

Nira Pereg / Canicule

Falls like rain

By Francis Mckee

It is a question worth asking. At what point does this work begin for a viewer? On entering the narrow space between screen and door, you are drawn down the length of the suspended glass - almost 8.5 metres long - all the while absorbing the images above and accompanied by the bestial groans of the soundtrack. Finding sanctuary in the deeper space in front of the work, you are confronted with three large, aligned projections on the glass curtain. The sculptural presence and noise of this work constitute an experience in itself, a self-consciously theatrical spectacle that overwhelms and disorientates the viewer before the images begin to create an impact.

The triptych of projections works first as a rhythmic sequence, fading in or out in various combinations. We become aware of figures emerging from mist and vanishing back into it, at times leaving the screen a near fog-white blank. Amid these images there is a constant pulse - the digital projection of animated rain slowly falling against a red background. At certain moments, the three panels recall the large minimal abstractions of the 1960s. At other times, figurative action dominates the panels and evokes the triptychs of Renaissance painting in Europe.

The action itself is ambiguous. Some figures merely loiter in the mist and rain, others pass through in slow motion carrying shopping bags or wearing rucksacks. Occasionally a figure will luxuriate in the deluge while more often someone will lean or sit against a wall, impassive and resigned. There is a wide diversity of races but this must be Europe. There is a sense of catastrophe yet people are also going about their business. The scene seems almost medieval but it is clearly contemporary. It could be apocalyptic or a vision of hell. It might be a futuristic prison or a sci-fi world of perpetual rain. It could be an image of the third world enveloping the first world.

Actually, it is the daily scene at the Paris Plage in the summer of the 'Canicule' of 2003. In the midst of Europe's devastating heat wave (which may have caused the deaths of over 10,000 in France alone), the Parisian authorities constructed a fake beach along a strip of the Seine. In the killing heat, the showers that lined one wall of the simulacrum became more useful than anyone had ever envisaged, drawing crowds eager to cool off.

The weather that summer hit record highs, threatening governments that had not sufficiently prepared for such climactic extremes and, inevitably, invoking the specter of global warming. A phenomenon such as the Canicule lodges in the memory of a population more readily than most historical events and often assumes significance far

beyond the mere fact of weather. In his study of Western technoculture - *Strange Weather* (1991) - Andrew Ross observes that

Instances of prolonged meteorological abnormality expose popular and official anxieties about the economy of change and constancy that regulates our everyday lives. Historical weather events, no matter how singular or prolonged, are remembered as material instances of radical abnormality long after contemporaneous political or social events and upheavals have faded from the popular memory. Famous blizzards, droughts, tornadoes, and hurricanes punctuate regional and national history with a social meaning that often far surpasses the resonance of the political events with which they coincided or were causally associated...Changes in the weather from day to day are our most palpable contact with the phenomenon of change, and so it is no surprise that they often come to be associated with patterns of social change..

The Canicule in France was one of these extraordinary weather events. Charged with significance beyond the facts of a summer heat wave, the memory of the phenomenon became emblematic of a period of catastrophic history, reflecting the anxieties of western cultures teetering on the brink of a new, uncertain world order.

The images in Nira Pereg's *Canicule* (2004) amplify this confusion. Scenes of celebration seem to sit side by side with moments of profound gloom. There is an elegiac quality in the rhythm of her editing - the slowed figures, repeated scenes, long fades and stretched, bellowing voices all memorialise the action. Though looped, there is a definitive moment when all three projections show only the red background and digital rain. This marks a beginning or end and subsequent fades carry the suggestion of chapters opening and closing within a remembered narrative. We remain uncertain, however, as to what exactly is unfolding in the situation before us. After a while, it is the hypnotic rhythm of the images, the reflected light and the darkness that holds us.

In the first *Matrix* movie there is a moment when the looped image of a cat passing a doorway alerts the characters to the hallucinatory nature of their surroundings. In *Canicule*, the falling rain against the red background punctuates our dreamlike state in a similar way. Constructed using a digital imaging package, the image is patently false with little attempt to mimic nature (except perhaps in the too perfect, machinic precision of the falling 'rain'). The colours, of course, are wrong from the start but we could still bring ourselves to believe in the rain if the red wasn't so intense and the raindrops so elongated.

The falsity of this image undermines the documentary qualities of the 'real'

footage. Whatever may be unfolding in the apocalyptic landscape we are viewing cannot be trusted and is rendered as suspicious as the digitally enhanced rain. Moreover, when we examine our own initial reactions to the images we realise the double-edged desire for metaphor and simile that defines human nature. The spectacular images invite us to consider that the scene is 'like' a sci-fi futuristic world, 'like' a catastrophic incident or 'like' a strange open prison.

It is not even as if there is a simple reality behind the ambiguity of the images. Discovering that the footage was actually shot at the Paris Plage only aggravates the experience of dislocation as we find a stage-set seaside resort in the midst of one of Europe's great urban tourist attractions. The Paris architectural landscape has itself served as a backdrop for cinema and literature for generations. The need to create a beach scene within its city centre reveals a complex blend of insecurity, arrogance and self-conscious playfulness on the part of the authorities.

Pereg's *Canicule*, then, has nested simulacra within simulacra and the complete theatrical impact of the installation serves to question the status and integrity of the images we can construct in the world today. It is not perhaps coincidence that its formal evocation of minimal art in the 1960s links it to works attacked at that time for their 'theatrical' nature. In *Art and Objecthood* (1967), the most penetrating critic of minimalism, Michael Fried, argues that such work 'is concerned with the actual circumstances in which the beholder encounters it.' These works throw the emphasis back on the viewer in a gallery who becomes intensely aware of their relationship to the work and of the whole process of perception. Fried argued that this was unlike the works he himself favored which 'were in essence anti-theatrical, which is to say that they treated the spectator as if he were not there.' Pereg's practice in general, though, dwells on the nature of looking and the voyeurism prevalent in contemporary media. Buried deep within this concern in her work lies the question of responsibility and action. Voyeurism and the passive appreciation of simulacra absolve the viewer of any need to take a position on any issue, it seems enough to simply watch.

Pereg's *Canicule* roots its images in an extreme and, for many, fatal weather event and makes us aware of our own presence in front of the work. It highlights our voyeurism in a world of media images, conflicts, and news broadcasts and it searches for that elusive moment when the act of looking may finally demand action and responsibility from the viewer.

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