didn't feel strange. It's this kind of places that makes me want to ... leave, so I can come back again.

S Yes, I know that feeling. ... the move ... the movement ... a stream of movements. Leaving a good place because you know you can come back, if you want. It's like ... the seduction of a place, ever promising, never demanding...

/ [long silence, walking]

S But we make those places as much as they make us.

M Yes. I remember that one city.... I mean I forgot the name and where it was, but I remember the places, the atmospheres, the neighborhoods. I refused to use a map, and I always got lost, every day again. Not because I forgot the routes I took the day before, but because the streets and buildings changed all the time. Every day the places looked different from the day before. And the strange thing was that I didn't care. It felt very natural. And of course there was no need to be somewhere.

S The moment you think you got lost is the best. Because of course you are not. They are lost, not you. You see them being lost, around you. They don't even realise they are lost, on the way to their destinations, like mindless machines.

M You remember that one night, at the river? There was this factory, and there was this party and most people left already. And then this guy insisting, like he wanted to explain us the way home because he felt we were not from there. And then we said there is nothing to explain because true we want to leave but we don't know where we want to go, but that's ok. And then he got totally confused.

M HKA – Tragic Realist Fiction – ‘So Here We Are’ (Film Works)

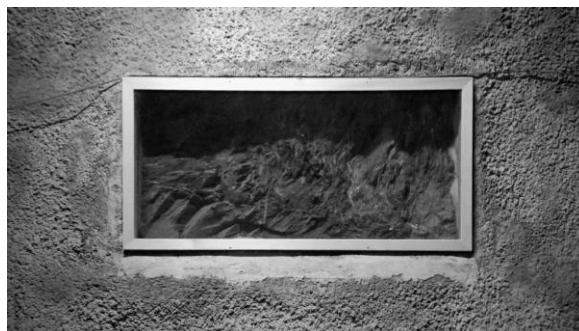
- S Yes that was a really good night. I still remember the view from the bridge. It was a hot night and the water of the river was flowing very fast. Fast but without sound, like a silent movie playing beneath us.
- We wanted to jump in it because it looked so appealing. Deep dark with the glitter of the moon. And the smell was like, ... I don't know, smokey, ... something like that...
- / [long silence, walking]
- M Now it's really really dark ...
- S Yes, there is no path anymore. I mean I can't see it anymore... What shall we do?
- M Wait, I saw a light... Now it's gone again...
- There it is again. Is it a lamp, or a fire? It doesn't seem to be moving.
- S I think it's a lamp. Someone puts it on and off. Or it's spinning around, like the lamp of a lighthouse. Are we already close to the sea? We should be, at least if we didn't walk too much in circles.
- M Yes I think it's a lighthouse. But then... Let's not go there. Let's stay here and wait for the sunrise. I think this is a good place to stay.
- / [long silence, no movement] / [then with lower more relaxed voice]
- M You know, I was thinking... Every time again, it will turn out that this one night, that one walk, this one conversation, that one morning, ... was not some kind of new reference for a deeper and more authentic life, but simply a meaningful event to never forget.
- S Yes, true... And then you are somewhere, alone or in company, and suddenly you feel connected to some other place, to some moment in the past and to some time in the future, all at the same instant. It's as if you experience a time lapse of connection with an undefined set of possibilities.
- M And you cannot name this other place and these other moments, but you know you know them, either as a potentiality or as a memory.
- S And then also... It's like you know that you might have been to that other place already, and that the moment in the past feels as if it still needs to happen. And you feel already that consolatory kind of melancholy, remembering that time that still needs to come.
- M Yes...

The Spectacle of Facts

2022 15'59"

performance Klaas Janszoons & Fred Dusesoi
& our friends upstairs

concept, camera, editing, music and text Gaston Meskens



The Spectacle of Facts

it was that cold January night
way past midnight
it was now or never
we knew what we were looking for
and we would not take
a no for an answer
in spite of our suspicion
we were confident
we would find
everything lost

the doors opened down there
we felt their presence
they have been here. not
lived here, loved lied hoped feared danced cried died

shadows on the dark floor
and the outside noise suddenly gone
we felt a freedom
a slow down
it's not time that is impatient
it's our memories,
the way they drive us
into the void
obsessed with restoring
the waning presence of
them

they said this
and then they said that
could it be that they meant this
or that?
how could we
how could we
know

what hope can we have
stumbling on the verge
of our illusions
waning through the past
in search of that word,
image, feeling or thought
to hook on?

...

...

they went back. up

in the end
the dust was unreadable
the measures faded
the logical constructions
fallen apart

there was nothing down there
that could possibly make sense
as a memory on its own

what was left was everything
possible