

The Immersive¹ Unknowable²

Project proposal by Elysa Kooijman

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What & why do I want to make?

For my graduation project I want to interpret and depict a personal version of a folklore story that is native to Wadden island Ameland, *Rixt van t Oerd*. This native folklore story was written in 1889 by a school teacher from a secluded community living on Ameland. The story will be a framework for a (horror) short film.

The story is about a witch, Rixt, who lives a secluded life on the beach of Ameland. She survives by controlling the seas and the weather, so that ships strand onto shore and she can steal whatever washes up on the beach. She has a son, Sjoerd, who is the only person that she loves and he loves her back. However, he doesn't know about her being a witch. One day, unbeknownst to her, he joins a ship as a sailor. That evening, Rixt conjures up another storm that makes the ships strand onto shore. The next morning she goes out to the beach to see what has washed up, and ends up finding her dead son. He drowned in the storm that she conjured. She's so heartbroken that she cries out his name: SJOEEEEEEEEEEERD. Legend is that when you listen to the wind on the island, you can still hear Rixt call out her son's name.

I want to work with this story because it encompasses a few things I find very interesting: women and their stories, Ameland, the immersive unknowable, mystery, and possibly magic. Specifically the film will be focusing on the feeling of being immersed in the unknowable; feeling overwhelmed/awe-struck/terror-struck by nature or the universe. I also hope to expand within this film how we, in contemporary times of climate crises and pandemics, relate to the immersive unknowable and its mysteries, as well as how we deal with women who have (magical) power. For visual examples of the immersive unknowable that I find interesting please look at Appendix 4.

I've been going on vacations to this island in the north of The Netherlands for about twenty years now. The place is rural and quiet, and in that sense differs from my daily life and surroundings. Feelings I can't reach while being in my daily settings, I'm sure to reach when I'm on the island. I want to emphasise this "power" of the island in my film.

How do I plan to make it?

In my practice I make images like a diary. I am often inspired by a personal memory, feeling or something that I read which fascinates me. These inspirations range from memories of killing a bat as a child, to the painful experience of being followed by a van, to the workings of the universe.

After making images, I reflect on them but not purely analytical. I fantasise and put them together, as if decoding puzzles. I recombine them and make them personal. This process inspires me to make new images and to also narrow down the story if there is one.

I approach the script this way as well. I consider the script to be a part of my thesis, as well as part of my project. More about how I plan on writing the script can be found in my thesis outline.

¹ providing, involving, or characterised by deep absorption or immersion in something (such as an activity or a real or artificial environment)

² lying beyond the limits of human experience or understanding

As for the actual filming and editing of this movie: the script will provide me with a guideline for shooting images. It will tell me what moods I'm looking for and how I can fill in and translate the narrative visually.

A good moment for going to Ameland to film is unfortunately also dependent on the Corona situation. The island is part of The Netherlands, so it's not like going abroad, but if the government puts a restriction on public transport, it would be unwise (however still allowed) to go to the island. Generally speaking I think it's important that I consider the Corona situation for planning the exact dates of the trips to the island. I will look into borrowing a car in case of public transport restrictions.

Secondly, filming is also dependent on when I would have a good foundation, script wise. I don't think I should finish it entirely before shooting, as I want the images from the island to inform my script and vice versa. Even though my process is highly instinctive I will keep my general schedule (see below) as a framework. This means that I am setting myself periods in which I am solely focussing on writing the script or filming and editing, which should provide me with enough quality material to move on to the next part of my schedule.

What is my timetable?

I would have to visit the island every once in a while to film, and then edit/analyse, readjust the script, and then go and shoot again. My timetable is like a cycle that repeats itself. The duration of the cycle is somewhat dependent on how often I'm able to visit the island, considering Corona and the weather. This means I will prioritise going to Ameland to film during seasons with rough weather, and finding safe ways to travel.

Another thing worth mentioning is that because I will be doing another masters besides this one, I will be taking an extra year to graduate. This will allow me to visit the island more often, and to improve the quality of both the script and the movie.

In terms of ideal weather for my movie, autumn, winter and early spring are the best times to film on the island because the weather is more rough and wild. An overall and rough schedule looks like:

Dec 2020-Jan 2021: script writing
Jan-March 2021: filming and editing
April-Sept 2021: script writing
Oct 2021-Feb 2022: filming and editing
Feb-June 2022: finalising

Having never written a script before, or even taken on a movie project this big, I find it hard to fill in any more details at this moment. I will produce detailed two-monthly schedules on an ongoing basis throughout the project as it moves along.

Relation to my previous practice & larger context

The common thread running through my work are feelings that have to do with powerlessness, either negative or positive. Think: vulnerability, heartbreak, being in love, being overwhelmed (by the workings of the universe), gazing (male-gaze vs female-gaze), etc. Combined with my imagery being soft - in focus, light, and colours - and "subjective", my work is best compared to films like *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (see Appendix 1), *Recent Horizon* (by Elysia Crampton and Timur Si-Qin) (see Appendix 2), and *The Blair Witch Project* (see Appendix 3).

In my work I express how I experience the world around me through the stories that my personal memories and emotions provide. For example, one of my latest (horror) short films is a fictionalised autobiographical account of a personal memory in which I'm being followed by a

white van from ages 13 to 14. The images feel gritty, sometimes chaotic and panic'y, and mostly personal (see Appendix 3 "my own work: Then I Started Looking Back").

I took this feeling to being overwhelmed to a new (unfinished) project. In this project I combined texts about the mind-blowing workings of the universe with images that I made on my direct surroundings. I experienced feelings of the immersive unknowable about the universe, which I saw reflected in these daily things that surrounded me. The texts were written by Carlo Rovelli, a contemporary and important physicist (see Appendix 2 "my own work: Untitled"). One of his most interesting theories is that time is nothing more than human memories and emotions.

This new project will continue to deal with feelings that have to do with powerlessness, specifically the immersive unknowable, as well build on the visuality and workings of my practice so far.

Who can help me and how?

The first people that come to mind, and that already have been helping me are Simon and Natasha. Natasha, being my thesis supervisor, is able to help me with the writing process and the narrative of the script. Simon, with his experience and knowledge on script writing and making movies could also very much help me in that department.

I think Barend could help me a lot with the (technical) editing of my movie. I think that David, Ine and Rosella could help me with the narrative of the story as well as visuals.

Because the sound of the wind in the story is very important, I am looking into possibly working together with someone who's more savvy in this than I am. Barend could also help me with technical sound related questions.

Furthermore I'd also like to mention my fellow student Fileona, who is also interested in folklore and female power. She can help me through peer reviews.

Bibliography

Beard, M. (2018). *Women & power: a manifesto*. London: Profile Books Ltd.

Beard revisits the gender agenda and shows how history has treated powerful women. Her examples range from the classical world to the modern day, from Medusa and Athena to Theresa May and Hillary Clinton. Beard explores the cultural underpinnings of misogyny, considering the public voice of women, our cultural assumptions about women's relationship with power, and how powerful women resist being packaged into a male template.

Burke, E. (2015). *A philosophical enquiry into the origin of our ideas of the sublime and beautiful: 1759*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Original text on The Sublime

Federici, S. (2014). *Caliban and the witch: women, the body and primitive accumulation*. New York: Autonomedia.

Moving from the peasant revolts of the late Middle Ages to the witch hunts and the rise of mechanical philosophy, Federici investigates the capitalist rationalisation of social reproduction. She shows how the struggle against the rebel body and the conflict between body and mind are essential conditions for the development of labour power and ownership, two central principles of modern social organisation.

Fisher, M. (2016). *The Weird and The Eerie*. 1st ed. London: Watkins Media.

The weird and the eerie both fundamentally concern the outside and the unknown, which are not intrinsically horrifying, even if they are always unsettling. Perhaps a proper understanding of the human condition requires examination of liminal concepts such as the weird and eerie.

Jackson, S. (2019). *The Haunting of Hill House*. New York, New York: Penguin Books.

In this book the woman seems to become part of the house that she resides in. It drives her mad, and Jackson's writing style underlines that. Unclear but poetic. You don't realise that she's merging with the house because that is what's being described, but because you read about her inner thoughts and feelings. I feel like I don't fully understand yet, but I am very intrigued by this book, and I think the theme of merging with your surroundings is interesting for the Rixt story.

Johnson, D. (2017). *Fen*. 1st ed. New York: Vintage Publishing, pp.1, 208.

This book is an anthology of modern folklore stories made up by Johnson. The stories oftentimes have female main characters, and topics like sexuality and desire are certainly not avoided. There is an interesting fusion between human beings, animals, and surroundings; it feels more primal and closer to magic.

Lloyd, G. (2018). *Reclaiming wonder: after the sublime*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Genevieve Lloyd illuminates and challenges some perplexing aspects of contemporary attitudes to wonder. Central to her argument is the claim that wonder has come to be largely eclipsed by the allure of the notion of the Sublime a concept closely associated with Romantic Idealism. Lloyd offers us a renewed sense of wonder, reconnected with its philosophical history.

Mamet, D. (1994). *On directing film*. London: Penguin.

A masterclass on the art of directing from the Pulitzer Prize-winning David Mamet illuminates how a film comes to be. He looks at every aspect of directing; from script to cutting room; to show the many tasks directors undertake in reaching their prime objective: presenting a story that will be understood by the audience and has the power to be both surprising and inevitable at the same time. Based on a series of classes Mamet taught at Columbia University's film school.

Mann, B. (2006). *Women's liberation and the sublime: feminism, postmodernism, environment*. New York: Oxford University Press.

This book is a report on the state of feminist thinking and practice after the linguistic turn. A critical assessment of masculinist notions of the sublime in modern and postmodern accounts grounds the author's positive and constructive recuperation of sublime experience in a feminist voice.

***Marianne*. (2019). [Streamed] Los Gatos: Netflix.**

A famous horror writer who is lured back to her hometown discovers that the evil spirit who plagues her dreams is now wreaking havoc in the real world.

Shelley, M. (2014). *Frankenstein*. 1st ed. London: Penguin Books Ltd.

High romanticism, and also deals with feelings of The Sublime. I would say that Frankenstein's monster is at first awe-struck by the world, and then terror-struck when he experiences rejection from his maker. It's basically a self-fulfilling prophecy; he's seen as evil and thus becomes evil. I'm interested in this dynamic, which is also part of the Rixt story.

***The Witch: A New England Folktale*. (2015). Universal City, California: Universal Pictures.**

This movie is about a young woman deciding to become a witch, after being persistently perceived as such.

Appendix 1

Comparison is mostly in cinematography; the use of light and soft focus. Besides that, Dicht Bij is a love letter, comparable to the narrative of some scenes in Eternal Sunshine.

Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind



my own work, Dicht Bij Mij Vandaan



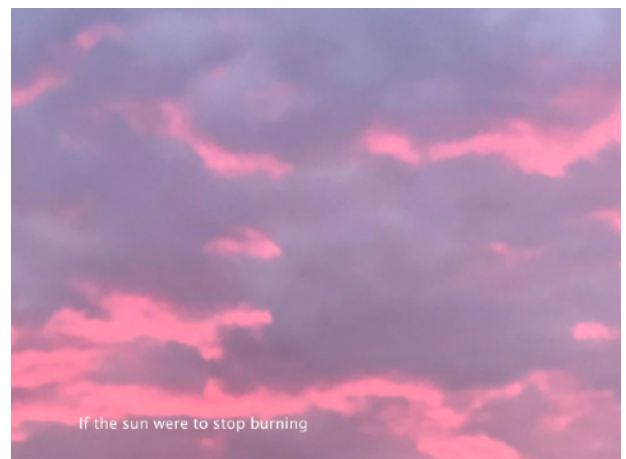
Appendix 2

Comparison is in cinematography; images focussed on natural surroundings, and the use of "subtitles". The message of Recent Horizon is in conversation with both Untitled - because of the references to physics - and Dicht Bij - because of the love letter feel.

Recent Horizon



my own work, untitled



Appendix 3

Comparison is mostly in cinematography; the handheld camera effect, being crowded in (by trees or vans), and a visual curiosity. Both movies convey emotional distress.

The Blair Witch Project



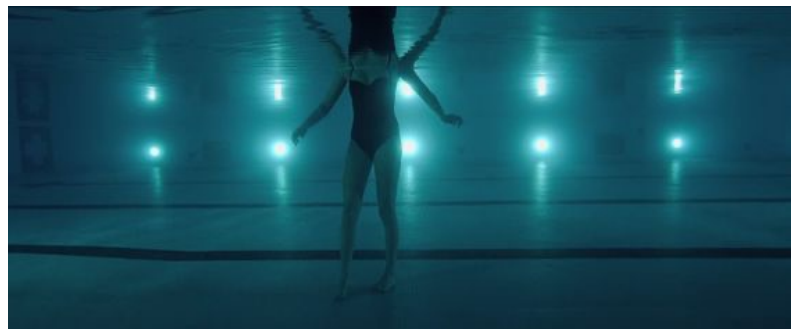
my own work, Then I Started Looking Back



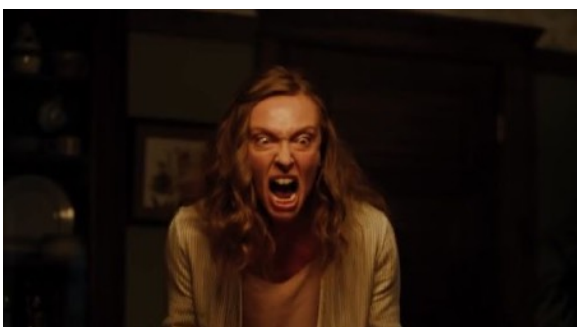
Appendix 4



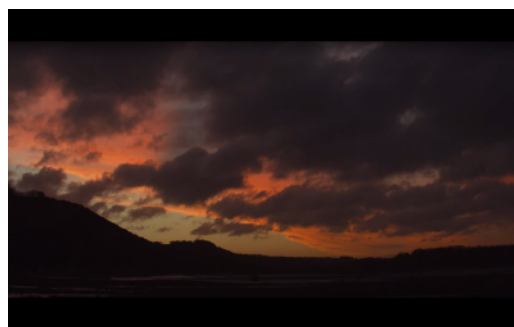
Carnivale



It Follows



Hereditary



Marianne