

# **‘The Big Picture’ at NAI Rotterdam**

Report by **Marije van Eck**

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The Netherlands Architecture Institute (NAi) in Rotterdam teamed up with International Film Festival Rotterdam (IFFR) and Mediafonds to host the lecture ‘The Big Picture’, on January 29th 2009 at NAI. Three speakers focused on the interaction between architecture and film or video technologies in three presentations. The link between architecture and film might seem farfetched, but during the introduction by NAI director Ole Bouman and IFFR curator Edwin Carels, it became clear that they have become more closely linked in postmodernistic architecture, because architecture is currently more about storytelling than about just designing a building to live or work in. An architectural design now focuses on the full visitor’s experience of working and living. Bouman mentioned also, however, that architectural narrative isn’t new, because there is even animation to be seen in light shining through stained glass cathedral windows: architectural cinematography from the Middle Ages.

## **Shivers down your spine**

It were these medieval cathedrals that formed the starting point for Alison Griffith’s lecture on the immersive view. Griffith is professor at Baruch College at the City University of New York and author of the book ‘Shivers Down Your Spine: Cinema, Museums, and the Immersive View’. Her lecture focused on the history of the immersive experience. From the upward gaze in a medieval cathedral to the omnipresent visual experience of the 19th century panoramas (such as the Panorama Mesdag in the Hague) to the powerful IMAX movie, Griffith draws parallels between architecture and the experiences of awe, the ‘wow’ factor, and the hovering between reality and fiction that these buildings or installations induce in their visitors.

While cathedrals were built in a way that center the viewer firmly onto the ground, panoramas and IMAX movies put the viewer right in the middle of the visual scene. And although cathedral paintings and ornaments and panorama paintings are still images, as apposed to IMAX which makes use of impressive, gigantic moving image technologies, the response in the viewer is the same: the shivers down the spine. Griffiths mentions that there are instances recorded of panorama visitors fainting or falling ill with motion sickness because they were so overwhelmed by the images around them. It is the size and design of the building hosting the visual images that create the immersive experience. From the cathedral to high tech movie installations, they give us the opportunity to be elsewhere, without going anywhere.

## **Chasing the audience**

While these visual experiences still demand the spectator to travel to them, William Boddy, also professor at Baruch College at the City University of New York, focused in his lecture more on the video technologies that are brought to the viewer. With the rise of mobile video, and people getting used to watching films on a 2-inch screen, people are less prone to visit the traditional movie theatre, and therefore traditional businesses in the film theatre industry have started seeking income elsewhere.

Boddy gave examples of various applications of mobile video technologies, usually combined with advertizing. He mentioned CBS Outernet, a company that hosts specialized television channels throughout the United States, such as Autonet, a channel that is broadcast at five thousand locations and reaches 2.5 million viewers. More products have been

introduced over the past years, such as shopping trolley touch screens with personalized shopping lists and response to voice input queries, and the Adwalker, a fully interactive digital bodypack, with games and advertisements, worn by females, because women are less threatening when approaching potential customers. Whether these applications could be the success their manufacturers anticipate remains to be seen. A most impressive application of bringing the commercial visual experience to the customer, is the holosonic billboard : [http://www.holosonics.com/PR\\_AE.htm](http://www.holosonics.com/PR_AE.htm)

It is a giant advertisement that can speak to people using an isolated sound beam targeting a specific area near the billboard. All these applications of mobile media redesign urban space, and make us wonder whether the abundance of media exposure will still allow for the existence of traditional media and film theatres in the future.

### **A new perspective**

Michael Naimark, research associate professor at the University of Southern California, has focused in various research projects on how our image of the world is represented through photo and video technologies. If we all took a photo of the scene at the same time, our interpretations of the photographs would be more or less the same. Yet there are very many angles, view points and external factors which make each photograph unique.

Representation of the world exists through different media. Maps and models, photos and geotags (as used in Flickr), and panoramas and movie maps are just a few. Applications like Google Earth try to create an objective image of the world. Using people's input in generating street views and 3D models - but banning any artifacts that leave historical or personal traces - the images in Google Earth seem strangely desolated. Cars can be seen, the people inside are invisible. Several projects Naimark and his colleagues have collaborated in try to reverse this development, by leaving footprints behind in Google Earth, or by fitting dozens of (amateur) photographs taken from different angles, at different times, into a 3D panoramic picture of a certain landmark. This makes it a most subjective but at the same time generic image of the landmark in question. By leaving ourselves out of the pictures and videos, we try to preserve an objective representation of the world, but at the same time we are distorting reality.

Examples of Naimark's work can be found at : [www.naimark.net](http://www.naimark.net).

From three different perspectives, the lectures focused on the architecture of the world through sound and vision. Numerous factors play a role in how we perceive the world around us, and what we do to escape from it. 'The Big Picture' was an enlightening view into these processes.

*Source* : <http://networkcultures.org/wpmu/weblog/>

Netherlands Architecture Institute

<http://en.nai.nl/>

**The Institute of Network Cultures** analyses and shapes the terrain of network cultures from the inside. No innocent bystander, it actively contributes to the field through events, publications and online dialogue. The sphere of new media has huge potential for socio-technological change – the mission of the Institute of Network Cultures, the INC, is to explore, document and feed this potential.

Established in 2004 the INC takes as its focus the Internet and other new forms of media. The INC is a framework for the realisation of a diverse array of projects, with a strong emphasis

on content. Its goal is to create an open organisational form where ideas from both individuals and organisations can be given an early institutional context.

A key INC focus is the establishment of sustainable research networks. Following from this the INC seeks to identify emerging critical topics and to then initiate and steer dialogue and exchange in order to shape the way these new forms develop. Differentiating the INC from Information Technology research is its emphasis on the interaction between aesthetics and social relations within technological environments. Attention is also paid to the intercultural aspects of the field. The INC views theoretical developments and self-reflection as vital to the creation of the rich autonomous language that this new area of knowledge deserves.

The Institute of Network Cultures was founded by Geert Lovink following his appointment as Professor within the School of Interactive Media at the Hogeschool van Amsterdam (Amsterdam Polytechnic). **Net Critique** : <http://www.networkcultures.org/wpmu/geert>

### **Research**

The field of network cultures revolves around the interaction between new forms of media, for example, the Internet and mobile telephony, and the users of such new forms – where the users themselves shape the technology. With a strong focus on the transdisciplinary nature of new media and its DIY and open source components, the INC gives equal attention to the artistic, political and technical aspects of the Internet and other emergent media. As such, the INC's area of research extends to design, activism, art, philosophy, political theory and urban studies and is not confined to the Internet alone. Indeed, the INC maintains that the Internet can only be understood at the conjuncture of these various fields and lines of inquiry.

'**Network cultures**' is seen then as a strategic term enlisted to diagnose political and aesthetic developments in user-driven communications. Network cultures can be understood as social-technical formations under construction. They rapidly assemble, and can just as quickly disappear, creating a sense of spontaneity, transience, even uncertainty. Yet these forms are here to stay. However self-evident it is, collaboration is a foundation of network cultures. Working with others frequently brings about tensions that have no recourse to modern protocols of conflict resolution. How to conduct research within such a shifting environment is of key interest to the Institute of Network Cultures.

The aim of the INC is to create sustainable research networks. In its first years, the INC selected a few emerging topics in which a critical contribution could be made, such as ICT for development, urban screens and the creative industries. Such an INC research thread may start with just one person with ideas on a topic of critical importance. This can lead to the formation of a small group of international researchers, both inside and outside of the academy, which may then result in a larger online discussion. Together with the researchers and a group of students, interns and volunteers, an event is organised to gather key questions and thinkers. Each of these events, such as a conference, seminar or workshop, culminates in a publication. Formats of publication may include a printed reader, a book, video interviews, wikis, blogs and special online magazine issues, along with conference documentation (photos, videofiles and podcasts). The publication functions as an important vehicle for the sustainability of the research network.

**Institute of Networked Cultures**

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