

## Outer Image

In the iconography of many cultures, and particularly in the Western one (especially starting from Romanticism), sometimes you can see someone pictured with his or her back turned, or from an angle, while staring into the distance, often beyond the borders of the painting. Thus, the presence of an “elsewhere” is established, which even though invisible (or *especially* because it is invisible), becomes the true protagonist of the scene, in the picture or in the photographed image<sup>1</sup>. Anyone who might have happened to look at a photo of people looking towards a celebrity close to them, in a particularly important moment (for instance on Barack Obama's election day, in November 2008, or in January 2009, when he took the oath of office as the President of the United States) will have certainly noticed how they always directed their gaze beyond the onlooker's shoulders, outside the shot. There is no way of knowing what they are really seeing, what other images might overlap with the 'real' one, which is – moreover – inaccessible, because it's situated *outside* the image. The very inaccessibility of all of this, though strongly impressed in those gazes, marking their expression, makes them particularly interesting, or rather, fascinating, like the repositories of a mystery which the real event, both liberating and galvanizing, managed to bring to the surface, to evoke, vaguely, also in ourselves<sup>2</sup>. Scattered through all of Carlos Casas' work, there are very intense, *ecstatic* moments, where reality, whilst standing out with objective clarity in its physicalness, with no adjustment, with no ‘tricks’ whatsoever, seems somehow to be on the verge of overflowing under the effect of a strong internal energy, thus deriving towards an ineffable object, a sort of *no where* which the mechanical medium (with its audiovisual and radio-receiving recording devices) is only able to evoke, but not to capture and show us. Figures shown with their back turned, who look towards the darkened and deserted horizon, others who peer far away through the lenses of their binoculars, others still who talk about themselves while staring into nothingness, thus making their words (“Lonely, lonely... lonely!”) appear to be permeated with a singular force, in spite of their apparent simplicity. Thoughtful men, intent on writing, or apparently pensive, whilst gazing around, in silence.

Carlos Casas always shoots his videos in places that are far away from the so-called centre (or the so-called centres) of the world, like in Patagonia, Uzbekistan, Siberia. His approach is candid and open-minded, without preconceptions, so as to be able to capture, in the very instant they take place, moments of transcendence in the gestures of a seal-hunter, of a worker in a remote Patagonian land or of a fisherman at lake Aral. Casas doesn't 'process' his material with any software, preferring the naked objectivity of the footage, which reflects back to us his own experience ‘on site’ without practically any mediation. And it is easy to identify with him, while he is on the Siberian 'pack ice', enraptured as he watches millenary gestures, carried out in silence before a boundless, desolate nature, as if performing a rite. Gestures which, although recognizable to us as human, we are almost unable to understand, and perhaps for this very reason, they are able to fascinate us and take us to an unknown dimension, where it can become difficult, for the limited time of the screening, to even recognize ourselves. Probably Casas

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1: figures caught in this pose are frequent in the work of C. D. Friedrich, and can be also found in Böcklin, Courbet, Gericault, and earlier in Caravaggio and in Vermeer, more recently in Magritte and Calle, amongst many. The motion picture industry also used it often, there are examples in films by Godard, Fellini, Tarkovsky, Hitchcock amongst many. In 1970 Bruce Nauman, with *Live-taped Video Corridor*, has his say on the theme of the figures that have their backs turned to the onlooker, in a radically innovative and perturbing way: the shoulders we see on the screen in front of us, unreachable, are our own nape and shoulders, the identification is inevitable, though difficult to come to terms with.

2: author of some of the first examples of this kind of portrait, that presents a character positioned frontally in relation to the onlooker, whose stare is directed towards something we can't see, being outside the image, eluding (or better, ignoring) our gaze, is Gericault, with his portraits of madmen, completely absorbed in an object which is external to the picture, far away. And also in Japanese painting, especially in ukiyo-e prints, the theme of the character (almost always a lady) who stares beyond the picture is very widespread. Often, in the title a reference to the moon is made, which however almost never appears in the image, but the direction of the look, upwards, clearly indicates, especially in the eyes of a Japanese, that that is indeed the target.

experimented something similar while shooting "Ice Edge" (in Siberia, in 2007), capturing images of men who have their backs to us, as they scan a vast and desolate landscape, searching for the animal that they are destined to kill, awaiting the event that will guarantee them the complete perception of their own existence and its justification.

In Casas, these rebounding looks – we, through the eye of the camera, watch someone whilst they're looking somewhere else, unaware of us or indifferent to us – structure many of these *ecstatic* moments, like at a certain point of the last film of the trilogy "Hunters since the beginning of time", shot in 2007, where one can see a group of Siberian hunters intent on scanning the landscape from afar with the help of a pair of binoculars, each one in his own particular way. Making this sequence really special, rightfully including it amongst those moments, is the fact that Carlos Casas cross-cut it, during the editing process, with a scene where we see – from above and far away – a vast stretch of sea marked at intervals by the puffs of a whale moving with unearthly slowness. And it is proceeding towards the exact opposite direction than the one towards which the hunters had directed their binoculars, in the previous sequence. Thus, Casas seems to subtly suggest the possibility that that could be a vision, an image of what the men are searching for, and therefore, dream about.

The capability of creating strongly evocative sequences, able to hint at the transcendent and the invisible, the occult (in a literal sense) using materials collected 'on site', is the true force of this author, who doesn't need to go over the top, resorting to illusory effects, as is often the case with many film-makers. "Frozen Coast" (2007) serves as an emblematic case: we see for almost an hour the still image (the shot was taken placing the camera on a tripod) of an iced-over expanse, where the foreground is taken up by a sea wave frozen solid in mid-air. No human being is present, just a small bird which flies into the shot and stays there for a minute or so, while the chirping of other birds and various indistinct sounds can be heard during all the duration of the video. Yet, a sense of quiet expectation which – due to the 'loop' effect – seems able to carry on indefinitely, pervades the work, and one keeps on staring towards the horizon of that desert land, boundless, where the livid colour ranging between white-blue and light-grey unifies everything, ice and sky, creating an almost 'naturalistic' image of the concept of void, of a void charged with possibilities, from which one may expect something to happen. How contrasting is all this with the world, often overloaded with images, colours and facts, the sense and motivation of which often elude us, which starts and ends at the corners of the monitor, and how essential to the fascination of this work does this contrast become, inviting us to a contemplation that satisfies us just because nothing or very little is given to us in return. Nevertheless, in the end, we are mirrored in that void, in that nothingness, it fills us, for the time spent contemplating it, and the effect is purifying, liberating. It was probably the same effect it had on Casas, while he was there shooting, motivating him to offer us these images in order to recreate it in us.

Another approach frequently adopted by Casas in order to vividly recreate the presence of something that lies beyond the shot, which we search for without ever being able to reach, to see, consists in the frequent use of tracking shots, starting very slowly from the right or the left hand-side of the opening shot. Following a long slow trail of smoke which rises from the shacks of the workers at dusk ("Smoke", 2002) towards the woods where it lingers a little before dissolving, like a dream at dawn. Or (in "Dead Sea", 2003) roaming along the line of the horizon, as if trying to follow something that is continuously escaping, passing over and over again in the same spot, until the sequence is interrupted by the approaching of the dark, while one can still hear for a couple of seconds, captured by the short radio waves, the distorted and winding voice of a muezzin. Or in the brief, blunt, bewildering "White Night" (2007), where the Siberian 'pack' is the protagonist once again, vast and sparkling in the short night of late Spring, when a diffuse blueish light makes it possible to see as far as the extreme limit of the horizon, but there is nothing and no one to see, and the beating, deafening sound which is repeated and is almost the same throughout the entire length of the sequence, instead of synesthetically filling that void, seems to accentuate it, as if describing the nothingness. In "Light", one of his most fascinating videos, shot, like "Smoke", in Patagonia in 2002, we participate in a dream-like vision, where things have dilated and shapeless contours, and evanescent figures move with extreme slowness around faint lights suffocated by a slimy darkness. The camera follows them, finds them for a moment, and then loses them, helpless

like a blind man who wakes up in an unknown place and tries to find his bearings.

Carlo Fossati, 2009/2010 (translated by Valentina Maffucci)