Through the Keyhole: (Photographic) Desire and Astronomical Imagination*

Text by Jasmine Pisapia.
Images by Malena Szlam

The etymological meaning of desiderium harkens back, it seems, to sidus—meaning the celestial body (l’astre), or constellation. Nostalgic regret had thus been paired to the idea of a “dis-aster” (“dés-astre”), which means much more than a simple uprooting (dépaysement). Because the loss of ground (sol) is then worsened by the loss of cosmic protection.


These curious lines, taken from Jean Starobinski’s wondrous historical exploration of saturnine sentiments, depend on the translation of words such as astre and dépaysement, which hardly find their equivalent in English. Astre refers to any celestial or astronomical body—its Latin expression sidus being the etymological root, the author tells us, of the word “desire.” Dépaysement signifies, literally and metaphorically, a change of scenery, a sense of astonishment, of (cultural) disorientation, of being uprooted from a country (pays), perhaps even a particular “landscape” (paysage).

What Starobinski seems to suggest, then, is the intimate—or at the very least, linguistic—connection between celestial objects and desire. The loss of the former holds the potential to cause a “dis-aster” greater than any other. What might it mean, then, to “hold on” to the astres, to gaze at them intimately through the keyhole, to reproduce them mechanically, with intensity and patience?

*This text takes as its source and impetus the fascination of two women, a century apart, with the architecture of the nightly...
Malena Szlam, image filmed in the Altiplano, Chile, 2015; 16mm film, colour; Courtesy of the artist.

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Malena Szlam, image filmed in the Altiplano, Chile, 2015; 16mm film, colour; Courtesy of the artist.

NIGHT: RHYTHMS

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character, the moon—or luna—has inherited the very name of “light,” as both rise from the ashes of the Latin *lux* and *lumen*.

Three riveting lines from Walter Benjamin’s *Berlin Childhood around 1900* evoke the peculiar force of lunar light: “The light streaming down from the moon has no part in the theater of our daily existence. The terrain so deceptively illuminated by it seems to belong to some counter-earth or alternate earth.”5 In Benjamin’s text, objects are described as imbued with enigmatic radiance, as moonlight brushes across the globe have “projected” countless *pareidolia* (a human face, the silhouette of a rabbit or a toad).6 Such projections spring as much from folklore as from scientific rituals, such as when the International Astronomical Union baptized, in 1935, one of its craters “Daguerre” in honor of the character, the moon—or luna—has inherited the very name of “light,” as both rise from the ashes of the Latin *lux* and *lumen*. Through the Keyhole: *...*

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skill, women were presumed to offer a speak. [...] Beyond their supposed ‘lack of skill,’ women were presumed to offer a ‘natural’ predilection away from the grand speculative tradition.”

Annie Jump Cannon found herself historically at the juncture between these various practices and discourses, as both a so-called “human computer” and photography aficionada. And yet her trajectory subverts these narratives. Her theoretical innovation in the realm of spectra classification was recognized worldwide, and her passion in the realm of spectra classification was recognized worldwide,12 and her passion about what came to be appallingly called the historically at the juncture between these one hand, the handmade treatment of filmic/century (astronomical) photography may be desire. Despite how far apart late-nineteenth-century... (Photographic) Desire and Astronomical Imagination of poet Matthew Arnold:

\[\text{blue ink somewhat in haste, appear the words can fully capture. Thus, jotted down in dark scrapbooks—written by herself and others—perhaps only the abundant poetry found in her heart and imagination since childhood in ways for celestial bodies went far beyond her} \]

It is the poetic dimension that Malena Szlam’s work seeks to redeem, as it finds itself at the crossroads of cosmic and photographic processes and the beauty of mechanical accidents—still haunted, perhaps, by the spectres of “heliography.”

“...texts I want to transform into something else...texts I want to transform into texts efímeros y foráneos ephemeral and foreign texts correct my grammar correct my grammar...texts efímeros y foráneos ephemeral and foreign texts correct my grammar correct my body and so on... Written words, seeking to exist through linguistic and bodily uncertainty, begin to accompany her in the process of filming—a cyclical dimension to the seemingly linear temporal progression of life. Similarly, yet with a different purpose, by rewinding film in-camera to expose the same frame, time and again and at various moments, Szlam creates palimpsests of images that offer a portrait of the temporal complexity of lives in which dreams, memories, and the imagination co-exist with the quotidian passage of time.

While Szlam’s first attempt at filming the moon took place in Chile, this sidereal scene continued to make intermittent appearances in her works, before emerging in a fixed, hypnotic anchor, blazing with light: the point of view of an animal, or of the trees...textos efímeros y foráneos ephemeral and foreign texts...texts I want to transform into something else...texts I want to transform into texts efímeros y foráneos ephemeral and foreign texts correct my grammar correct my grammar...texts efímeros y foráneos ephemeral and foreign texts correct my grammar correct my body and so on... Written words, seeking to exist through linguistic and bodily uncertainty, begin to accompany her in the process of filming—a cyclical dimension to the seemingly linear temporal progression of life. Similarly, yet with a different purpose, by rewinding film in-camera to expose the same frame, time and again and at various moments, Szlam creates palimpsests of images that offer a portrait of the temporal complexity of lives in which dreams, memories, and the imagination co-exist with the quotidian passage of time.

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scene by a lake where she and her mother had stopped overnight, in a wooden cabin: warm translucent rivers emerging from the earth; they spring and continue their course under the wooden house. Harboring for the immigrant family the door opens and the wind pulls me outside. This was in fact the house as it appeared in a dream she had jotted down the next morning in her notebook. I imagined this house, ensconced at the edge of a lake, and translucent rivers "like bloodstream," she writes a few entries later, flowing under the wooden planks. And between those lines, out of that floor made of wood, emerged the harbor of an "immigrant family." Her paternal grandparents, perhaps—exiled Polish Jews forced to flee and cross the Atlantic Ocean to reach South America in 1938. A ghostly wharf, stable and yet subject to moisture and erosion, as it hangs over a continuous stream. And while reading this text, the curious sense of hearing the flow of blood—whose was it? That of a (barred) biological connection to the land; or the very blood shed by the destructive potential of such a claimed appurtenance? The question of origins, not unrelated to the imagined matter of blood—translucent blood, all the more—kept wavering, as did my dull sense of loss experienced in the present. As she recalled her travels to Southern Chile, she remembers filming water:

I was doing an observational research on water as an embodied element—related to the human body, the female body. The womb. Water is not just water. It is many waters. I grew up thinking water was singular. But there are solid waters, muddy waters, transparent waters, dead waters. And this manifests itself through color too. Blue, silver, brown. Following water recalled my sense of feeling uprooted, she says, displaced. Of a sense of loss within myself. Landscapes are linked to a sense of being lost, to my need to find myself in this place.19

“What place?” I asked. “Well, Canada, Chile, South America and North America...” Images of moons, lakes and skies allow to conjoin very distant geographies. Her answer seemed to gesture towards a form of roving that both encompassed and exceeded geographical considerations—perhaps even language itself. Interestingly, in most writings addressing the question of “landscape,” language falters. Raymond Williams’s astonishment at the word “nature” and its extreme complexity is time and again revisited as a plethora of etymological excavations revealing semantic dispersion and uncertainty.20 Critics often resemble Freud at the outset of his astonishing piece the “uncanny”—a subject matter described as a “province” of the aesthetic realm—digging in the various dictionaries of the world only to find the most contrasting significations and to come back to what was, uncannily, “long old and familiar” in his German language.21

Starting from the suffix “scape,” Kenneth Olwig unearthed multiple significations from the limited domain of Germanic languages: carved out shapes, male and female procreative organs, birthing processes, organic growths.22 The prefix “land” allowed him to conjoint the term to its twin concepts nature and nation: an (agri)cultivated space identified to a people through blood ties and/or the ploughing of the soil. For Olwig, landscape was to be considered by its structural opposition between city and state, and he retracts this oppositional relationship back to the writings of Virgil, which may find a powerful aesthetic resonance with the images of astronomy. For the Roman poet, nature was a “unity of opposites”: “the sexual cosmology in which a female earth and a male sky (was) conceptually linked in Andromeda, a seminal process of cosmic intercourse.”23 According to this ancient cosmological conception, celestial knowledge was closer to geometrical, mathematical precision and urban imperialism, whereas the earth offered rural, “organic, biological wisdom.” Olwig ultimately locates “landscape” as conceptually and mythically opposed to the sky—and as the imagined locus of communal identity: “it is in organic, biological terms of breeding and cultivation that power within the community is legitimated.”23 Mechanical reproductions of the sky—especially twentieth-century astronomical photographs—would seem to be quintessentially opposed to such an understanding of “landscape.”

The worlds conjured by Szlam are not inscribed in the fetishization of a specific national attribute, nor do they afford the stabilization and domestication of a fixed, recognizable locale from which one might be forcefully inserted or expelled. Yet the creative processes involved in crafting Szlam’s “landscapes” enact a form of inhabitation. Writing, filming, and building installations

Malena Szlam, Lunar Almanac, 2013 (detail), Canada; 16mm film, colour, silent, 4 minutes; Courtesy of the artist.
become modes of “ploughing” a soil on which one can exist. In this process, Virgil’s mathematical sky may well become re-coded as “land” through artisan-like image-making practices, where the moon is carved out from the preserve of scientists and taken for the richness of all its other possible rhythms and uncanny repetitions: calendric, menstrual, oneric, filmic, photographic. Repetition, in fact, is crucial to the aesthetics and creation of Lunar Almanac. The moon filmed in Caburga will later be re-filmed in Canada, and it is the latter that will appear in the single-channel film. The simultaneous similarity and disparity Szlam finds between the places that appear in her films are manifested in her notebooks, and hint towards the ways in which landscape itself—the word and concept—might be considered as Das Unheimlich: homely and unhomely at once.

Fusing landscapes... Dissolution and condensation... Last night I arrived in Caburga... I’m farther South from Canada, on the edge of a lake in the south of Chile... a lake that mirrors the ones farther north, in Canada... that mirror strikes me... and only exacerbates the differences

In Szlam’s notebooks and films, lakes appear as sites in which light is reflected, but they also echo other lakes. These lakes become copies, doubles, substitutable, at once homely and uncanny. They are the natural/artificial anchors onto which is projected and displaced a desire for home. It is no coincidence that it anchors onto which is projected and displaced

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... (Photographic) Desire and Astronomical Imagination... (my emphasis) And yet despite this strangeness, it is ultimately when gazing at the stars that she expresses a sense of home: “These glorious nights made me feel equally at home under the southern as previously under the northern stars.”

The peculiar “familiarity” of these skies was cultivated by Cannon through her own diaristic writings, and through the affective collection of words written by poets such as Emerson, and others. These poetic texts open astronomical aesthetics to the question of sublimity, and religious or philosophical transcendence. Though it is impossible to do justice to such complex theoretical entanglements in this context, we must consider how celestial bodies—which most humans are unlikely to ever touch except, perhaps, through processes such as light impression on a photographic plate—are always already somewhat “imagistic,” and bound to be seen from afar. Their capacity to exceed human physicality and lifespans both awakens the conscience of finitude and becomes grafted onto the ways death inscribes itself into life.

In 1894, Annie Jump Cannon began a notebook immediately after the death of her mother. Only two years later was she to begin working at the Harvard College Observatory, and dedicate her life fully to astronomy. The deep blue journal is one of mourning, which brings to the fore the forces that drove her scientific perseverance, and the ways in which astronomical bodies appear in her writing under registers of religiosity, finitude, and the otherwordly:

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February 15th
It is so cold to-night. When I opened the window it almost drove me wild to see the moon shining on the white snow. O, could I but have something. A dream, vision, a fancy to soothe my troubled brain…

March 18th
... Have had no dream or vision or sight. I have tried to crowd every day with busy work … Busy—as if I had to rush from one day to the other and never think about what ought to be done next... I am here, and she is lying calmly by Silver Lake. [...] When, or where is her spirit? ... I long so for more real feeling of her spirit–life. For a visible communication with the other world… The stars help me more than anything else. The glorious orbs greeting me every night and the words of revelation have saved my mind …

April 8th
The giver of all my good things is beneath the earth at Silver Lake. I can hardly endure life. I would give anything for one look into her beautiful face, for one sound of that lovely voice … I do not want just the spirit. I want her hair, her eyes, her very body.

Celestial bodies accompany her as she attempts to make sense of the absence of a loved body, to imagine what a “visible communication with the other world” could be. In this process, the moon “drives her wild,” and the stars have “helped her”—their light offering the visible otherworldly emission she so longed for in the absence of a sign, of a “spirit–life.” This is the very emotion, it seems, shared by many protagonists of a film by an(other) Chilean filmmaker, Patricio Guzmán. In Nostalgia de la Luz (2010), in which astronomy is said to be a widespread fascination and pastime in Chile, Guzmán explains this by recalling the imaginary linked

April 20th
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NIGHT: RHYTHMS

to the many famous observatories located in the Atacama Desert in Chile, which offers unparalleled conditions to observe nightly skies. Astronomy becomes the lens through which to speak about the country’s troubled history in the aftermath of the dictatorship, as many people who have suffered from the political violence recall holding on to the study of the stars in moments of profound despair. Ex-political prisoners return to the abandoned cells where they were held in the desert as they show where and how they collectively gazed at constellations. A woman whose parents were both killed under the regime—and today works for one of the main astronomical associations in Chile—explains how the study of astronomy offered a mode of making sense of her loss, as she gained access to stellar temporarities reaching far beyond human finitude. In this film, the past is considered at multiple scales: from the astronomers in the desert observing light received with incommensurable delays, to archaeologists—in the same desert—looking for the traces of long-deceased human beings, to the painful, recent past which has been unable to be addressed.

Thus, a third group appears throughout Guzmán’s film: women scanning the desert with the hope of finding the bodily remains of their loved ones, killed under Pinochet’s regime. On the surface of this moonlike landscape, we see them digging, wandering with their eyes glued to the ground. Demanding more than the nearness of a “spirit–life,” they seek the tangible bodies scattered throughout a cracked earth, as if to bear witness to and counter-act the very physicality of displacement. Again, Szlam’s notebook comes to mind, and takes on a new meaning:

Re-configuring the language of history that has been invisible. Tracing those inhabited spaces where the history has been violated erased and killed. Landscape emptied of people. Full of memories, there, apparently invisible.

Landscape is a fracture of mapping history, a history of repression, the history of being uprooted. Relocating y refuncioar collective memory. Arte de desplazamiento.

How arresting that a scene such as the moon may have entered Malena Szlam’s camera at the same time—“by chance”—while simultaneously carrying many other possible moons. Daguerre’s failed photographic inscription. Schneemann’s spiraling Super 8mm moon. Chilean astronomical desires as traced by Guzmán, a filmmaker who elegantly evokes how culturally specific astronomical imaginaries may arise from histories of global transnational scientific projects (such as the construction of observatories) and offer both an object of collective desire and a mode of turning one’s gaze away from the unbearable wounds of history experienced and unearthed on land. How may we understand such logics of “chance” by respecting the double movement of interconnectedness and contingency?

Photographic moons allow us to consider a series of movements, oscillating from North to South and back again, and hint towards broader geographical histories of celestial observation and reproductions at once collective and irreducibly intimate. American telescopes implanted in Peru… German telescopes in Chile… stargazing on photographic plates or through a telescope in Massachussetts and in Arequipa… moon-gazing in Southern Chile and later in Canada, either through the sensuous, constricted space of the camera’s viewfinder or before rushes projected in a dark room. In these different moments, sidus—the astronomical bodies (of desire)—consistently exceed their status as aesthetic motifs offered to naked and technological eyes. As bodies, they inevitably interact with ours. In and around them, feelings of uprooting (dépaysement) congeal and find an anchor—a call for solace, perhaps, in order to circumvent “dis-aster” (dés-aster).
... (Photographic) Desire and Astronomical Imagination

NOTES

1 I would like to thank Marilyn Ivy at Columbia University for her encouragement, her careful reading, and for providing the initial context (a seminar entitled “Eccocriticism for the End Times”) in which this research emerged.

1 One might be reminded here of the title of Judith Mayne’s The Woman at the Keyhole: Feminism and Women’s Cinema (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).


4 Ekphrasis is a reversal film produced by Kodak and has been officially discontinued since 2013. Its vivid and contrasted colours are highly sought after by filmmakers still using analogue techniques.


6 Pareidolia derives from the Greek parai (beside) and olio (disk, or appearance, form). The Online Merriam-Webster suggests this definition: “the tendency to perceive a specific, often meaningful, image in a random or ambiguous visual pattern. The human brain is optimized to recognize faces, which could also explain why we are so good at picking out meaningful shapes in random patterns. This phenomenon, pareidolia, could be responsible for a host of otherwise unexplained sightings, such as the face of the Virgin Mary on a toasted cheese sandwich.—New Scientist, 24 December 2011.”


8 Annie Jump Cannon, In the Footsteps of Columbus (Baton: Beria and Co., 1893).

9 The Kamarat, patented in 1891 by The Blair Camera Company, was the first American camera to move the film sprods to the front of the camera.

10 It was during the last decades of the 1800s that the crucial figure of the female “typewriter” emerged, as documented so deftly by Friedrich Kittler in Gramophone, Film, Typewriter (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999). Also, for a detailed study of the ways in which “nature” and “women” have been historically conflated—see Carroll Merchant, The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1990).


12 The Penny Diner Catalogue (1918–1924), which Cannon co-authored, catalogued over 300,000 stars and was an absolutely pioneering effort in stellar spectra classification for the time.

13 Geoffrey Batchen insists, in the early proto-photographers’ discourses, on the recurrence of the trope of “spontaneity” in the revelation of the image on photographic surfaces.

14 It is remarkable that Marieke Nijkamp’s riveting film Breaking the Frame with Carolee Schneemann (2014) begins with a spiraling image of the moon she found in a stack of Schneemann’s Super 8mm outs. She opens with such an evocative scene as a way of conjuring up what she calls the “paradox of the see-er in the seen,” one of her film’s forceful motifs.

15 Prior to this, the philosophical motif of the sphere was already present in Slatm’s work. See her own text inspired by Jorge Luis Borges’ short essay on Pacal’s sphere: “Una Esfera,” Poesia 2 (Chile Council for the Arts and Culture, November 2004): 62–67.

16 Benjamin, Berlin Childhood, 85.


20 Raymond Williams, Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), in particular the entry “nature—“The Order of Landscape.” In The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes, ed. W. Meining (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 153.

21 For example, J. B. Jackson, editor of Landscape magazine, who after 25 years of scholarly work on the topic wrote that “the concept continues to elude me.” “The Order of Landscape.”


25 Annie Jump Cannon archive, “Southern Skies” (1922), Harvard University.


27 We should be reminded here of Immanuel Kant’s famous early phrase (which was reproduced on his tombstone) in which he expressed his awe before two seemingly incommeasurable realities: “The starry sky above me and moral law within me.” For an elaborate critique of Kantian cosmology, correlationism, and the question of finitude, see Quentin Megarry, After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency (Iran: Ray Brasser (London/ New York: Continuum, 2008.).