

Going in Circles

Rotation and Immersion in Björk's "Wanderlust"

"Things go in circles" (Björk)¹

"Wanderlust" (Encyclopedia Pictura, 2008), a music video released in 2008, pushes boundaries by opening up new modes of perception. As a stereoscopic 3D production, this work initially seemed to detach itself from established music platforms, such as conventional music television, whose channels would find it quite inconvenient to broadcast.² Furthermore, and this is decisive, its aesthetic arrangement refers to pictorial principles that are no longer aligned with the rectangular frame, but transcend it and expand it as a circular form. "Wanderlust" presents its image world in the form of rounded optics reminiscent of the aesthetics of iris diaphragms. The left and right edges of the frame are concavely curved, centering the action within the image. Consequently, a viewing configuration arises that gives up the logic of vertical and horizontal alignments and replaces them with curved lines. As if looking through binoculars, we view a world of wonders that opens up before our eyes: Björk travels through an artificial landscape, interacts with mythical creatures, and invites us to immerse ourselves in this experience of wandering and wondering.

The following will investigate, in two sections, the media-aesthetic implications that are connected with the orientation towards a round image form. The first section addresses the stylistic staging of the round, with recurring models and motifs that the "Wanderlust" music video organizes as a comprehensive principle of rotation and intensifies through techniques of immersion. The second section deals with the video's production logic and

1 <http://www.bjork.fr/Harp-Magazine-novembre-2007>.

2 The music video was released in 2008 at first on a DVD that included 3D glasses. Afterwards, it was published online in both 2D and 3D.

ultimately questions the future of an expanded media dispositif whose digital image worlds seem to find their vanishing point in an innovative focus on roundness.

1. Motif

The music video begins with foghorns sounds, whose tones pull us out of darkness into the world now being revealed. At a watering hole a herd of bison can be seen, in the middle of which Björk suddenly appears and begins singing her song "Wanderlust." What follows then is a trek whose movement is not characterized by clearly defined steps but by a perpetual flowing and gliding. Wearing a folkloric costume and outfitted with a hiking backpack, Björk begins her journey, embarking on a river through a rugged mountain landscape. A universe of its own opens up here, an imaginary space that is constantly invoking and evoking the dissolution of stable orders. This includes, for example, the distortion and shifting of proportions: the water buffalo are oversized; the female hiker, however, seems miniature by comparison. Moreover, it involves the ambiguity of volumes and planes whose structural principles flow into each other: the images oscillate between painted staffages and relief-like elements. Ultimately, though, what is particularly pronounced is the staging of surreal creatures and forms that are difficult to put into categories of our everyday experience.

What stands out here is, above all, the demon whose extremities are already wriggling their way out of Björk's backpack at the beginning of her journey. As a colorless double of the hiker character, it comes across as her dark doppelgänger whose weight impedes her movements and thus prevents her from progressing. This interruption of her continuing onward can be seen in a scene that presents the intertwining of two opposing movements as a transition into the circular. As if wrestling in a "ring," the two bodies entangle one another in a type of mirroring inversion: the demon's feet are next to Björk's head, and its head is next to her feet. In this arrangement, the doubled figure moves in a continuous rollover from the right to the left of the frame. What was above is turned downward, and what was standing up straight is set in gyration. As a result, a kind of rotation develops that goes beyond the supposedly straight path and represents a delaying interruption of the linear course. Already this scene addresses a central principle of the round: it opposes the dominant viewing direction, at least for a short time, with a different order.

The transposition and relativization of the points of orientation from above and below, as well as forwards and backwards, set into motion a type of rotation that confounds our established notions of structured image composition. As a result, an alternative orientation is developed that begins to detach itself from conventional rules and restrictions in order to counter it with a different visual logic.

This visual logic is not only advanced by the figures' movements but also dynamized by the flowing and rushing of the water. Already at the beginning of the journey, we are dealing with a viewing arrangement that draws the visual vanishing lines into the depth of the image space. Following the opening at the watering hole, the video opens up a perspective that draws our line of vision from the foreground into the depths of the image (Fig. 14). The animated rapids in the river appear like individual strands, and, like liquid struts, they seem to carry us along to pull us from the image's exterior into its interior. This impression is augmented and condensed in those moments in which the video's circular image is totally focused on its view of the river—in other words, it changes the field of view so that the surrounding banks disappear and we find ourselves wholly in the water. Particularly conspicuous is a shot that portrays the bubbling of the river as both a pulsing rush of water bubbles and fountains of foam. The water bubbles along with the rhythm of the electronic beat and endows our visual experience with a new dynamic.



Fig. 14: *Wanderlust*

From out of a space of the solid, structured—the landscape along with its mountain range and meadows along the shores—something transitions into the diffuse, the blurry. Suddenly, all possibilities of orientation have disappeared: there are no longer any relations, no reliable relationships between things, no coordinates structuring the field of vision. As a result, the viewer also loses his or her bearings, since the imbalanced space of the water makes any stable position impossible. With the immersion in the water, the clear view is undermined. In the water, it is primarily the movement of the waves that causes constant visual unrest and produces various states of the visible. Gilles Deleuze has pointed out that cinema “found in water [...] the promise or implication of another state of perception: a more than human perception, a perception not tailored to solids, which no longer had the solid as object, as condition, as milieu. A more delicate and vaster perception, a molecular perception.”³ In this context, the liquifying of perception manifests its specifically medial achievement in no longer letting the gaze stick to solid or fixed forms. Rather, the film’s “fluid universe”⁴ tests the dissolution of solidification in order to forge a path toward a different type of perception.

What is striking about the example of “Wanderlust” is that the moment of immersion as well as the process of a perceptive transformation initiated with it and through it, becomes mobile within the image itself. This moment is partially tied to the subjective perspective of the traveling figure of Björk but it also detaches from her again. In the process, the abysmal nature of the whirlpool, its suction power, plays a pivotal role (Fig. 15). Several times, we encounter the circling, turning movement of the water—and, therefore, an inversion of the first movement of the river. While the bubbling of the water, the pulsing of the bubbles and waves, evokes a direction from below to above, as if they are coming at us, the whirlpool creates the opposite effect of a visual force of attraction. As if a downwards moving gyrostat, it seems to pull us into the depths, suck us into diffuse darkness, and swallow us there. What is striking here is the polarization inward, a self-accelerating force that leads from the curved edge of the frame right into the center of the picture. Thereby a fluid transition occurs between the view from the outside and the detachment from it. One could turn the image around any which way: top and

3 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 80.

4 Edgar Morin, *The Cinema, or The Imaginary Man*, trans. Lorraine Mortimer (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2005), 64.

bottom, left and right, can no longer be made out. The frame of the coherent whole is thus itself called into question.



Fig. 15: *Wanderlust*

It stands to reason that this process of diving in and out should be combined with the perceptive disposition of immersion. This is already indicated by the term's etymology, since the Latin word *immersio* refers to the experience of diving into water:

Immersion is a metaphorical term derived from the physical experience of being submerged in water. We seek the same feeling from a psychologically immersive experience that we do from a plunge in the ocean or swimming pool: the sensation of being surrounded by a completely other reality, as different as water is from air, that takes over all of our attention, our whole perceptual apparatus.⁵

For film, the term “immersion” is primarily used as an indication of the dissolution of spatial boundaries; as a reference to the fact that the perceptive diversity of the camera's view enables the viewer to feel an all-encompassing sense of being involved in the action onscreen. Thus, Béla Balázs noted in 1930:

[Film] has eliminated the spectator's position of fixed distance: a distance that hitherto has been an essential feature of the visual arts. The spectator

5 Janet H. Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (New York: Free Press, 1997), 98.

no longer stands outside a hermetic world of art which is framed within an image or by the stage. Here the work of art is no insulated space, manifesting itself as a microcosm and metaphor and subsisting in a different space, to which there is no access. The camera takes my eye along with it. Into the very heart of the image.⁶

Crucial for immersion, as we see and experience it in “Wanderlust”, is the spiral movement of the whirlpool, for it enables an enormous aesthetic condensation. With the turning movement continuing unabated, an elongation into the depths of the image space is achieved, which converts the incompleteness of the circling and rotating into a type of visual vertigo. Contemplative observation is excluded; here, the visual arrangement does not provide for capturing space but dissolving it. A reliable shaping of space exists merely as an illusion and can be stripped away at any time.

In fact, the music video for “Wanderlust” invokes this disappearance of security and stability repeatedly in its bizarre image worlds; both in terms of the spatial stabilization of the viewing position and of the level of meaning-making. One sees ship locks, tunnel-like round forms, falling motions, whirlpools, and spirals; in other words, configurations that constantly visualize the sense of groundlessness in the viewer’s sense of seeing and sensory perception. In addition, scenes are integrated into the video that present, in a reflexive way, both the process and the effect of visual immersion—for example, when eyes appear in the background of the picture that seem to look at us from a distance or when two oversized hands reach out to the flying-falling or, rather, swimming-floating Björk to catch it at the end of the visual tunnel (Fig. 16).

Everything that constitutes the immersive experience as an image-induced process—the depth of the viewing experience, the fluid viscosity of perception, the comprehensive, indeed all-encompassing dispositif of 3D technology—is again here turned back onto itself. In this sense, the circle shape that makes up the central motif of the music video can also be considered on a meta-level: “Wanderlust” does not just figuratively turn in a round but also makes it comprehensible as a medial effect.

6 Béla Balázs, “The Productive Camera,” in *Béla Balázs: Early Film Theory. Visible Man and The Spirit of Film*, trans. Rodney Livingstone, ed. Erica Carter (New York: Berghahn, 2010), 99.



Fig. 16: *Wanderlust*

This includes, at first, the visual construction of the gyrostat, that is, the formation of the circle in the circle, which is augmented into a moving spiral shape; but also the reciprocally exponentiating relation of sound and image that the video designs as an audiovisual rhythmic figuration. “Wanderlust” is a loop through and through. Already, the media format of music video medium is closely tied to forms of rotation and recursion. As a short and compressed work, the music video relies on repeated reception, on a type of repetition that can increase to heavy rotation. Moreover, the inner organization of the video is also connected to the repetitive structure of the music: to the succession of verses and chorus in the song, to the rhyme scheme, and to the electronic samples. And, ultimately, the video is itself a reproduction; it stages a pop song that has already been produced, which it circulates as a stylized duplication of itself.

The principle of rotation in the video “Wanderlust” can thus be understood as the simultaneity of the centripetal—in the sense of a set of motifs that polarizes one’s view into the interior of the image—and of the centrifugal—in the sense of a referential type of radiation that goes beyond the inner image world. Both forces compel each other reciprocally and develop an all-encompassing dynamic of rotation. “Wanderlust” is an aesthetic phenomenon of the threshold whose production logic points to a particular process of transformation, namely the potential detachment of the image from the rectangle and the frame as a fundamental aesthetic orientation. In the following, I will discuss what this development means for medial transformations of modes of

perception and visual arrangements and to what extent it implies the emergence of visual principles of roundness.

2. Medium

The conception and composition of the round image world of “Wanderlust” is markedly distinguished from conventional music video productions. The production lasted nine months from the first idea to the finished work of art; a considerable effort that is highly unusual for pop music, which typically needs to be promoted in a timely manner. *Encyclopedia Pictura* was responsible for the creation of the video’s artificial universe, an artist collective that primarily deals with the combination of classical animation and Computer-Generated Imagery, or CGI. Isaiah Saxon describes the challenges of the aesthetic process of conception as follows:

For me the hardest aspect was trying to achieve an immersive, complete, and very specific aesthetic—because the only thing in the video that isn’t hand crafted is Bjork’s face, hands, and feet. I used my own hands everyday but also worked with over 50 key artists to achieve the forms and textures of this world. We tried to lodge ideas into the forms and use the patterns and textures of these forms to transmit meaning to the viewer.⁷

The work done on models was crucial for the development of the artificial world in “Wanderlust”—both materially as well as virtually. The artificial creatures were generated by first shaping them by hand out of modeling clay or silicone and then bringing them to life through movement. Breathing a spirit or a soul into them—since this is precisely what “animation” means—was achieved by means of claymotion, that is, a stop-motion technique in which the plasticine figures were photographed frame-by-frame. This process was supplemented by further animation techniques, such as the physical movement of the puppets or the acrobatics of the human bodies in front of a green screen, the orientation of the 3D camera in the miniature, studio-like model structure, computer-generated particle animation for the water worlds, pil-

7 Ned Beuman, “Creating Bjork’s ‘Wanderlust’ Video: Encyclopedia Pictura Expand the Realms of Direct Experience,” *Dazed Digital*, April 8, 2008, <https://www.dazeddigital.com/music/article/296/1/creating-bjorks-wanderlust-video>.

larboxing for the round picture effect, as well as layering and compositing to combine all of the individual elements and layers.

What has been created here, then, is a circumnavigation of illusion techniques, a tour through their history, their past, and their future. In this sense, the name of the artist collective, *Encyclopedia Pictura*, actually refers to a comprehensive collection of image forms, of pictorial understandings and media relations. The dream of an artificially generated fantasy world appears as if through a spherical magnifying glass, along with the longing to completely immerse and lose oneself within it. Two aesthetic practices are salient here: the orientation toward the round form, on the one hand, and the image world's becoming plastic on the other hand. Both practices are embedded in a long media tradition: the circular form recalls a telescope, whereas the volume effects recall stereoscopy. If one takes the dream of immersion a bit further, one would also have to consider the dispositif of the circle-shaped enclosing image space, that is, the 360° illusion. Once again, we land within the round and, thereby, in a sense, in the gyroscope of history. Within this context, Oliver Grau stresses

Despite changing media technological phenomena, the idea of the 360° image marked a continuum in art and media history. The overarching characteristic of this development was an interaction between large-screen spaces of immersion, which fully integrate the body (360° frescoes, panoramas, stereopticons, the Cinéorama, and IMAX cinema, up to current immersive processes in contemporary digital art). On the other hand, there are devices worn directly in front of the eyes, such as perspective boxes, stereoscopes, stereoscopic television, the Sensorama, and the head-mounted display. A history of the image without a frame, indeed without measurements, a history in which one can particularly recognize the human-image relationship in relation to time-specific perception and media competency and whose core phenomenon—immersion—then arises when the work of art and the advanced image apparatus, the message and the medium, converge almost inextricably for the sake of perception.⁸

Currently, with the development of Virtual Reality glasses, the media history of immersion is entering a phase that is starting to invoke the round

8 Oliver Grau, "Immersion und Interaktion. Vom Rundfresko zum interaktiven Bildraum," *Medien Kunst Netz*, http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/themen/medienkunst_im_ueberblick/immersion/.

yet again. Already, the construction of the visual device—two circular lenses through which the computer-generated image landscape is viewed—points to the perception-specific focus on the principle of the round image. In the process, the overcoming of frame limitations is greatly increased. Due to physical proximity, virtual reality images appear considerably larger than conventional screen images. However, what is decisive for this is not solely the size but, moreover, also the image landscapes' expansive capabilities. Every visual impression can be immediately supplemented by an additional one; so the scenery always seems expandable and, therefore, potentially infinite. Because the visual world of Virtual Reality covers the viewer's entire field of view, it seems to surround, to encircle him or her.

Along with the reception technologies of Virtual Reality, its production apparatuses also seem to have found a new goal in the concept of the round. An example of this is *Project Beyond*, developed by Samsung. This is a camera apparatus for 3D panoramic shots that is supposed to solve the problem of very little format-appropriate content being available when new types of display technologies are introduced. Sixteen HD cameras are arranged around the outer edge of the circular device, each capturing at an angle of 45°. The individual images are then combined with the help of a specific 3D algorithm, so that they can be seen by users of VR glasses as one image all around them. As user-friendly equipment, *Beyond* is supposed to help ensure that not only more frameless images are seen but also produced by users, whereby the circulation of round images could experience an exponential boom.



Fig. 17: *Project Beyond*

Thus far, digital VR technology has been in an early experimental stage. What is already beginning to emerge, however, is a gradual detachment from the flat rectangular aesthetic, from its framed limitation and its perspective-guiding geometry. Digital images have a specific elasticity, they are not neces-

sarily bound to rectangular frames but can transcend and even question them. Our gaze has long since ceased to be aligned with fixed screens or monitors, and image forms have long since ceased to be exclusively adapted to them. New dispositifs of perception are developing before our very eyes and, along with them, new image aesthetics, whose flexibility and malleability point us toward round, rather than rectangular organizational principles. In the face of digital images in the making, Gilles Deleuze notes:

The new images no longer have any outside (out-of-field), any more than they are internalized in a whole; rather, they have [...] a power to turn back on themselves. They are the object of a perpetual reorganization, in which a new image can arise from any point whatever of the preceding image. The organization of space here loses its privileged directions, and first of all the privilege of the vertical which the position of the screen still displays, in favour of an omni-directional space which constantly varies its angles and coordinates, to exchange the vertical and the horizontal.⁹

If this holds true, we then find ourselves at the beginning of a profound transformation that will entail a new logic of the image. In this sense, Björk's "Wanderlust" can be conceived of as a transitional phenomenon, as an art-form whose wandering movement is already announcing a forge ahead into new image worlds. The decisive factor would then no longer be the geometry of the rectangle, but the generation of flexible forms, the curvature of orientation lines, and the rotation of formerly stable fixations. Our image world breaks free of its frame, and this process redirects our sight: the future of images leads into the round.

9 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 265.

