

Panorama and Creation

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Abstract:

The process of creating a pictorial form such as a painted panorama (form developed in the late eighteenth century) engages the viewer in a unique experience, in which figurative detail and accessories play a major role. Before the invention of the motion picture, pictorial panoramas offered a place where art and culture could meet, reaching a utopia of an all-inclusive view of the world, that both the gaze and the body could embrace, in real and virtual time.

These sometimes preserved paintings, nestled away in the occasional old architecture works, can still unsettle visitors today. The details of these paintings capture our attention. They uphold illusions and surprise us. In other words, paradoxically, detail is at the heart of the panoramic process.

The simplicity and theatricality of the panorama, a heritage object, is a kind of a cultural performance process, that contemporary artists are continuing to explore today. The panorama is the matrix of several experiences, in which image, sensation, body and gaze are linked by a common time and space.

I. What is a panorama?

In the epigraph of his book *Le XIXe siècle des panoramas*, (Panorama's Nineteenth Century), Bernard Comment cites a technical definition of the panorama as, "a building in which one shows what's called a panoramic painting, done on the inner wall of a rotunda, covered by a dome or cone-shaped ceiling. This sort of painting precisely imitates the appearance of a site, as far as the eye can see, in all directions. To this end, the viewer is placed on a platform or circular gallery, simulating a tower, situated at the center of the rotunda. Light comes in and strikes the painting from above, through frosted glass windows fitted into the bottom of the dome or cone. A large parasol, with a diameter larger than that of the platform, hangs from the beams above, throwing the viewer into half-shade, while hiding the light source," (Comment 1993, p. 5).

Since the late eighteenth century, large panorama paintings have offered viewers this unique individual and collective experience. The intense immersion into the representation of a historical scene or a landscape is the result of an artistic and cultural strategy (Comment 1993). The process, that consists of creating the illusion of adventure for the masses (as visiting panoramas was a popular form of entertainment for those from different social classes), required details and convincing elements. Many panoramas can still be found around the world today. Our perceptions have changed. The motion picture is not in competition with these originally ephemeral, large decorations, which have hence become heritage objects. However, the scale of these circular paintings guarantees their power to enthrall or at least to astonish visitors today. Thus, since 2003, Yadegar Asisi has been making enormous panoramas in Europe. (Amazonia.www.panoramaxxl.com can be seen in Rouen until 2016.)

2. The role of detail in the panoramic process as a creative process

A significant example: The Hendrik Willem Mesdag panorama and its transformations

"A large panorama is fundamentally a projection of a future into space. It is a kind of a life journey, but a life journey freely chosen. Because, in this landscape, we have a feeling that we can go everywhere. We have an astonishing impression of freedom. For me, this is what is appealing about the vast Aubrac Plateau and Causses Plateau. I think there is projection of time into space in these places," (Gracq, 2002, p. 36-37).

The Mesdag Panorama in The Hague is an interesting example, since, apparently devoid of history, it invites a contemplative gaze, that could suggest certain contemporary video game atmospheres (Flower, 2009): We focus our gaze on a fleeting moment, to replay endlessly. Is the Mesdag Panorama the "projection of a future into a space"? This illusionistic device produced in 1881 offers a meander that seems in contrast to Julien Gracq's stroll in a vast living nature, which is perhaps experienced as "the unique appearance of the distant, as close as it may be"- to divert the words of Walter Benjamin when he defined *aura* in 1936. Indeed, the panorama is somehow auratic. Through the feat of its dimensions, it makes a landscape or an event sacred. In a fixed place, it shows a huge pictorial performance which arouses admiration. The panoramic process foreshadowed cinematography, while cinematography, as photography had previously done, took up the panoramic process. Even if panoramic paintings fix this "life journey", this possibility to contemplate both real and metaphorical expanses; they allow movement: that of the viewer. With the use of simple, precise and sometimes poetic detail, the Mesdag Panorama depicts a place and a period. The circular pictorial space of

this particular panorama (perhaps unwittingly) emphasizes the limitations laid down by the conditions of an unfettered gaze, starting with the process leading to its completion.

Willem Hendrik Mesdag (1831-1915) was an artist and a businessman. At the age of thirty-five, he definitively chose a career as a painter. At the time of his father's death in 1881, Mesdag had a fortune and a social standing, based on land speculation. He was rather quickly recognized as an excellent marine painter. His work *The Breakers of the North Sea*, leased by Millet at the 1870 Paris Salon, immediately confirmed his talent. He had well-known art dealers (Bismeyer and Kraus, Sakse & Co in Germany, Durand-Ruel and Goupil) and was present in international painting shows (Amsterdam, Vienna, Paris, Brussels and New York). In 1880, he received the largest commission of his career: The Société Anonyme of Panorama Maritime de la Haye in Brussels asked him to paint the Scheveningen Panorama, which was completed in 1881. He received a handsome sum and had five assistants, including Blommers De Bocks and Breitner. In 1910, the Mesdag family founded an association to protect the panorama. The Mesdag Panorama is a monument and a relic, because, already in 1882, the top of big dune, that a unique perspective could be enjoyed from, had been partially leveled. The artist had fought in vain to preserve the landscape he so loved. The panorama was begun on 1 May 1880, and inaugurated on 1 August 1881. It is 114.70 meters in circumference and 14.70 meters high. (The famous Bourbaki Panorama, painted under the direction of Edward Le Castre, inaugurated in Lucerne the same year, is 7.9 meters high with a circumference of 112 meters.) It is in oil on canvas, with resins, giving it an intentional matt finish. In 1996, the panorama recovered its original splendor. The canvas and the artificial dune were again united, in order to create an illusion and to bring the old site of Scheveningen back to life.

In 1880, Mesdag did two oil studies, took eight photos, and did many preparatory sketches of the seaside resort. There is no record of his working method. However, the glass cylinder that he stood inside of, in order to draw the contours of the Scheveningen landscape, during herring fishing season, and at the beginning of the swimming season, has been conserved. Mesdag was aware of the common panorama techniques of the times (camera obscura, grid drawing, panoramagraph and photographic projection). With his assistants (especially Breitner) he painted this enormous work in a short time. The precision of architectural elements (we can think of Vermeer), of objects and of carefully painted human figures, contrast with other elements, which are energetically brushed on, in zones of color that show the speed of the brushstroke. The enlargement of certain areas of the painting shows these differences, which are barely perceptible to the naked eye.

What place would be given to details in such a big project? They were given the direct, decisive, historical and poetic place that Mesdag and his assistants gave to all that can be observed in its characteristic detail. The technical details are the magic of the panorama device, with details placed here and there in a false nonchalance, upon the mound of imported sand, in response to the details of the receding clouds in the horizon; the brightness of the colors refined by strong, gentle oil tones. Small silhouettes, sometimes delicate fleshy figures, bring the somewhat empty nature and the surrounding urban constructions to life. The Mesdag Panorama became a museum. It somehow "exoticized" the seaside resort of Scheveningen, by representing it differently. Yet the Mesdag Panorama highlights our relation to the familiar and to reality.

3. The Question of details:

Big panorama, small details

A small part of a face, of an object or of the whole, the detail (*particolare* in Italian) can also be the result of a mark, of an action (*dettaglio*). In *Le Détail, Pour une histoire rapprochée de la peinture*, (*The Detail, For a Closer History of Painting*), Daniel Arasse (1944-2003) shows how the very definition of the word detail raises the question of representation (Arasse 1992, p. 7-14.). Iconic (*detail-particolare*) or pictorial (*detail-dettaglio*), the presence of a detail surprises, and incites the viewer to scour the painting surface, moving closer in and then farther back, in order to savor all there is to take in, in the work.

In the foreword of the book, Arasse recalls Kenneth Clark's assertion in 1941, "The overall impression of a work of art is built from myriad sensations, analogies, memories and thoughts. Some are obvious. Many are hidden. Some are analyzable. Most are beyond analysis," (Arasse 1992, p. 7).

This obscurity arises from the impossibility to create a history of detail (Arasse 1992c, p. 12). And somehow a crisis of modernity arises. According to Baudelaire's renowned text, modernity is "the transitory, fugitive, contingent half of art, whose other half is the eternal and the unchanging," (Baudelaire, 1976 p. 695). The characteristics of detail, when part of the artist's impulsive act, and of sensation, make it a sign of modernity. Yet its placement in the painting put it into a strange time zone: whether figurative or a pictorial area, details escape the very notion of context. They are between two worlds, that of modernity, as a sign of the present time, and that of a representation, as embodiment of a long history. Little monad inherited from the thought of Leibniz, the detail seems to disturb the natural order of history: time. It also breaks down the notion of perspective theorized by Alberti in 1435. If a painting is an open window, limited by the discipline of its context, that we can view history through (Alberti, 1993, p. 114-115), the existence of detail as monad constantly reminds us that fiction can be built without a predefined framework, with such quick flow that it becomes imperceptible. Since Baudelaire's century, our relationship to time seems to have become stronger and faster; and interest in the creative process and what's beyond the picture frame has grown.

The detail, the crack in modernist utopia, symbolizes the fragility of all of creation. The very existence of a detail inevitably disrupts the infinite ideal form. Even if contained in the perfect shape of a circle, it remains paradoxical: both here and nowhere. Details are often a sign of freedom, because they are thought. Connected to a historical context, they also reveal the inevitable reality of pictorial matter (textures) created by the establishing the aim of the artist, who, beyond collective history, affirms the specificity of his or her gesture (workmanship).

The detail and its derivations, nestled in the heart of the pictorial process (of the mural or canvas) indicate the elements of a structure and how they are connected, through planning, achievement, destruction, composition and restoration. The work also reveals its intentions through the arrangement of very small figures that constitute or have constituted the heart and the edges of the creative process.

Thus, because the detail contains its own finiteness, it indicates the path of boundaries. The *mise en abyme* of representation occurs through details, guardians of fixed or moving images, bearing a mysterious necessity

to make present that which is constantly taking leave and which will one day take final leave. Hence the recurrence of the theme of vanities, which warn, with every detail of the composition, that we must ponder the finiteness of humankind and our surroundings. In the Mesdag Panorama, it is a question of still lifes which are both banal and strange, because they are there to play on the trompe l'oeil effect.

The choice of details makes imitation, plays of illusion and the lies of art more or less fluid. Their placement orients perspectives, anamorphoses and various mirrors, that place the viewer at a distance and in the center, in the hollow of the device invented by the artist. To perceive and to represent also lead to this "ultimate experience" that Daniel Arasse analyzed (Arasse, 1992d, p. 145). While condensing the questions of the painter, the detail can break up the panoramic device, to differentiate it from what it should express, open up and complete (Arasse, 1992e, p. 148-149). The science of details amounts to skill and an ability to assess (Arasse, 1992f, p. 116). Truth in painting is linked to these details. We have known even more patently since the Mannerist Renaissance that art conceals art, and that a painting is like a machine whose assembly is completed when the details are finally introduced.

The pictorial landscape (a truism) is thus a staging, a path, a fictional horizon of representation (Arasse, 1992g, p. 163), and allows an abundance and a quivering of space and time. Details are like symbols in this imaginary codified whole, because they have a local, and therefore "dislocal" nature (Arasse, 1992h, p. 166). This allows to define the "landscape as an official dislocation of the gaze". Arasse also showed that to enjoy the painting one had to be in an undefined place, not in a particular place (Arasse, 1992i, p. 166).

These various points of reflection may shed light on the particular panoptic device that the Panorama Mesdag offers viewers today, because it is a very large and long painting (not quite a monumental painting because it doesn't have the mission of being of a noble, historical painting, as other panoramas do, when representing educational historical scenes), an ingenious encounter of well-organized details, and because it is a sort of machinery that can be seen when one accedes to the foundations. (One can visit the back of the Mesdag Panorama on the ground floor and see, up close, precisely how the canvas was painted and the heavy brushstrokes that made this great décor. The overhead eye of the Mesdag Panorama diffuses a velvety light. It enshrouds the viewer, so as to best orient in a space that can dizzy, and certainly provoke unease. (Ladies sometimes fainted when inside the panoramas, to the delight of their companions.) The landscape of verifiable drawings (on the beach of Scheveningen) unfurled in a circle, is pictorial, false, sprawling and cultural. The details that rhythm the variety of the work, bring it its believability. Their treatment unambiguously show a skilled and well-painted work.

In the Mesdag panorama, the visitor, highly drawn to the painted surface, feels the volume of air between viewer and painting, as the viewer is both within and facing the represented landscape. The details enable to avoid the unease provoked by a pictorial enshrouding, despite the distance established by the panoptic device. The various details of the Mesdag Panorama soften the uneasiness caused by this space closed in on itself. The panorama rolls out forms whose apparent stillness disconcert the viewer, who would expect more action, action as can be seen, for example, in the Bourbaki Panorama Lucerne (which inspired Jeff Wall).

Yet in the Mesdag Panorama, a disturbing peculiarity, which disrupts the order of familiar landscapes, remains dependent on fixed academic illusions. Things do not barge into view. They appear gradually, with the soppy sweetness of entertainment, however well-arranged. The power of illusion on the viewer, and a knowledge of the panoramic device, as well as first-hand experience of the place represented, come together to produce an accessible show, thanks to the artistic team that created this panoramic process, which is adapted to time and place.

4. Is a panorama the sum of its details?

A whole world captures the awareness of viewer, when penetrating into the Mesdag Panorama space: a vast, bright, quiet landscape. Images are imprinted on the mind in a way comparable to when in a cinematographic space. Yet the panoramic process and device somehow stop time. Whereas film stimulates time. Of course Mesdag and his team completed this panorama just ten years before the birth of cinema, but panoramas continued to be made after 1895 and are still made today (Bath Panorama in 1984). The excitement is not of the same sort, and the room is not darkened! Yet the device also involves assembling and editing. The visitor is in front of a total of work, which is the result of a didactic assembling and editing, a technical mastery of format, that of concept: to collect and assemble all the details that assure the plausibility of the composition (the *istoria*), while breaking down the traditional painting frame and welcoming the hint of infinite movement.

The combination of details and accessories creates the necessary connections for the development of an action that is both controlled and uncontrollable. The viewer is situated inside the Mesdag Panorama; within the imposed movement, that of looking at, from one point of view, then from another; in other words to let one's passion arise, within a contained uninterrupted field, while maintaining a certain distance. This sum of details, voids and surfaces that inhabit the immense space unfurled all around the visitor's body unearths a series of indispensable links. These links, from detail to detail, (a basket, an anchor, a boat run aground, a lane, the silhouettes of fishermen), from one end to the other of the circular canvas, form a contained explosion. The lines that one could stretch from one detail to another, build a large spatial configuration, bearer of utopia: the representation of imagination, based on a device with more or less clearly formulated references. What do we see? A beach, the sea, the sky, a few sailboats, a lot of pale sand; some human figures; a city, the countryside and a few church steeples over there. In the foreground, real objects are carefully arranged, so as to support the illusion. A real chair is turned to face the vast painted sea.

The sum of details (painted and real objects) break up that which, in theory, would result from their totaling, since there are too many surfaces interfering with one another, to take them all in at once.

The panorama refers to reality, in the past and in the present. We can still recognize Scheveningen Beach as it is today. The large painted canvas and its accessories offer a historical and visual getaway within the limits of its artificial, opaque, fictional horizon. A performance with direct and differed impressions, the Mesdag Panorama delineates details that punctuate the work, in order to avoid the visual boredom that large surfaces can provoke. In its meanders, it condenses the linear stroll that a traveler on Scheveningen Beach could trace today. The volume of air in the Mesdag Panorama is a bit oppressive. This is where illusion falls away. There are no gusts of wind, no noises, no shifts of light. The peaceful silence in this space is almost like in a sanctuary.

The Mesdag Panorama is not a sum of details. It is rather a sum of times: the result of the work of artists, restorers and of memory.

5. The Mesdag Panorama, a Time Landscape

In many ways, the Mesdag panorama reveals time. The biographies of its creators, the period, the fashions, the morals of the end of the Industry Century, the links between photographic and pictorial time, the conception and achievement of a painted canvas, its restorations and its current pertinence are all different temporalities, each full of meaning and ideology.

Different relationships to time overlap within this huge inverted bowl, pierced by the zenithal orifice, keystone of a secular cathedral: one of leisure, the symmetrical reverse of work. The panorama illustrates progress and the universal ambitions of mastered performance, which is sometimes considered as common, because poor and banal; as intended to be quickly consumed by the masses. It surprises the crowds, softens the uneasy feeling of the closed-in space, by means of a pleasant topic (the landscape). It entertains without revolting, playing with the large and the tiny, leading the viewer to discover a composite. (The seaside, the city, and the countryside are all grouped together here.) The panorama participates in the economy of a society that promotes entertainment available to the masses, and is thus a cultural process. Daylight is filtered, just as are the many visitors who await their turn to see the panorama.

6. The panoramic experience as a repressive process

Mesdag's panoptic device of is frustrating. It lacks "real life": the smells of kelp, the cries of bathers, the sound of the waves, the shouts of fishermen and the distant echoes coming from the nearby streets. The visitor is put under an artificial belvedere that physically puts him or her in front of a vast, almost frameless image, a huge *trompe l'œil*. The usual process of binocular vision is disturbed. The body has to accompany the gaze, so as to attempt the impossible embrace. Once again, the painting captures the viewer, who is seeking intimacy with it, who wants to know how it was made. Of course, as is often the case in museums, we do not touch the painting. We contemplate it. To penetrate into the the strange brightness of the Mesdag Panorama, is to experience the void, and a form of absurdity, through quick steps. For this neither beautiful nor ugly landscape is absurd; and naive in its aim to depict a logical continuity. It thus becomes a grand game, an clever puzzle. It activates the viewer's imagination, but saturates it rather quickly. The process grinds to a halt. It's time to leave the space. There is nothing to see, other than a vestige, a project that combines achievement and pop entertainment. Because we have the experience of film, we are bored by panoramas. Yet they suddenly bring us closer to those who passed through before us, before 1895. The Mesdag Panorama has a kind of elegance. Its creators folded time, in order to yield to and stretch one of the functions of painting (at the risk of completely erasing it): to tell a story. Because this panorama is a landscape and not a battle scene, space replaces narrative. This is what we discover once inside this curious vessel. A small space odyssey, the Mesdag Panorama brings together the romantic science of landscape painting and the disenchanting realism of modernity. It represses the past and brings back some stereotypical details.

7. The Panoptic today

What the first panoramist, Robert Barker (1739-1806), created in 1787 continues to allow viewers to see everything, as if consulting a map. In the Mesdag Panorama, to see everything stretches the appearance of things to such a "perfect" form, that Van Gogh is to have said in 1881, "The only flaw of this painting is to have none," (Comment 1993b, p. 61). This meticulous detail rendering, which fills everything, to avoid the dissolution of forms, is often associated with the perfection of skill. Restoration work, connected to memory, is part of this project. Contemporary artists play with this device, its scale, its images and its space.

We have been considering fixed views, but Erkki Huhtamo has recently shown the importance of moving panoramic devices (Huhtamo, 2013), which are real cultural phenomena.

Jeff Wall has done realistic photographic scenography works, riddled with quotes. In 1993, he completed *Restoration*, a large photograph showing the restoration of the Bourbaki Panorama (Brougher, 1997, p. 41), which shows the scars of time, the expanse of the painted landscape, the scaffoldings, and restorers at work, looking at this space. The "body" of the rotunda is visible, but by showing the details of what is behind the scenes architecturally, the work becomes a double picture, and remains a work by Jeff Wall. This piece, presented within a 1.19 meter by 4.90 meter long light box, can be found at the Kunstmuseum in Lucerne, Switzerland.

As another example, in 1996, in Kijkduin, near The Hague, James Turrell created *Hemels Gewelf* (Celestial Vault). The Mesdag Panorama has fascinated Turrell, because its device generates for viewers a powerful awareness of their own perception of space. For Turrell, a panorama is firstly a matter of perception. He has certainly been sensitive to his own work, based on space and light (*Roden Crater*, acquired in 1977). *Celestial Vault* is a hollow dug into the dunes, above which the sky appears as a dome, if one is lying down in the base of the hole. Standing up, visitors contemplate the vast landscape, as Hendrik Mesdag had done in the past. Turrell, like Mesdag, wants to awaken a new perception of reality in viewers, based on an intimate experience of one's relationship to environment, space and light; and to draw the viewer's attention to details that he or she will soon forget.

David Hockney has also questioned the impact and the limits of the natural, artificial panorama. How can one paint a picture that will absorb the viewer? By shifting the vanishing point, as the cubists did, causing simultaneity, Hockney has made large paintings and large collages based on the Grand Canyon in the USA (*Grand Canyon with Ledge, Arizona, October 1982*, a collage with 60 vanishing points; *A Closer Grand Canyon*, 1998; *A Bigger Grand Canyon*, 1998.) Finally, Jeffrey Shaw uses the panoptic device in his work, in which virtual reality is made visible. Anne-Marie Duguet shows how, since 1974 (*Diadrama*), Shaw has been combining circular images and observation platforms (Duguet, 2002a, p. 119-172). This is a process of almost unlimited scale, which links transformable shapes and the post-modern experience (Duguet, 2002b, p. 151-154). As mentioned above, the enormous panoramas by Yadegar Asisi, including *Amazonia* (34 meters in diameter, 34 meters high, with 360° view), unfurled in the *XXL Panorama (after Rome 312)* in Rouen, show how much this remains a living art form.

To accept to give oneself over for a moment to the panoramic space, is to become aware of the hypnotic strength of the image - and to its tiny, subordinate, theateralized worlds: in other words, the details - which are often result of a coincidence, of an accident or of ecstasy.

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