

## GLISSEMENTS DE TERRAINS

On seeing Lise-Hélène Larin's work, we are immediately caught up in a landslide of polygons<sup>1</sup>. The *glissement de terrain* or landslide metaphor the artist chose for her exhibition is not only striking, but operative in the case of her 3D animation stills. What immediately comes to mind at the mention of such a cataclysm is an apocalyptic vision of entire swaths of landscape tumbling towards a stream or ocean, plunging to the bottom of a ravine or to the abyssal depths. Her metaphor becomes a *mise en abîme* for the techniques and disciplines used to produce these intriguing, abstract synthetic images.

The quantity and arrangement of virtual polygons created with 3D animation software, confront the viewer to forms and notions of landscape utterly unlike those inherited from the Renaissance, following the invention of projective vision through linear perspective by Florentine architect and mathematician Leon Batista Alberti (1450). Hence, during the Renaissance as well as today, the idea of landscape has always been pure invention, a figment of the imagination. Landscape is born of a viewpoint or *punctum* as Barthes called it. This notional position was immortalized, more than five hundred years ago, through the paintings of artists such as Perugino, Uccello, Piero della Francesca and Raphaël. These artists made use of linear perspective with a vanishing point sitting on a horizon line. Alberti described perspective as “an open window on the world”. Indeed, in Renaissance works of art, the exterior landscape was often visible through the frame of a window that led the eye to such depths of field as had never before been represented.<sup>2</sup> Yet there was a single and unwavering vanishing point, as there was only one horizon line.

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<sup>1</sup> A geometric figure having as many lines as it has angles, such as a triangle, square, trapezoid, rhombus, pentagon, or hexagon.

<sup>2</sup> When artists painted interiors or buildings, they applied linear perspective with its vanishing point. However, as soon as they moved out of the architectural frame to illustrate a landscape as seen through a window, they used a technique called “aerial perspective.” To suggest depth in landscape, they depicted a

With *Glissements de terrains*, the Albertian and Barthesian *punctum* disappears altogether. We are faced with a three-dimensional, abstract, moving landscape, whose viewpoint is located in the artist's eye, not in that of the viewer: the landscape exists in a state of perpetual motion that rotates on all sides. Evidently, the onlooker—accustomed to seeing through linear perspective—is confronted with a loss of landmarks, a loss of balance, as the very ground beneath our feet seems to slide towards the unfamiliar zone of the virtual abstract landscape.

The landslide represents a rich allegory that incites us to reflect on a new imagery and calls upon a transdisciplinarity that is at work in the stills, through “collaborations” between the arts, science (mathematical and computational languages) and technology. This cataclysm, this *telluric* upheaval inevitably calls to mind a different type of landscape and reality, a novel way of visualizing the image, an unexpected way of looking and seeing, but also a new technical and technological know-how for application systems and software, indeed even a new discipline.

The temporal and dimensional transformations are assembled by means of a series of calculations that simulate movement and the third dimension, sometimes through the evocation of a landscape (with a false horizon line) or of human organic matter, sometimes through the suggestion of a vibrant living cell as seen through a microscope. The identification process on which the viewer relies to recognize certain forms that construct the image and the semiotics of the work of art is a phenomenon known as perception/apperception, which calls upon our cognitive faculties. Although there are points of reference—for we must keep a few—we are nonetheless

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succession of horizontal planes that went from deep tones and detailed contours for the closest planes to paler tones and less distinct shapes for the farthest planes.

confounded by the unconventional use of software, such as *Softimage* and *Photoshop*.

In these images, the artist does not apply 3D techniques with the aim of producing a “figurative” representation of reality in which for instance, virtual characters or avatars replace living actors, as we now often see in the movies. In Hollywood mega-productions, 3D animation is used to create mythical monsters and futuristic creatures as well as grandiose architectural structures and phantasmagorical panoramas that as yet, remain tied to the paradigm of Albertian perspective.<sup>3</sup> Working with the same elements, Larin is thus subverting the 3D animation process to invent a world that is not a representation of “reality,” but rather evokes abstract virtual landscapes drawing the viewer into a place, a location, a site, an atmosphere, another dimension that as yet, has not been fully explored.

The techniques of 3D film animation are “distorted” then integrated by the artist to achieve different ends, but that does not prevent her from exercising an implacable rigour in her calculations in order to generate her animations within their particular environment. For this exhibition however, Lise-Hélène Larin has chosen to present her 3D animations as “simulated photographs”. We shall call them *3D stills*, calling to mind ever so furtively and on a completely different level the “film stills” of Cindy Sherman. Unlike Sherman's “film stills,” Larin's *3D stills* capture the idea of movement, despite the static character or fixedness of the images. This is due to the depth of field produced by the simulated effect of the third dimension. In fact, these “simulated photographs” allow us to make out in greater detail the complexity of each level contained in the animation. And of course, the images

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<sup>3</sup> Examples include *Shrek I and II*, the *Harry Potter* and *Lord of the Rings* series, and more recently *The Polar Express*, which integrates a 3D animation of actor Tom Hanks. In *The Immortals*, by comic-book author Enki Bilal, real and digital actors, always designed on the basis of Albertian perspective, “perform” alongside one another as the story unfolds.

themselves do not depict characters functioning within a story line as part of a *mise en scène* imagined by the artist, as Sherman's do.

In Lise-Hélène Larin's work, it is the polygons that serve as “characters,” for her *mises en scène* of various landscapes, with their remarkable effects of transparency and their rich, flamboyant colours that, even within still images, suggest an oscillatory trajectory. So, as we amble from one photograph to the next, we can very well imagine the original animation's movements; by contrast, in the freeze frames of a film still, the characters and scenes are permanently frozen. Moreover, the transparency of the medium—large translucent films through which ambient light is diffused—allows us to imagine and even perceive the course and itinerary of the animations.

One question we might ask in conclusion is why did the artist chose to reveal her images as “freeze frames”? This way of showing us abstract digital animations—as *3D stills*—inevitably takes us back to a classical exhibition strategy, emanating from a modernist stance, rather than taking the form of a virtual demonstration more linked to our post-industrial paradigm. But there is more to it than meets the eye. Although at first glance nothing revolutionary is happening, the *3D stills* are *mediating* images that let us make out what is happening behind the animations, paving the passage from one dimension to another and offering us a multitude of *puncta* that give glimpses of new horizons. The landslide metaphor is still operating, for the virtual camera holds the double function of recording both fixed images and movement. With the help of Lise-Hélène Larin's “simulated photographs” we are thus invited, safely, into the “folds” of a new invention of landscape and animated digital imagery.

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