

Nihal Goel's

# Text on Practice

In my time so far in Piet Zwart's master program, I have worked on several films. A recurring theme that appears in my work is a use of symbolism and metaphors to explore topics of inaction, deprived desires and effects of environment on the consciousness.

The short film I made for the eye film museum's research labs is titled "I'm here" and it explores the phenomena of the distance between subconscious thought and conscious action. The film consists of moving images of everyday residential surroundings. It takes the perspective of the viewer as the key character and takes them through sequences of images layered with text. Dying house plants are used as a metaphor for ideas, actions and/or ambitions that were neglected and forgotten even though they were of potential importance and perhaps even assumed necessity to the protagonist.

The project started with generation of ideas for scenes<sup>1</sup> that were loosely connected with the theme of urgency and broader topics such as war, climate change and industrialisation. Most of these were transcribed from voice recordings that I would record abruptly without a lot of planning or forethought. I wanted to use these broader topics as a real world example of consequence of neglect and inaction and employ feelings of helplessness in relation to such events. Since awareness was a key aspect of exploration in my project, I wanted the viewer to become acutely aware of the space that they were watching this film in. I planned on using very long duration, static white shots to light up the cinema room so that the viewer can easily see the space and their neighbours, and would have time to break out of the screen, hoping that this would point out how selective our awareness is.

---

<sup>1</sup> Scribbled scenes and ideas :

pigeon explodes, urgency, sirens, fluorescence, space, ambience, focus on the darkness  
re-contextualise the future, ice sheets, glistening, bubbles, pop, bright red orange yellow, geometric boxes, solid patterns flat. viewer must be aware that the maker is aware of the space they inhabit graphic imagery, skin, veins, blood. Point the viewers in space and bring them to current space and use strobe to wake them, skin splits slowly, gross and grotesque musculature, whale fat, demolished, dark, feeble, weak, pathetic, skinny man falling apart breathing and heartbeats

To realise the images in my project, I intended to use Artificial Intelligence for image generation. However the limitations of current state of Artificial Intelligence quickly made it clear that such tools would be insufficient to realise the aforementioned moving image sequences. This led to reflection on the origins of my interest in this topic and why I wanted to make such a film. I have a deep interest in psychology of addiction. Specifically the research on role of dopamine in decision making (Rogers, 2011) and how its very easy for short term gratification to overpower long term decisions. In her writings, psychologist and researcher Anna Lembke discusses the notion of subconscious mind and how some actions generated by it can only be realised by the conscious brain in retrospect (Lembke, 2021). I've certainly had experiences where I would neglect actions that were of importance to me, for no apparent reason. The said tasks were not always unpleasant or cumbersome either, and would always leave me puzzled so as to why I would delay taking action. This realisation that there were a lot of factors at play in my decision making, some of which external to my conscious mind and not easily understandable in the moment, was a very crucial discovery for me.

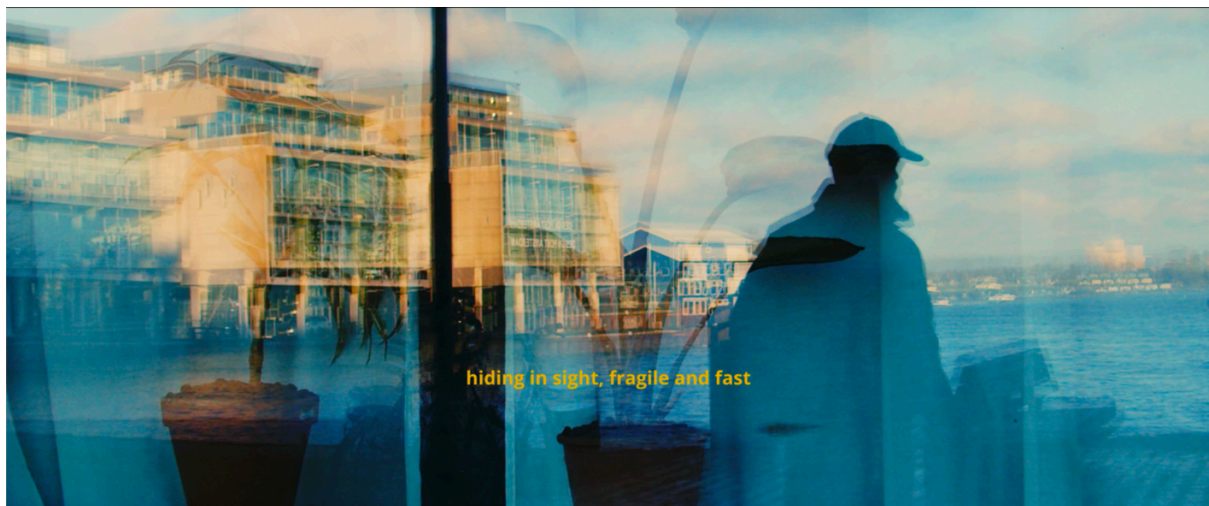
For the project I decided to take a more personal and individualised approach. Instead of addressing the theme through such broad topics as climate change, a more personal metaphor of neglect was used which in my case were my dying houseplants.



The first version of the film consisted of black and white shots of plants with their leaves falling apart, images of a person working in the background who is the neglectful caretaker and warped shots of various plants and trees in the residential neighbourhood to generate an eerie and depressing atmosphere, symbolic of loss of life and connected to the death of plants.

In this version, the symbols and scenes felt too direct to me. I aspire to make visual and textual sequences as open-ended as possible while preserving the core themes so that viewers can project their own experiences and memories on the metaphors. I have been greatly inspired by songwriting of artists like Thom Yorke. In the song "Nude" (Radiohead, 2007) he opens with "Don't get any big ideas they're not gonna happen" without a mention of what the "big ideas" are, allowing the listener to translate it into current/past events of their lives.

Also the first version of the film lacked linearity and it seemed that the phenomena of neglect needed a past, present and potential future to make sense. So for the second and final version of the film the shots were rearranged to give the film a more linear flow. I also used shots of flora in residential neighbourhood, water and trees and birds, though this time in very vivid and saturated colours and mostly in slow motion.



Time was slowed down in most sequences to give the viewer, space for recalling memories and generating projections. It was important for me to have the viewer be the protagonist for this purpose also so I used a shot of a reflection of the person looking directly at themselves and also partially at the houseplants in front of them to frame them as the neglectful caretaker.



Death is a very strong symbol here because it emphasises the permanence of consequences of inaction. Usually for me, once I become aware of my neglect, it brings up a variety of emotions. Sometimes that can be paralysing regret, other times its acceptance and moving forward and sometimes its rejection of the circumstance and hasty attempts to rectify the situation. This is contrasted with the knowledge that the world is indifferent to my situation which I find somehow very calming. The soundtrack that I used in the film, for me, brings out this feeling of bitter-sweet tranquility.



After making the two versions I realised that the differences in the two films were in part due to the effects of my own environment. The first version was mostly shot and edited in the month of December when the skies were grey,

days were short with barely any light and I was mostly isolated with most of my friends away for holidays. Perhaps this translated into the images being grey and a bit depressing in nature. In contrast the first few weeks of January were quite sunny and a relief from the previous months. That sense of relief was also translated into the final version of the film in the form of the various vivid colours and slow motion shots. And hence the process and outcome were entangled around the theme of uncontrollable forces affecting my being and actions.



The first draft i made for the eye project in November, titled "Ijsje", has a few parallel themes in terms of current actions affecting the future and the importance and weight of decisions. Both films use a lot of metaphors and end on a unresolved ambiguous note, tending in the direction of despair and regret. I like the exploration of sombre reality in film. Films like "Manchester by the Sea" by Kenneth Lonergan have had great influence on me. In this film the protagonist doesn't end up victorious and with resolved internal conflicts. I think thats a more accurate picture of reality for a lot of lives and individuals.

For my next project I am also exploring the effects of environment on beings but this time environments which are abstracted from our day to day reality. I am pointing my camera at the industrial structures of the port of Rotterdam and Amsterdam and the areas just outside big cities.

For this project I am working backwards from my usual methodology. Usually I start with concrete themes and ideas I want to explore, even if the precise plot isn't defined. But for this project I am starting with recording the images first.

Its an experiment in letting the effects of the environment dictate the story. My role would be to translate these effects into moving images. I will be spending multiple days in these spaces, trying to identify what is it that draws me to them.



The seed for this project originated when I showed my eye film to my housemate. He is very familiar with the locations that the film was shot in. Nonetheless he told me that through my images, he saw these spaces in a new way. Perhaps because they were my interpretation of those surroundings. Ports and industries play a big role in our lives, but they are usually hidden from sight. Weird unfamiliar structures that people don't know much about. What kind of events happen in these surroundings? What kind of rules do you need to comply with to negotiate your presence in these spaces? There is a lot of illegal activities in these places and its a very masculine atmosphere. It feels like you are not supposed to be there. The usual safety barriers for protecting people are often non-existent. For instance, most of the rail road crossings that I witnessed, didn't have any physical barriers. Some didn't even have any stop lights. It feels like an otherworldly jungle, full of sounds and movement. But one that is not meant to support bodies.



I am drawn to spaces which are not easy to access. For instance, I like to do a lot of hiking especially on difficult trails where you really need to plan the route, learn some techniques and be very focused at all times to minimise risk. Perhaps I am hoping to discover something rare in these spaces. Something that maybe you only get to witness or experience if you make an effort to look beyond the artificial boundaries of cities.

## References

Rogers, R.D, 2011. The Roles of Dopamine and Serotonin in Decision Making: Evidence from Pharmacological Experiments in Humans: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3055502/> [

Lembke, A, 2021-, Dopamine Nation: Finding Balance in the Age of Indulgence. [New York, New York], Dutton, an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC

Radiohead, 2007. "Nude" [lyrics] from "In Rainbows" [Album]

Manchester by the Sea, 2016. [film] Directed by Kenneth Lonergan.