

FILMING THE IMPOSSIBLE

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Spring 2005. African migrants who got tired of waiting assail the EU-sponsored gates around the Spanish enclave of Ceuta in the North of Morocco. Moroccan and Spanish authorities respond rough-handedly to the violence. Deadly victims are the result, Ceuta is world news and the despair of many Africans a reality – for a while. Ever since the number of refugees waiting by the Southern border of Europe has never stopped to increase – but not in the media. Even today they are still hiding, some of them for years on end, in the woods around Ceuta and Tanger – the upper end of the African continent – waiting for the right moment to cross the Strait of Gibraltar. They are being repatriated to Mali or Senegal or, worse even, dropped in the Sahara desert. Some of them wash ashore on the beaches of the Canary Islands. Or even worse, they end up on the bottom of the strait between Africa and Europe.

Spring 2006. Herman Asselberghs travels from Brussels to Ceuta – from the centre of Europe to the border. In the process he manifests himself once again as a media artist in the most literal sense of the word. He looks at the world through the media, where vague notions take shape – notions playing an important role in his work: the Palestinians, 11 September, globalization, hostages and hostage takers, Fortress Europe, the sans-papiers, life and death. The other way round he looks at the media through the world. A trip to Palestine is the starting point for *a.m./p.m.*, a trip to Ceuta for *capsular*. Precisely for that reason the city of Brussels – the place where he lives and works – plays some major or minor part in each of his videos. As an unrecognizable part of the image of the globalized world in *a.m./p.m.*; as a place where the world

and the media meet up in *proof of life*; as the heart of Europe in *capsular*; as a coda in *Futur antérieur*. The city as a haven and as protection. As a beacon, a shelter, a capsule.

AS IF WE WERE CAPSULAR

The glass cage, which protects and offers freedom, is more than a symbol in *capsular*. It comes in various shapes. Its earliest appearance is that of a hothouse with fairy lights in a Royal Botanical Garden. Its elegant architecture is a reference to the crystal palaces from the nineteenth century, when the combination of cast iron, cast cement and cast glass made it possible to create light houses (literally: full of light and seemingly weightless). Open and shut at the same time; protective and ever so fragile. A crowned building as proof of the extent of the power of its owner: (plants from all over) the world under a single roof. These glass cages – Walter Benjamin recognized them in the galleries of nineteenth-century Paris; the protected passages along which the flaneur moved from one street to the next – are the distant forerunners of the glass towers in the city of the twentieth century: visible and invisible at the same time, reflecting and absorbing, very material and yet never the same. Symbols of power and of vulnerability – that much we know since 11 September 2001, the day the world was collectively glued to that other glass cage in our living rooms: the television and the computer.

The image of the idyllic hothouse is positioned all the way in front of the video, preceded by nothing but signal lights in the night. A reassuring warning, a beacon for possible danger. The signals are meant for another capsule, drifting somewhere out in the open sea. The glass cage of the ferry; a floating aquarium on its way from somewhere to nowhere. The capsule as a means of transport – a medium in order to relocate ourselves to exotic paradises: this was also the intention of the nineteenth-century hothouse and its flora, of the galleries and their shop windows, of television and its images, of the internet and its sites. These are media to move

from one reality to the next – to go to places without actually moving. In order to carry your own world along with you all over. That way you are always at the heart of the world and the difference between inside and out is always clear. These capsules are always personal; as if, just for one moment, you become the media, you become the world. The capsule is a portable borderline; it turns us into isolated entities, intended for travelling and exploring, giving the impression that borders are a thing of the past. A border which erases all others.

Borderlines play a significant part in Asselberghs' video's. "How far can we go?" is the question they always seem to ask. Where is the border? Where does it start and where does it end? What is still inside and what is already outside? The checkpoints in *a.m./p.m.*: are they used to maintain order, or to create chaos? To protect the Israeli or to hassle the Palestinians. The form of *a.m./p.m.*: is it a documentary or is it fiction? The television screen in *proof of life*: are we looking at ourselves or do we find ourselves in another environment? Is it about our watching behaviour or their showing behaviour? Ceuta: is it a beginning (a vanguard) or an end? Are we already in Africa or still in Europe? Are we still in or already out? Here borders aren't clear lines, but rather vague zones, a no-man's-land, a vague territory. This vagueness turns Ceuta into a marginal event. Literally an event in the margin, along the borders of Fortress Europe. But a footnote, also, in the shadow of all these other events playing such a huge part in the preceding videos: the globalisation, the Middle East, 11 September, the hostages in Iraq...

KEEPING THESE PEOPLE OFF-SCREEN

If media are extensions of the body, Asselberghs shows nothing more than the extensions, while the bodies stay off-screen. He starts from the capsular existence of the average Western European; of the new tribal situation in which the media user finds himself since the electronic age, according to Marshall

McLuhan. Instead of the body, he focuses on the capsule, taking over more and more of its vital functions. He shows media as protection; as extensions, behaving more and more as a closed system around the individual. The signalisation, the fence, the windows, the cities with which we surround ourselves are signs of the *capsular* existence, causing media to stick closer and closer to the body. At the time of McLuhan the main issue was finding a way to give the body a place in the media (the Canadian media philosopher saw the media as a *milieu*, an environment in the sense of surroundings), today it is more about giving the media a place around the body (today the user is a *milieu*, in the sense of a centre, a middle). These videos investigate the possibility to escape the capsule, to escape the media as an obstacle.

The other, the other side, the outside of our capsules, of our protections and our obstacles; it is always vague – always a product of the imagination. In the same way as students in the Paris streets of May '68 could chant "sous les pavées: la plage", media users in today's global cities can shout out "beyond the capsule: bare life". But nobody shouts it, because that particular beach is a place where nobody wants to go. The body which stays chastely off-screen in these videos, is the final capsule, the ultimate medium, the final resort, the last environment, the very last surroundings of which a human being can avail himself. Looking for an outside the artist will inevitably be confronted with the 'zoe' of the ancient Greeks: the naked, disorganised, unprotected life, subjected to arbitrariness, which differs from 'bios', the specific lifestyle of an individual or group, according to Giorgio Agamben in *Homo Sacer*. The arbitrariness at the Israeli checkpoints in *a.m./p.m.*, the unclear destiny of the hostage, at the mercy of his hostage taker, in *proof of life*, the hopeless situation of the migrants on the other side of the fence in *capsular*.

Bare life, that is the bodies the media can get at no longer. Because the bodies don't want it, and hide. Because the media can't and ignore them. As a result they turn into vague bodies. "Vagueness is no ideal, it is the final degree of abstraction",

the media theoreticians of Adilkno wrote at the beginning of the nineties. Vague bodies and vague media come together – the first is a consequence of the second. If we do get to see them, it is through a badly defined image of a security camera (like on the cover of Lieven De Cauter's *The Capsular Civilization*) or indirectly, washed ashore on a beach of the Canary Islands, where the accidental saviours – healthy white tourists in swimsuits – fill the screen and the vague bodies – the exhausted dark fellow man without a home, without a roof, without papers, without roots, whose personal traits dissolve in the ink of halftone photos on porous newspaper or in the over-pixillated images of non-professional cameras on our screens – move to the outer edge of the screen. These bodies are always in front of the borderline. They are disorganised bodies, bodies without organisation. The new vagrants at the mercy of the scanners in and around our capsular civilisation. That is a huge difference when compared to the organised bodies in the globalized world, to which there are hardly any borderlines left that can't be crossed. The difference between migrants and nomads, between the clandestine existence and the destinatory life.

THERE'S HARDLY ANYTHING TO BE SEEN

Nothing else happens in this video. That is precisely the event. The fact that these people are not on the front pages of our newspapers every day, that is the event. It's as a protection against that event (or non-event) that wars are started and that people withdraw into houses, in cities, in fortresses. In the strongholds which turn us into civilians. In the capsules which turn us into users.

The non-event turns scanning into a frequent technique. The searching movement of the camera. A travelling to Ceuta, a pan over Brussels. A boat trip, a camera movement, a quest, an odyssey from here to elsewhere. And back again. Always back to the place where it all started: the city, in the centre we never quite left behind.

There is hardly anything to be seen. The invisible threat comes from a crowd without a face; not from a multitude, as defined by Hardt & Negri, with many faces. This multitude is the real subject of these videos. The multitude that starts with the spectator in front of the screen – you and me as modern media nomads – and self-evidently with the video maker as well: a professional spectator who does not merely write about and reflects on film, video and other media, but since a couple of years by creating himself as well, throwing back the work to the spectator in the screening room. That is what I would like to call 'Filming the Impossible'; or rather the 'not yet possible': a potential filming, filming of potential. The production of images arising as you watch them. An attempt to visualise what was never visualised before.

A very narrow divide separates this impossible filming from a clandestine filming. It is about ignoring do's and don'ts – the signalisation this video sets out with. It's about sharing experiences that can't be shared, because they are always personal. It's about watching, where everything is already being watched. It's about looking for more images, in spite of it all. Looking for the invisible. It's about looking for images of the outside of the camp, like members of the resistance during the second world war, looked for images of the inside of the camps. It means always opposing the unimaginable ("N'invoquons pas l'inimaginable", Georges Didi-Huberman writes in 'Images malgré tout' on the images of the camps). It means ignoring the omnipresent scanning, inquisitive cameras in this no-man's-land where nothing ever happens. Where the scanning movement of the cameras (pointed at the stream of people) and of the tourists (pointed at the stream of goods) is the only event. It's about the vague borderline of decency; about looking back to the spectator – as if we are all criminals: both the inspectors and the producers. It is filming on the verge of what is permitted.

GOLDEN STARS AFLOAT IN A SKY OF REFLEX BLUE

The text is important in these images, these videos that would like to give a voice to what can't be represented. These videos that want to provide a place for the other; that act as a witness and refuse to remain silent; even when it is hard to speak. The text is poetically misleading, supporting and undermining the images at the same time. That's how these images get a place in the imagination.

With these videos about the vague camps of the twenty-first century the author – half a century after Adorno's claim that it's barbaric to keep writing poems after Auschwitz – tries to make poetry, in a place where poetry had actually been declared impossible (indecent) already. And yet, in spite of everything: imag(in)ing, and not depicting. Not reducing and minimizing, but transforming and maximizing. In that sense these images and these texts, which don't reveal themselves easily to the passing glance – which leave you speechless – actually break through the speechlessness. Nothing is impossible to image/*inimaginable*. No moment is too cruel for the force of poetry. The idyll of the floating ship is immediately sent to the bottom by the ferocity of the mass grave underneath.

What is said is important in these texts, but so is silence. Silences during which the spectator/listener waits for what follows, for the event which never seems to come. The waiting, so important to the characters, they seem to have stepped right out of a story by Beckett. Similarly to the master of the post-war absurd unimaginable – interpreting Adorno's claim in his very own way – the text is merely used as a means to an image. And there also the silence, the waiting, is part of the rhythm, and therefore of the image. It is an imag(in)ing which is inevitably connected to the experience of the trip to the border. Killing time, looking around, looking for what stays off-screen, scanning, sounding out in the dark and keep communicating in spite of everything. Keep trying to align yourself with the world and the people that live in it.

The scale, in all of its vagueness, is an abstraction: the city in *a.m./p.m.*, the living room in *proof of life*, the border in *capsular*. The secret as well, what we cannot or refuse to know or to see, has a weird scale. The hushing up of the sans-papiers, the consensus on the negation of a problem which really can't possibly be ignored. Images give these abstractions a human face. The text gives them a name. Image and text work together like an imagination machine. There are no golden stars at all and the clear blue sky has always been blurred. Except on the flag of the EU – anything but an idyllic symbol, but rather of power. There is nothing enticing about that flag, that rag of cloth, that imag(in)ing of the European Union, which is bestowed with a completely new dimension here, a humiliating new context.

A FORTRESS BESIEGED FROM WITHIN

That way obvious visualising (imaging) changes in a complex system of becoming image (imagining) – in a perpetual instantaneous concurrence with the world. Or actually: in a 'becoming invisible', or rather: a "devenir imperceptible", in the words of Deleuze and Guattari; a becoming like everyone else. An attempt to integrate the differences between here and elsewhere, thus wiping them out. The always temporary differences between black and white. Between them and us. Between protected and unprotected, between zoe and bios. The body of the clandestine traveller, that of the clandestine filmmaker, as the ultimate capsule. As that which links them up with all other bodies.

Becoming invisible is not the same as making invisible. The first is what individuals do in order to become one with the world, the territory in which they move around. The second is what authorities do to align their territory with the world. Becoming invisible means confronting the multitude of differences, nothing but differences. Becoming invisible is inherent to any use of the media, whose essence it is to take over functions of the body, to make them superfluous, and

thereby wipe them out. It is inherent to the ambition of media to link up bodies with each other, thereby grading them into one another. It is inherent to the mediamatic aspiration for transparency, the exclusion of each resistance, the encapsulating, which leads to an erasure of the physical body.

The people we seek protection from in the capsules of Western civilisation, have been living in the centre of our cities for a long time. We just don't see them, because we can't, or because we don't want to. That way a dream – the idyll of the park, the fairytale of the hothouse, a king in Africa – turns into a nightmare from one moment to the next. This makes it harder and harder to leave, and return to the place where it once started. To the place that plays such a major role in this video, this capsule that wants nothing more than to create a new space. A space where one would rather not be. One that makes slightly uncomfortable. A space to think about the past and about the future; a space that maps fragments of the world.

That way an image, a text, a capsule transforms into a war machine. That turns this imag(in)ing into a Trojan horse – an act of resistance in the system (the media in our bodies; the clandestine in our streets). It should be clear, after all, that each imag(in)ing starts with the own experience. This requires a becoming invisible of each visualisation: becoming the clandestine in our cities, becoming the other on the other side of the border. To place oneself into the other is the pinnacle of imagination.

capsular, 2006, video, 23 minutes. Text by Herman Asselberghs. Photography by Fabio Wuytack. Editing by Bram Van Paesschen. Sound design by Boris Debackere. Voice by Vincent Eaton. A film by Herman Asselberghs. With the support of *Bruegel Revisited* and IvOK. Distributed by Argos. *capsular* premiered at the Brussels *Bruegel Revisited* exhibition, summer 2006, and has been screened at the International Film Festival Rotterdam 2007 and European Media Art Festival 2007, Osnabrück.

capsular is part of *An Anthropology of World Mapping* (2004-2007). Located at the point of intersection between art and science, between fact and fantasy, between print and the digital, this 3-year, interdisciplinary research project pushes towards a fluid cartography for the new millennium. Research fellows are Herman Asselberghs & Steven Devleminck of Transmedia, Hogeschool Sint-Lukas Brussel, in collaboration with Filip De Boeck & Koen Stroeken of the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University Leuven.

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