

Reflections on Realities of Constructed Complexity - A Letter to Leni Tanzer

“The inhabitants of the village of Shivakoreni were not sure whether it was true that on the other side of the Andes there was a monstrously large body of water, an ocean. In addition, there was the fact that this monstrous water, the Pacific, was supposedly salty. We drove to a restaurant on the beach a little south of Lima to eat. But our two Indian delegates didn’t order anything. They went silent and looked out over the breakers. They didn’t approach the water, just stared at it. Then one asked for a bottle. I gave him my empty beer bottle. No, that wasn’t right, it had to be a bottle that you could seal well. So I bought a bottle of cheap Chilean red, had it uncorked, and poured the wine out into the sand. We sent the bottle to the kitchen to be cleaned as carefully as possible. Then the men took the bottle and went, without a word, to the shoreline. Still wearing the new blue jeans, sneakers, and T-shirts that we had bought for them at the market, they waded in to the waves. They waded, looking over the expanse of the Pacific Ocean, until the water reached their underarms. Then, they took a taste of the water, filled the bottle and sealed it carefully with a cork. This bottle filled with water was their proof for the village that there really was an ocean. I asked cautiously whether it wasn’t just a part of the truth. No, they said, if there is a bottle of seawater, then the whole ocean must be true as well.”

“From then on, what constitutes truth - or, to put it in much simpler form, what constitutes reality - became a greater mystery to me than it had been” (Herzog 2010).

These are the words of Herzog giving a lecture in Milano, Italy, where he speaks of the difficulty in understanding the concept of truth, the concept of reality. Something that will challenge all of us continuously will fuel us with a great deal of fear and leave us in a state of perpetual misunderstanding. The journey I embark on derives from this deep sense of misunderstanding and is accompanied by a strong desire to come to an understanding. It may have started out as a quest to find a truth to reality, a real to sense of self. I realise the answers may never be absolute and maybe they shouldn’t be. Our reality is a constructed and unique perception of our self and everything around us. This reality translates, transmits, entails our entire unique notion about our self and the world, everything we believe to be existing vs. non-existing, real vs. fictional, true vs. false. In understanding this subjectivity of reality lays far more a challenge and a chance of finding a truth, a ‘real’ to it.

My ears are ringing, the loud and numerous noises that normally enter and irritate now seem far away, like someone grabbed them in a firm grip, holding them under water.

The victims of a bully and a toilet bowl. Or is it me, the other way around. I'm the one being held under water. I can't hear, can't breathe.

Adrenaline coursing, eyes unable to focus as they're trying to clasp on to the physical whereabouts of my being. I'm moving, moving while sitting frozen in my seat.

It's so crowded in here, strange knees touching mine, strange how they unlike other times give me a careful sense of comfort, like this minor contact is a sign of compassion instead of limited space.

The exchange of blank stares continues as I force myself into motion. Leaving the knees of my neighbour behind. It's time to get off.

My scream reaches the surface only as worn out bubbles, my inner world manifests itself as bad Prosecco. 'Does nobody know today is not an ordinary day!' This will be my third time meeting her. I don't know this woman and yet she's managed to fuck it all up.

She must have known something of this magnitude was coming, awaiting me reserved and calm with a box of tissues and a houseplant to keep her practice cosy.

Just some fundamental questions she asked. Who are you? Who are your mother and father? He passed? How old were you? How did that make you feel? Nothing? You don't remember? Were they still together when he passed? No? Why not? You don't know? Aren't you curious to know what happened? You never speak about it?

Dear Leni,

I'm glad to finally have the courage to approach you.

My name is Lisa-Marie Vlietstra and this is my final year studying photography at the Gerrit-Rietveld Academy in Amsterdam.

Currently I'm writing a thesis on the complexities of understanding the concept of our reality.

A universal desire that's present in all of us, to distinct what is real concerning our reality and what is not. I want to question the possibility of ever accomplishing this distinction.

We spend our entire life living a reality that can be reduced to our perception of how we see the world and how we see ourselves in it. Therefore we have to acknowledge that reality can only be of a subjective nature. But if our reality is of a subjective nature, how can we ever establish what is true and what is false? Distinguish the fictional from the factual. Fiction from reality? Can there ever be an absolute distinction?

According to Jacques Lacan the entire comprehension of our existence is fictional, as he states that we are only able to comprehend reality if we 'mediate' it through self made transformations of everything that our reality entails including a transformation of self. He also believes that the concepts of 'reality' and the 'self' are intrinsically connected, as one cannot exist without the other.

In his article 'the mirror stage' he writes about the phase in human life when we start to develop a sense of being a 'being'. A period in which we start to act and engage on our self, our enviroing objects and the other human beings that surround us. We take in images of them and transform them, which allows these images to be cast into what Lacan calls; the imaginary order; the realm of our fantasy, composed through invested images of imagos; images of main importance in the life of a human.

This imaginary order can also be seen as our 'world', as the imago's function to establish a relation between our reality and us.

To place ourselves in this mediated reality, we also need to assume our own image. This imaginary image of the self is referred to as the ego or ideal I and is projected as more complete and unified than we actually are.

Emphasizing that this identification with the image itself is "fictional" as is the image, therefore this ideal I will never fit our actual experience of existence and will continue to disrupt our experience of self. It seems we are stuck with an ego that is fabricated and therefore Lacan claims we become characters inside our own lives as fictional stories and play the role of the protagonist in our own autobiography. But if we have become characters in a reality, mediated through our imagination, it becomes increasingly difficult, if not impossible to comprehend when something is 'real' in our reality and when it is fictive. I prefer to use the word 'when' instead of 'what' as these conceptions derive from our perception thus can never be absolute and are sensitive to alteration.

Maybe the more important question is; should we even desire this distinction?

I'm sharing with you my reflections on the subject because this idea of being a fictional character in life, directs my attention towards the medium of cinema. You've managed to leave a tremendous impression on me as a 'little girl' named Eva. I believe it to be the first role you've ever played in a movie; *The Seventh Continent* by Michael Haneke, you starring as young daughter next to Birgit Doll, who takes on the role of your mother and Dieter Berner as your father, portraying a family that commits collective suicide.

I encountered this family of three with gloomy outlook, preoccupied with the insignificant and dreadful things in their day-to-day life; spending their days away at work, in supermarkets and in carwashes. The meaningless and depressed nature of their lives finds reinforcement through Haneke's unrelenting long takes and close shots of the family's breakfast table, their hands at work and mostly their faces that always seem to be on the brink of spilling out emotions that they are in fact estranged from.

There is no space and most important no understanding of emotions. The alienation from themselves and their relationships leaves them with nothing but empty commodities thus nothing to live for. The sad fact that this family, living in this narrow western world of capitalist civilisation in which affection has become residual, functions as the main directive of the film. While from the beginning of the movie this tragic plan of committing suicide is set into motion, the viewer is uninformed.

The preparations take place almost unnoticeable, but become more pertinent as the movie develops, gradually revealing the actual goal of the family. The three of you having what seems to be a festive dinner is in hind sight your 'last supper', as you finish the leftovers the next morning and begin demolishing your entire home. You panic and cry hysterically when your father destroys the aquarium as he slings his hammer shattering the glass of the fish tank. Water is pouring as the fish gasp for air sliding all over the floor meeting their end in the midst of broken glass.

This is one of the rare moments where affection is expressed as your mother holds you in her arms trying to console you. In the last apocalyptic half hour of the film when final motions have been set into action and you have perished as the first one of the family, Anna cries out in tremendous panic, rocking you and clasping on to your lifeless body. As if only then she realises what the implications of this death wish are. In this way Haneke wants to show us that authentic sensibility can find consolation only in death.

This movie left a profound imprint behind, but not only because of the enormous tragedy it depicts. When I set out to contact you, I wrote another letter. A letter addressed to Eva, explaining her why it's so important for me to contact you, to contact her.

Dear Eva,

I'll refer to you as Eva for now and hope I don't disturb you by doing so.

It's simply who I encountered on the screen. It's who I know you to be or, who I knew you to be seems more correct as I watched you die.

I was so upset, trapped inside the frozen facts of your reality, unable to distinguish them from mine, unable to move around the events of time, my eyelids unwilling to close off to the tragedy in front.

I got lost, buried myself in your story, filled with so many questions to ask you about your life.

To study it carefully would be wise, to understand every detail of your world and your perception of it. You we're so young. Unaware of being destined to live one of the heavier lives.

It was never your decision to end it, like many of us you became victim of a decision that was made by others. I can still see you bravely living up to a destiny your parents chose for you and themselves, a true family.

You were innocent, not able to comprehend the implications of the actions set in motion. You did as you were told. The worst thing in a young mind is to let your mother and father down that must have been most dominant in your experience. How to avoid disappointment. In the end you were lucky to leave behind the live that was given to you when the last scene was shot. The only thing you had in common with her in real life was that she was also a young girl. Leni is it? Leni Tanzer.

The last role you played was in 1995, 6 years after you left the role of Eva and can't imagine you were able to leave Eva behind completely. Maybe that's why you never pursued an acting career as you got older. Consumed by your first and most tragic character. Something you probably couldn't realise at the time you were playing her. Unaware of the implications this role would have for you in the future.

There is a particular experience Leni has in common with Eva; to be placed in a reality that you are unable to comprehend. Eva couldn't possibly comprehend the reality forced on her by her parents. As Leni couldn't possibly have comprehended the reality she was portraying.

I feel strongly related to you, being in this position. To have a completely different understanding of what your reality seemed to be as to what it is now.

I can't help but wonder how your perception on the character you played as young girl must have changed as you got older. How this affected you and might still affect you.

I'm trying to find out if Eva is still a part of you, I think she has to be.

Sincerely yours,
Lisa

As you must know the unification between the actor and his role is desired in the creation of a fictional character. But how does this duality manifest itself in the person that takes on this fictitious character? Does this alternate reality leave traces behind after the acting is done? In the creation of cinema, fiction and reality become inseparably entangled, plaguing us even more so than in real life.

Of course you are not the only one to whom applies this fate.

A director who loses himself in the fiction he creates is Lars von Trier. In his dogma film *The Idiots* 1998, he creates a tight knit group of people who 'act' being mentally disabled, live together in a house that is not theirs, share convictions implanted by Stoffer; leader of the pack. They detest the bourgeois way of life and try to find their 'inner idiot' to break free from the set conventions of today's society.

They provoke their surroundings by 'spazzing', conveying their contempt of the set standards their community lives by. The characters are outcasts, come from difficult homes, making them fragile and susceptible to the convictions of Stoffer who during the film reveals a narcissistic, manipulative and complex personality that enfeebles his vision, leaving it to be nothing more than a psychological play for power. Jesper Jargil documents the making of *The Idiots* in his film *The Humiliated*.

One of his conditions was that he could film without restrictions and limitations to his access.

As viewers we are 'looking in', observing the actors relating to each other as characters and themselves. We witness their ongoing discussions with Von Trier about the true intentions of particular scenes and their credibility. The set becomes their habitat as well as decor, eating, drinking, discussing by candlelight and 'spazzing' for fun as they start to embody their characters more and more. This film was shown during IDFA 2013 and Jesper Jargil was present, sharing that Lars von Trier wrote the entire script in 62 hours, locked in a hotel room snorting coke, writing relentlessly.

On the very last day of shooting Von Trier surprised him by handing over his secretly kept audio diary. 'Here' he said, 'do with it what you want, you might be able to use it'.

The material reveals his most private thoughts on the work in progress, and his reflections of an almost philosophical nature on his existence and his vulnerability as a filmmaker, as he claims to be 'terrified of his own talent'. He speaks of a tremendous sense of loneliness in his desire for the story and characters to become real.

This desire manifests itself in his way of working with his actors that entails psychological and manipulative characteristics, which not only affect the actors but himself as well. The quick and intense written script, his manipulative behaviour on set and his shared private reflections lead to thinking that the characters in the film are projections of himself and his inner world.

As Von Trier shows a great likeness to Stoffer, the protagonist of his film and in the character of 'the caring nurse' we can recognize a projection of someone he longs for, someone to console him.

He gets lost in the relations he creates with his actors as real people and as characters, as he develops actual feelings for the actress that embodies 'the caring nurse', thus placing himself in the middle of the fiction he creates, wanting to be part of it. In the end of the film he also speaks of the dramatic consequence that the role of the nurse is 'broken', because the conflict in the relation between him and her as real person ruined her fictional character.

In the end we witness Von Trier feeling left out while his actors are enjoying themselves; when a night they spend together in the house doesn't bring him what he expects, he gets angry and isolates himself sulking like a child with a blanket wrapped around him.

He is left alone with the realisation that his expectations can never be met.

The increasing need to seek a glimpse of my own image worries me.

On my way to her again I view moist streets through slightly damaged windows, my own fascinated reflection.

When we pass something dark my outline shows itself, the scratches on the plastic surface eroding my face. I resist the urge to touch, attempting to feel a connection.

What is it I am trying to find when I read into these pupils that stare at me.

The desire for answers she provides me with?

Not concerned with words I intend to find clues elsewhere.

She bought new flowers, long stems carrying cobalt colour.

The bouquet before lost its fresh presence like many others preceding.

I witness their ripening and withering over a three-session time span.

They too tire out from endless contemplation.

When our session is over it's time for me to leave.

My eyes reflect a desire to hide, worn out from staring at her, talking about me.

Trying to decipher her every thought, a hunt for the slightest reaction. It's endless trying to see.

Outside again, accompanied by my reflection in window shops.

As I exhale my breath freezes when it escapes my mouth.

The ride back underneath lambent TL light gives my reflection a yellow glow, darkens my sockets, now I am unable to stare at myself. In this yellow dim I will make my way home.

He opens the door and as I embrace him I search for the familiar clarity of my image awaiting me in the hallway mirror.

The desire from Lars von Trier to let his fictional creation become reality can be seen as different and yet as similar to the desire to distinct the real from the fictive to comprehend our reality.

These desires reflect two sides of the same coin as they are inextricably linked to one another.

We will always strive towards a reality, a self that is more desirable than the one we currently perceive to be true. Whether we try to escape our true selves' through fiction or try to define our true selves' by attempting to eliminate fiction from our reality, at one point we realise we'll never succeed.

This realisation can occur to us when our perception of reality clashes profoundly with another.

When we find ourselves confronted with a reality that is so different from the one we hold as true, this collision provides us with a shock of awareness that makes us question our perception of this truth and possibly leads to the collapse of our reality. The 'free man' Anwar Congo in Joshua Oppenheimer's film *The Act of Killing* experiences this collapse all too well, as does the director himself.

"What I've always been most interested in is exposing the way stories and fantasies reconstitute our everyday reality. What appears to be non-fiction is not only totally mysterious, unfathomable, and strange when you really look at what it is. It's also the way we cope with that strangeness, and live with it. Telling ourselves stories that we forget that we're telling so that we can make sense of an inscrutable reality"
(Oppenheimer 2013).

The film functions as a document of truth as it sheds light on the genocide of millions of communists, ethnic Chinese and intellectuals that occurred in Indonesia in 1965. Many of these killings have been carried out by gangsters; who have not only escaped prosecution, but are now declared local heroes. To understand this grotesque and monstrous reality, Oppenheimer interviews the killers and assists them in reconstructing their 'crimes', to create imaginative scenes about the killings 'in whatever way they wished'.

Anwar Congo is the 41th killer he meets and this man becomes The Act of Killing's principal character. Oppenheimer senses Anwar's pain is close to the surface, making him an interesting subject that during the film provides us with a deep insight into the ambiguities of the human self-image. They work most intimately together to revisit old killing sites, re-enact killings, act out scenes from Anwar's imagination and even engage in role play as Anwar acts out scenes where he plays the victim himself.

Realization of Anwar sets in while filming these scenes as the power of drama takes hold of him.

He starts to see his own actions as if for the first time- finally real. He finds himself confronted with his own brutality. Oppenheimer is fascinated by how present his guilt is yet he has no language for it.

In one of the first scenes with Anwar, he lets him dance the cha-cha where he killed hundreds of people. Anwar says he dances because he wants to forget.

He also describes taking on an alter ego while killing. He and his friends would watch an Elvis musical or gangster film, he would transport this character onto himself and would walk out of the movie like a gangster who walked off the screen and go about killing happily. What he seems to borrow from the movie is a kind of psychic distancing, as when he acts and performs there's an imagined spectatorship; he's being watched by an 'audience'.

He needs to embody this fictional character, as he is unable to be himself in the moment of taking a life. Oppenheimer claims the wider relevance of this matter concerns us all, namely our need to escape reality through fiction and storytelling. Anwar used the film making process the same way he used the Elvis Presley movies, to distance himself from the act of killing, to escape the pain. At the same he was drawn to this pain, to the most horrifying memories and the reenactments of them, as these caused the very pain he's trying to deny; 'It's like he was trying to build up a cinematic-psychic scar tissue over his wound.'

Anwar hoped the film would lead him towards redemption. He believed that if he could make a beautiful family film about mass killings, he could somehow put things right. In the last scene with Anwar we witness him, once again, revisiting his killing site where he earlier on dances the cha-cha. This time we find him in utter state of abhorrence. Standing on that rooftop, the Indonesian man finds himself overcome with remorse. It's as if his body catches up with the truth before his mind will, leaving him to dry heave his way through, creating the most disturbing footage. He realizes that no matter how much storytelling he will do, he'll never be able to replace the horror with fiction, never bridge the gap between his fictional self and the reality of what he's done.

"I wanted to say this stupid thing that Americans say; "It's okay" And it was an awful moment; I'll never forget this feeling of, "Oh no, of course, he's choking now because it's not okay. And there's nothing I can say that will make it okay ever again. He's choking on the realization, even if it's unconscious, that he's destroyed. It's like he's trying to vomit up the ghosts that haunt him, only to discover that he is the ghost.

He is his past, and nothing will come up, there's nothing to come up; he'll never escape himself"
(Oppenheimer 2013).

Werner Herzog became one of the executive producers of *The Act of Killing*.

His vision on the creation of Cinema makes us consider the power that fiction has to reveal truth. In his lecture I refer to in the beginning, he states that reality should not be overestimated in its importance nor should the factual, as these alone are inadequate in providing a full comprehension of our existence. What reality and facts can't provide us with is insight on a deeper level, a profound understanding, a state of illumination from which a deeper level of truth emerges. This deeper layer of truth – a poetic, ecstatic truth can be presented to us through the fine arts such as music, literature and cinema.

The Act of Killing becomes a documentary of the imagination rather than a document on a tragic historical event in Indonesia. The embodiment of Anwar's imagination provides us with a deeper understanding and insight on his reality and sense of self, as it does for Anwar as well.

In that sense the fictional translation of Anwar's inner world shows us a greater truth than the observational documentary footage ever could. Your part in *The Seventh Continent* visualized a truth for me as well.

It brought me to an understanding of my own reality I couldn't have imagined before viewing this film.

For that I thank you.

Sincerely yours,

Lisa-Marie Vlietstra

Wagashi, colourful forms and textures that reveal a hidden poetry of sugar, there to remind me that the depths of life can be viewed sweet.

As I flip through the graphics of Japanese confection, observe the shapes drenched in pastel, a calm revelation fills me with certainty. In this moment I exist without worry.

A pink pressed square, in the middle a thin line of glazed brown, pays tribute to the Japanese beach plover. A water bird, Hamachidori that sings when he flies and leaves his footprints on the sands of beaches that host him, the confection a representation of his footprints.

Outside the clouds are filled with the same shade of pink. The lightness of life can be a treat.

This is the last time I sit down in her practice. The subtle changes in my chair's position facing her don't provoke me any longer.

They have become irrelevant.

I leave her and the chair with firm conviction not to return.

The thought strikes me with a blend of fear and courage, as the evening warms my skin that shivers with anticipation. The water of the canal circles around the remains of a bird's nest.

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