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Isla Santa Maria 3D

Oliver Husain

2016, 3D, color, 18 min., English. Producer Oliver Husain. Production company Oliver Husain (Toronto, Canada). Commissioned by Images Festival and Gallery TPW, Toronto. Written and directed by Oliver Husain. Director of photography Iris Ng. Production design Oliver Husain. Costumes Stuart Farndell. Make-up Buzz Buzz. Sound Michelle Irving. Music Michelle Irving. Sound design Michelle Irving. Editor Oliver Husain. With Liz Peterson (Dr. Hologram), Naishi Wang (Conquistador).

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Isla Santa Maria – according to myth – is an island formed from the wreckage of a replica of one of Christopher Columbus's ships, created for the World's Columbian Exposition 1893 in Chicago. Based on this myth, ***Isla Santa Maria 3D*** draws together the violent colonialist legacy of Columbus with developments of perspective drawing and stereoscopic image-making as two histories that reordered the way we see the world. The film's cast of characters – a dancing conquistador, an oracle appearing as a floating hologram, a group of representatives from another planet, and a flock of Victorian era revelers on a beach – are pulled out of time into a nonlinear narrative that overlaps histories, truths, and fantasies to re-imagine possible futures.

A Map of the World Without Utopia:

Oliver Husain's *Isla Santa Maria 3D*

As a filmmaker and installation artist (the word multidisciplinary dulls in comparison) Oliver Husain is a consummate storyteller and visual thinker. Husain trained in film and media art in Germany before relocating to Toronto in 2006. Diverse in execution, his many projects share a concern for history and geography, built into one another like nesting dolls in their imaginatively built filmic explorations of the seemingly mundane. His work could be described as sculptural film or expanded cinema, emphasizing the extraordinary wit and performativity behind each of Husain's projects. In fact, in one way or another, Husain has been making three-dimensional films for a long time; at various times in his oeuvre, screens move, hats are donned, and audiences act as the projection screen. The artist plays with depth and volume in works such as *Rushes for Five Hats* (2007), in which performers/audience members don large hats in the row in front of the screen, blocking and distorting the experience for others. In *Purfled Promises* (2009) the screen itself moves towards the viewer, as syrupy camera movements advance on curtains of sea-colored velvet, showing a series of unveilings: a martini or brightly colored balloons, for example. ***Isla Santa Maria 3D*** (2016) is the artist's first stereoscopic film (colloquially known as 3D film), co-commissioned by Gallery TPW, Images Festival and Western Front, and premiered at Gallery TPW in Toronto. In ***Isla Santa Maria 3D***, the viewing points are fixed, circumscribed by the technology of the 3D glasses. Everything in the gallery has stopped moving except the film.

The film is a story of technologies of movement and projection, centred on a replica of the Santa Maria, the flagship of Columbus's first Atlantic crossing. Columbus's Santa Maria ran into a sandbank off the shores of Haiti on Christmas Day, 1492 and sank the next day. Four hundred years later in 1893, a replica of the Santa Maria was built for the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. The replica did not sink but was instead left to rot in the Chicago basin for years after the fair. In the film's opening scene, a conquistador moves slowly near a body of water, their choreography oriented around the movement of a telescope. White poles held in the hands of the dancing figure continually reorient to fix both the conquistador's body and the surrounding geography in space. This moving geometry also indicates where the projection screen is in relation to the viewer, a fact not always otherwise apparent. Later in the film our conquistador returns, this times with circles, recalling Leonardo's measure of a man. The multiplicity of circles echoes the shape of a telescope, the viewer at the tip and the dancer at the helm (ship metaphors abound). The narrative climax of the film comes in the form of a speech delivered by a certain Dr. Hologram (a projected image of a woman in Victorian garb) in front of a wildly costumed group of "representatives." The scene is shot in the basement of the Art Gallery of Ontario, amongst the Thomson collection of ship models, which, among other storied vessels, holds a number of models made by prisoners of the Napoleonic wars. Amongst these charged miniatures, Dr. Hologram suggests that the group may be gathered there because their world is in crisis, that they may be suffering from "worry, despair, disillusionment, and disappointment," a state familiar to those with experience of twenty-first century life.

My title borrows from Oscar Wilde's essay *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, cited by Dr. Hologram in Husain's film. Wilde writes, "a map of the world that does not include Utopia is not even worth glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when humanity lands there, it looks out, and, seeing a better country, sets sail. *Progress is the realization of Utopias*." Wilde describes the ever-expanding (and often times utopian) dreams of imperial expansion with a particularly nineteenth-century mixture of disdain and possibility. In violent ignorance of indigenous cultures, utopian projects were frequently proposed within the space of the colony, believed to be *terra nullius* for the reinvention of a Europe perpetually thought to be in decay. That utopia comes at the expense of something or someone else is not lost on Husain. As he suggests in the film, the historical narratives of colonialism and stereoscopic photographs (the technological precursor to 3D film) are intertwined and mutually reinforcing; with stereoscopic images frequently being used as a way of experiencing other lands and communicating colonial aspirations (utopian or otherwise). Husain uses this trope of replication (of ship, of image, of colonial settlement) as a structuring force of the film. However, his tone is not prescriptive; the gallery becomes a space of possibility rather than education.

Husain notes that 3D film, as with the stereoscopic viewers that preceded it, has only one ideal viewpoint from which all others diverge, what he refers to as a king or queen's-view. As the history of art tells us, the rise of the tradition of single-point perspective in European art corresponded with the rapidly increasing desire to "see" newly conquered lands – as sight was privileged as the modus operandi of occupation and ownership. Images arranged according to single-point perspective render the observer/spectator outside the picture, stressing the objectivity and reality of that pictured. Photography later followed in service to such an image of reality, pursuing single point perspective and echoing the vision for a central, rational subject for whom these images are offered up.

Describing a fantastical map in his epic novel *Against the Day* (one of Husain's many sources), Thomas Pynchon writes:
"The problem lies with the projection. The author of the Itinerary [the map] imagined the Earth not only as a three-dimensional sphere but, beyond that, as an imaginary surface, the optical arrangements for whose eventual projection onto the two-dimensional page proved to be very queer indeed."

The equivalency set up by Pynchon between the known three-dimensionality of our globe and that of an imaginary surface seems apt in relation to Husain's interest in the world exhibition and technologies of vision as they relate to the history of colonialism. World exhibitions acted fruitfully as spaces of projection for colonial ambition and global capital, with images and three-dimensional models acting as currency for both. As Dr. Hologram reminds us: "The replica of the Santa-Maria was built in celebration of imperialism… Its ending as soft pile for ducks to sit on can be seen as a reversal of its original intention." Both photography and world fairs operated to document and celebrate imperial expansion, with sections of the Chicago exhibition dedicated to the latest in photographic technology and 'exotic' replicas of faraway lands – "Little Egypt" being just one of the most famous. Photograph, exhibition, and replica were and still are caught up in service to tales of imperialism and technological determinism.

In conversation, Husain described the medium of 3D film as something that was always already failing, that is, a wildly hopeful medium. In this regard, Husain joins a long tradition of avant-garde artists, among them Marcel Duchamp and Robert Breer, whose interest in the philosophical toys of the nineteenth century transcends the laboratory and the fairground, employing them as formal devices within the walls of a gallery. The term "philosophical toy" is generally used to refer to a group of objects and devices popularized in the mid-nineteenth century. Perhaps the most famous is Sir Charles Wheatstone's invention of stereoscopic drawing and a stereoscopic viewing device, later popularized by Sir Oliver Wendell Holmes. Functioning on much the same optical principles as 3D cinema, these devices became highly valued as objects of leisurely entertainment and became the site of intense scientific and philosophical speculation. As Jonathan Crary has argued, these devices also served as the focus of an epistemological drama unfolding over much of the nineteenth century as earlier theories of subjectivity were overturned. These devices, much like later 3D cinema, laid bare the inner workings of binocular vision and helped give form to the idea that human experience of exterior reality is the result of a series of physiological operations. As Marcel Duchamp was to later put it: now "one [could] look at seeing."

Duchamp and Breer, as well as Soviet avant-garde filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein all experimented with the possibility of 3D cinema. Two of Duchamp's artworks (*Rotary Demisphere* and *Discs Bearing Spirals*) served as experimental ventures for the artist's interest in 3D film. Long seen as a medium with Brechtian political potential (though we might be more familiar with its commercial flops), 3D cinema is the twentieth century's philosophical toy, only just superseded by adventures in virtual and augmented reality. I would be doing Husain a disservice, however, if I neatly inserted his work with 3D cinema within this art historical trajectory. Instead of Breer or Duchamp's formal abstraction or Eisenstein's more overtly prescriptive political project, Husain employs the technology to establish a form of narrative abstraction. ***Isla Santa Maria 3D***'s narrative is collage-like in both its borrowing of words as well as its replication of images. Slides flip through the hologram orb, with the distinguishable sound of a slide projector, projection technologies colliding. The moving slides are ensconced in what appears to be the framing devices used frequently in the decoration of carte-de-visite photographs or stereographic cards. In another scene we find the cast in 1893: picnickers lounging on the beach, and lest you begin to think this is just another replica, their historical garb is interrupted by anachronism: whimsical white eyebrows, a plastic cone around a dog's neck. A voice reads from the *Columbian Ode*, a song written by Harriet Monroe and commissioned by the World Fair's committee in 1893. As various figures pick up an assortment of viewing devices, the crowd on the beach joins their voices together in choral form to perform the ode, recreating one small part of the hectic soundscape of the fairground.

In Sergei Eisenstein's 1947 essay *On Stereocinema*, his last essay on film before his death, he speculates on the future of cinema, mapping immersive techniques in the history of theatre through to the invention of stereocinema (an early iteration of 3D film). He compares what he calls the two "partners" of performance – actors (producers) and spectators (consumers) – to the intersecting spaces of fiction and reality. The bridging of experience between actor and spectator thus becomes a means of fusing fiction to reality. While Eisenstein charts a lengthy list of techniques by which this fusion has been attempted, he suggests its culmination in the Soviet invention of stereocinema. Eisenstein describes this history of theatre as one that would "'physically' plunge 'actual reality' into invented scenes and situations." Husain's own oeuvre follows a similar trajectory. As mentioned above, his films have frequently explored techniques of physical and digital manipulation with these same goals of immersion and duplication. Here lies the difference between this film and several of Husain's earlier works. In ***Isla Santa Maria 3D*** the image is more cohesive, and the technology immersive. So what are we to make of this new surface, the smoothness of Husain's cinematic composition? Judith Halberstam has described failure as the "grammar of possibility," indicating the value in exploring the radical opportunities available in narratives of failure, technological or personal. Likewise, Husain's representatives in the chamber of shipwrecks ask: "how do we inhabit these shipwrecks, these enterprises we are left to deal with… Do you see the spark of potential in this new form of the replica?" As Eisenstein (and perhaps Husain) would have it, the intrusion of reality into invented narratives has powerful potential.

Husain's wild meditation on the history of technology leaves us considering the complicity of our own technological processes in the construction of vision and power. Like 3D film itself, Husain's narrative explores failure and possibility, futurity and history, resting on the form of the replica as a guiding force, not only found in the form of the ship, but also in the hundreds of stereoscopic images circulating throughout the nineteenth century and the far-flung reconstructions which found their home in Chicago's "white city." The replica stands in for both memory and imagination, a dichotomy replicated so beautifully in the very matter of film and photography, mediums always at odds with their own temporality. Future perfect and simple past, Husain's film speculates on future and past with equal abandon, bridging fantastic narrative with the politics of his medium.

Emily Doucet: "'A Map of the World Without Utopia': Oliver Husain's Isla Santa Maria 3D," in: Border Crossings, Volume 35, Number 4, Issue No. 140, 2016.

Oliver Husain is an artist and filmmaker based in Toronto, Canada. His films and videos have been shown internationally at a variety of locations in solo and group exhibitions and in numerous film festivals and screenings.

Films (selection)

1999: *Ron & Leo* (13 min.). 2002: *Q* (16 min.). 2005: *Swivel* (15 min.), *Shrivel* (8 min.), *Squiggle* (22 min.). 2007: *Rushes for Five Hats* (13 min.). 2008: *Mount Shasta* (8 min.). 2009: *Purfled Promises* (8 min.). 2012: *Item Number* (15 min.). 2013: *Parade* (11 min.). 2016: ***Isla Santa Maria 3D***.