Into the Sandbox: Antoine Chapon with Vladimir Nadein and Liza Dorrer

Vladimir Nadein and Liza Dorrer, co-curators of Open, discussed Antoine Chapon's *My Own Landscapes* with the author. The film is the next installment of Into the Sandbox, the film programme of the Russian Pavilion at the 2021 Architecture Biennale

My Own Landscapes by Antoine Chapon

Vladimir Nadein
Dear Antoine, thank you for your beautiful and vibrant film! How did this project start?
Antoine Chapon
Thank you again for showing My Own Landscapes during the 17th Venice Architecture Biennale ! The project began when I started research about video games used by armies. I was also interested in the different types of simulations used by the U.S. army to train its soldiers. There are different types of video games: recruiting games like America's army which is a fps game close to Call of Duty where players learn the rules of the US army. The good players receive an email to come and sign a contract to become a soldier. I remember that a General of the American army said in an interview that this kind of video game save the money. Thanks to America's Army the U.S. Army doesn't need thousands of soldiers to search and recruit young Americans. The game does it very well.

Just as in France there was an advertisement to recruit young people in the soccer video game FIFA or PES. It's all about money. The social relationship is not important.
Other video games allow to train soldiers. These are serious games. But these games are still not very operational. They are used to prepare and train the gaze especially. Another video game allows to "prepare" the cultural shock of the soldiers before leaving for the Middle East. These games contain many racist clichés. The soldiers walk in 3D streets with arabic graffitis on the walls that doesn' mean anything. It seems that the programmers don't work with translators and that the soldiers don't care about the language and therefore the culture of the country where they go. It reminds me the writing on a wall in the series Homeland. The film crew asked local graffiti artists to write on the wall of a Syrian camp set "Mohamed is the greatest". It reduces the Syrians to a religion, while at the same time Syrians were writing on the walls in Syria that they want freedom. The artists wrote instead "Homeland is racist", "Homeland is a joke and does not make us laugh" or "Homeland is not a series".

Other video games are simulators of tanks and planes. These games are more realistic. Finally, there are video games that allow you to treat the PTSD of soldiers. After having tried to anticipate the "cultural shock", these same games try to cure it. It is in this context that I became interested in the way a soldier tries to heal himself every day by forgetting a PTSD. Therapists tried to heal him with the army video game by making the traumatic scene in 3D in the video game. The soldier in the movie was a video game designer. He made the 3D scenes with the therapists. When he came back from Afghanistan, the therapists tried to treat him but it didn't work. For the soldier, he realized that the vegetation of the traumatic scenes was good for him. So the background, the vegetation, which was not usually looked at, is now the main subject. The soldier needs to create a virtual world of vegetation. A false natural world that allows him to control his PTSD.

Vladimir Nadein
What is your personal relationship with video games and the culture around them?

Antoine Chapon

Sometimes I play video games with friends. But I don't play many different games. In our case the video game is more an excuse to talk and spend time together. Regarding the video game Arma 3 that I used for the movie, it's been a long time since I played a FPS again. The particularity of Arma is to be realistic. You die easily in the game, the maps are very large. To get to the mission location it sometimes takes hours. The game has been used as a platform for some military serious games because its editor mode is easy to use. You can modify or create a landscape, you can change the weather, you can add any kind of architecture etc. The database of the game is large. But the military game designers model in a 3D software the weapons and the cities where the soldiers will intervene. Then they import everything in the video game. For the film I had to learn how to use the editor mode. I explored very large maps. I had to remake what the soldier is doing. First to understand what he is feeling and second to make landscapes for the movie. I watched a lot of tutorials to learn how to edit the game. I even found myself fascinated by the landscapes in the game. While I was exploring a mountain or a sea, I didn't realize how much time I spent swimming in the sea. It was hypnotic. It's very relaxing to explore virtual landscapes.

Liza Dorrer

The Russian Pavilion's project "Open" investigates the potential of digital environments as a testing ground to experiment with more empathetic and meaningful forms of alliances and kinships in the amorphous space suspended across the physical and the digital and everything in between. Quite opposite to this inquiry is your film protagonist's salvation – a sterile and idyllic digital environment that is sheltered from any external interactions and encounters. A metaphorical island containing a real one double proofing the total control of a player. Would you say that your narrative is a specific case study of one's need for control and isolation rather than more alliances? Or can it be projected on a wider population that might need to establish their own virtual fortresses first, before coming together in a virtual public spaces?

Antoine Chapon

Yes I think it's a specific case. It's an unique story. I don't think you can project the story of the soldier and his PTSD to other people.

The soldier tried to relax himself day by day. I was impressed by the relaxing power of the virtual landscapes. Exploring virtual landscapes made me feel good. I lost my sens of time. There is always something to watch. The sounds are also important. It helps a lot to relax. So I don't think you can project this story to other people. I don't know if it would help soldiers who have PTSD. But I can say that in my case it was very relaxing to make this film. And I think you can feel it in the landscapes that I made, in the editing and in the voice over which is also very calm.

Vladimir Nadein

This summer at the Cannes Film Festival you presented a new project "Majestic tower" at work in progress stage. The description sounds really appealing! "Ten years after the start of the revolution, the Syrian regime razed neighborhoods to punish the population for rising up. Through Khaled's testimony, the film shows the hidden face of urban planning projects that are built on the rubble of dwellings of an expropriated population." Can you tell us a bit more about the film, will you continue to work with the digital environment, it seems like it from your statement "In this film, I want to show how architecture and their 3D animations are a new kind of weapon"? How will you approach it?

Antoine Chapon

The Majestic Tower is about a neighborhood under construction in Damascus. A kind of new Dubai made possible by the expropriation of thousands of Syrians who lived in this neighborhood razed by the regime. As in My Own Landscapes, the relationship between landscapes, 3D animations, wars and traumatic memories. This new neighborhood will be made of "hundreds of connected glass buildings" as they say. The neighborhood was razed to punish the residents for protesting, to raze the memory of the revolution, to reward Bashar's relatives who invested money in the war and finally to make money. There are many 3D animations of this future district. The 3D animations allow two things. To be a propaganda of the regime to show that the rebuilding of the country and that tourists can come back. This means that everything is fine and Bashar wins. The 3D animations also allow to find investors to buy apartments and towers because Syria has no more money. anymore Also the American blockade in Syria is blocking the construction of this neighborhood. In the case of this

neighborhood, we observe the relationship between expropriation, death, torture and beautiful 3D renderings. And we know the other countries that help Bashar to kill civils. My Own Landscapes shows that the beautiful 3D vegetation, the beautiful landscapes of serious games are usually used to train soldiers and therefore to kill human beings.The 3D landscapes participate in training the eyes of the soldiers, that is to say to locate, identify, analyze and neutralize people. In The Majestic Tower I will show that 3D animations of architectural agencies are dirty too. Behind the idyllic dream of a new neighborhood there are a lot of horrors.

It is this ambiguity of the beauty of the 3D image and what makes it possible. I like the painting Weed/White Flower No.1 » (1932) by Georgia O'Keefe because it represents a datura flower. The flower is both beautiful and poisonous. What makes the images toxic? Donna Haraway says in her article "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective" (1988): "Vision is always a question of the power to see-and perhaps of the violence implicit in our visualizing practices. With whose blood were my eyes crafted." When the 3D images of the regime invade Youtube, at the same time the images of destruction and expropriation are very rare. In the case of the 3D animations of the new neighborhoods of Damascus, we know whose blood it is and who's killing them.

For the film I will use the Unreal engine 5 software to recreate the 3D animations made by the regime to hijack them. It will be a way of appropriating images. After the editor mode of Arma 3, I want to use Unreal engine because this software is used for both industries : movies and video games. Today the border between video games and movies is very thin. And this is good news, it opens a very large experimental field.

Liza Dorrer
Your film touches upon a very interesting topic of dreams that is also present in two films from the Pavilion's selection – "The letters from the end of the world" by Dina Karaman and in some indirect way "Feather fall" by Total Refusal. There are many ways to approach this theme in relation to virtual environments, for example, creation of dreamlike experiences and lucid dreaming,

and the feedback loops between the two. Can you elaborate a little bit more on the relationships between the dreams and the virtual environments and what it means to you?

Antoine Chapon

Yes, the relationship between virtual landscapes and dreams is important. But the film is not about making a dream in the video game. For example, in the films Petrov's Fever (Петровы в гриппе) by Kirill Serebrennikov and in Memoria by Apichatpong Weerasethakul, at some point in the films it is not clear whether the characters are dreaming. Often in the works we see dreams represented in images. In the case of the soldier in the film it is different. That's what interested me.

In the film he doesn't show us his dreams but what he wants to dream. The soldier realized that by playing more than 10 hours a day, at night he was dreaming about the video game. He was experiencing the game in his dreams. It was from this point he tried to explore a single specific landscape to see if he could dream of the landscape he had been exploring for several hours. He doesn't show or talk about his dreams or nightmares. He does not make images of his trauma. These mental images are invisible in the film, except perhaps in the first scene. On the contrary, he makes images that help him to forget. He makes 3D landscapes that he explores. Landscapes that he looks at and experiences in order to master his dreams. The only goal of creating images during the day is to sleep well. The video game helps to keep the nightmares away. The landscapes keep the PTSD away during the night. Their is a relation between two types of virtual images: the video game and the dreams. There is a transition from the video game to the dream to put aside the nightmare. He builds his dreams like a landscape. The images are emancipating because he feels better, and at the same time alienating because he is dependent on them.