

# The Immersive<sup>1</sup> Unknowable<sup>2</sup>

---

Thesis outline by Elysa Kooijman

November 16 2020

## Statement

My thesis is going to be a combination of a creative document and a reflection on my practice. The creative element will be a script for my shortfilm. I want the text to be both reflective of, and formative for, my movie and my practice.

## Background

The common thread running through all of 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* (cinematography), *Recent Horizon* (by Elysa Crampton and Timur Si-Qin) (image and form), and *The Blair Witch Project* (cinematography). More about this can be found in the appendixes of my project proposal.

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.

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 about my direct surroundings; light dancing on the wall, the movement of water, the texture of fruit, the colour of the sky. 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. One of his most interesting theories is that time is nothing more than human memories and emotions.

For my graduation project I want to continue focussing on a contemporary and feminist idea/feeling of the immersive unknowable; feeling overwhelmed/awe-struck/terror-struck by nature or the universe. These feelings are universal in times of climate crisis and the pandemic. I want to tell my experiences with these feelings through a folklore story that is native to a place that is very dear to my heart: Wadden island Ameland. 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 translate this native folklore story to 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

---

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

<sup>2</sup> lying beyond the limits of human experience or understanding

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 strands the ships. 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: SJOEEEEEEEEERD. 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. 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.

### **What & how**

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 will be writing about the island and about events in the Rixt story, creatively interpret and analyse these writings, which will lead me to making more of them. They will be formative for the images in the movie.

Breaking up the story into events, or "beats", will allow me to get an overview of the story, and allow me to play around with its narrative.

Writing in this way about the island allows me to develop the Rixt character, as well as illustrate what some of the actual shots in the movie will look like.

As for the reflecting on my practice part of the thesis: alongside of this masters I'll be doing another masters as well: Philosophy of Humanity and Culture. This means I will have two years for my graduation. In this second masters I'll academically handle themes and philosophies that are reflected in my creative practice. This means that this second masters will provide me with the framework and information to reflect on my creative practice, and to critically contextualise it. This means that I will be looking at my practice through the lens of relevant philosophical theories.

The underlining question that I want to research in my thesis is

*To what extent does female power and powerlessness fit into a contemporary take on the immersive unknowable, and how does that relate to my body of work?*

### **Outlining Topics**

1. Script for Rixt movie
2. An interrogation of the immersive unknowable
3. Perception of female (magical/witch) power and powerlessness
4. Relation to my body of work

The immersive unknowable relates to the story of Rixt in the sense that Rixt is the embodiment of the scary side of nature. If the immersive unknowable in this case means being terror-struck by the awesomeness of nature; people are certainly scared of what the sea and the nature of Ameland can do.

I think this story also relates to female power, because Rixt basically has a lot of power and she's being punished for it.

## 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.