

# Interview with Daniel Zimmermann

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***Spheres* continues along the formal lines of *Walden*, with the camera slowly rotating on its own axis. In what way are the 360° sequences productive to the exploration of the film's themes?**

Daniel Zimmermann: Drawing from the animistic worldview and perspectivism, the rotating camera gives equal value to everything it encounters, creating symbiotic connections that link human and non-human entities in a non-hierarchical way and placing the audience in the midst of the scene of action. The camera's constant rotation creates an enduring, almost suction-like effect that gently takes the audience on a journey. In both *Walden* and *Spheres*, the main protagonist dies at the onset of the film and is then taken on a journey. While in *Walden* this journey follows a rational logic, in *Spheres* it takes on a dreamlike logic.

The continuous rotation of the camera, capturing everything around it, acts as a visual metaphor for the exploration of various events that grapple with existential themes. The use of the rotating camera and certain narrative structure creates an immersive experience, giving the audience time and space to engage with the film's themes without being exceedingly manipulated by conventional dramaturgical means. On the one hand, this "360° stage" is ideal for developing 10-minute practices for the artists to interact with the corresponding environment. On the other hand, the pull, created by the rotation of the image, carries a somewhat transcendent quality.

The creation of meaning by viewers defies any dictate. There is an unusual sense of freedom in allowing different plot strands to flow into one another. The longer the film runs, the more threads stretch between the sequences. If you give viewers time, they will be able to experience the complex connections that transpire between the sequences.

With *Spheres*, I didn't want to create just a film. I wanted to create an experience that takes viewers on a journey through time, space, and identity. I wanted them to feel like they are part of a ritual, question conventional concepts and systems, and share the experience of timelessness, placelessness, identitylessness, and nothingness.

**"Every revolution of the camera becomes its own empirical space," you say in your director's statement. Could you elaborate on this statement?**

DZ: In *Walden*, everything is meticulously mapped out, including the objects that we have invented and built to keep our production-oriented system running. After this project, I felt the need to look beneath the surface, and for that, we needed a creative

approach and innovative methods. Therefore, I invited professional artists from the fields of art, dance, and performance. I was particularly interested in collaborating with the artists whose practices dealt with spirituality and shamanistic rituals. First, I needed to explain to them that I was not interested in making a documentary about their personas. I was interested in collaborating with them to bring their artistic practices on screen. The goal was to translate these practices into a filmic format, which is not to document or explain them, but to implement them in such a way that each created sequence became a cinematic practice.

My work as a choreographer and performer, which I did for many years, has influenced my decision not to direct this film in a conventional manner—and record the process from the outside—but to be on the inside of the process and actively partake in it as a participant. Such an involvement in the process deepened my collaboration with the artists, and it led to a more authentic experience for everyone involved. As a result of this collaboration, we created 10 spaces of experience, with each space containing some archetypal elements and non-referential actions. The latter allowed only for partial identification with the characters.

**Could you tell us more about this non-referentiality and partial identification with the characters in the film?**

DZ: In conventional narrative structures and identification figures, there is usually the main protagonist, and you relate to their experience and their agonies. You may be listening to what they are saying, and you agree with them because you are familiar with the topic. Or they may be talking about love, and you can relate to that. In this film, this is in fact not happening. It works on another level. It is not about telling the audience what exactly is going on screen. It's more about the audience being emotionally moved by the unfolding events on another level.

This is not a question of lack, but rather of arousing fascination and curiosity, born out of the absence of reference and identification. Addressing consciousness, which may be less familiar to us, needs more than just explaining, it needs an expansion of experiences.

**What does the title *Spheres* signify, and how does it inform the film's form?**

DZ: The title alludes to different spheres or states of consciousness, which we immerse ourselves in through a series of practices. The singular experiences culminate in a catharsis, which gives rise to a new perception or perspective. This ultimately leads to a return to the self. As for the form, I would say that *Spheres* is porous, in part because are not acutely felt between the 360° sequences. We achieved that through smooth crossfade transitions.

**Each 360° sequence in Spheres constitutes an arresting visual canvas. Could you single out particular cinematic references that influenced the aesthetics of these canvases?**

DZ: I can single out several artists and their works as sources of inspiration when I worked on this film. Among them is Paul McCarthy and his performative work, Abbas Kiarostami's *24 Frames*, a compelling meditation on time and movement, delivered through 24 tableaux, and the visual prologue of Lars von Trier's *Melancholia*, which I thought of when devising the Prologue for this film. I would also like to mention Pieter Bruegel and his preoccupation with detail. We can also observe a lot of detail in our film.

*Spheres* explores what David Lynch perhaps enjoys talking more about than his films—the one thing that most people understand much less than his work—and that is transcendental meditation and the experience of the spiritual practice. It would be apropos here to mention David Lynch's quote from April 2007 (I read this quote in German, so I am translating it from German): “You learn to dive into the inner ocean of consciousness. And by doing that, you revive it. It grows. Awareness is growing. This is the deepest level of life: pure consciousness, boundless and eternal. It has qualities of bliss, intelligence, creativity, love, energy, strength, and—as they say—dynamic peace. It is the home of total knowledge. All natural laws are there. So you start to see the bigger picture. You get some kind of support from nature. You have more intuition and inner knowledge, that's valuable for a filmmaker.”

I would add that these experiences are important to all people, not just artists, especially if we want to find a way out of the spiral of crisis. To this end, we need a radically new way of thinking and feeling. That is what Nigerian philosopher and psychologist Bayo Akomolafe has expressed too.

**Your works continually raise questions about human engagement with the environment and the consequences of human actions. How does this film add to the critical conversation?**

DZ: All of my work is about shifting perspectives, questioning what is established and revamping what is familiar. *Spheres* departs from my previous film *Walden* in a way that it looks inward, into our consciousness. That is reflected not only in the thematic content of the film but also in the way it is made and how it evades the restraints of conventional narrative structures and film production. If we pursue a new way of thinking and feeling, we need to start with our consciousness. And a film can also contribute to that.

**Let's talk about the film's Prologue. What does the wooden slat piercing the man's skull symbolise? Does the man survive the dissolution of the ego?**

DZ: The seeming act of self-destruction symbolises quite succinctly how our surroundings and actions shape our perception of the world, our consciousness, and our view of ourselves and others. We orient ourselves within the created individual universes. Ultimately, everything leads to the dissolution of the ego and transformation.

The departure point for *Spheres* is to survive the destruction of one's ego, to learn that one can have a self that is separate from the ego, which does not die but endures. Mystical traditions speak of overcoming the ego as one of the main tasks of one's spiritual journey, where one finally reconnects with (their true) nature, once freed from fears, worries, and attachments. As the "I-feeling" retreats, the self expands. The wooden slat piercing the man's skull opens up his inner eye, which is connected to the pineal gland. This strengthens his capacity for knowledge and intuition, expanding his consciousness and increasing his sensitive perception.

The wooden slat symbolises what I have dealt with over the past decades. That's why it is me who launches it and is struck by it. This sets off my journey, which is joined by others as we craft panoramic experiences of consciousness.

### **In what way does this actionistic Prologue inform the film's themes and structure?**

DZ: With the prologue, I determine the themes, formal strategy, and framework of the film. The dramaturgy is established when a man launches a long wooden slat into the sky. The slat disappears on the horizon, and after circling the earth, it strikes him in the back of his head, endowing him with the ultimate transformation. While traversing the earth, the camera rotates 360° on its own axis. What appears to be a man's act of (un-)intentional self-destruction is in fact the metaphorical destruction of his ego, manifested through the fragmentation of his skull and the start of his journey in search of transformation and change. The throw of the slat thus strikingly demonstrates the impact of the man's actions.

### **The film stages a series of mind-expanding practices across the tableaux, which are as follows (as you mention in your notes on the film): Cinematic Transformation, Entanglement, Flying, Grounding, Observation, Breathing, Catharsis, Purification, Rumination, Fears, Regeneration, and Release. Could you talk about the overarching motif that guides these tableaux, both thematically and structurally?**

DZ: These refer to the practices that we co-created with the artists in the film. We decided not to display the titles in the film, as they would disrupt and manipulate the viewers' experience. Going through different stages of the narrative development would be an overarching motif here, which are similar to those of transcendental meditation.

**Let's talk about some of the tableaux. The camera pans uninterruptedly, revealing a group of people dining on sea creatures. We also observe a man (played by you) bending low to devour a piece of seafood. In your notes on the film, you refer to some sequences as "parables." This parable seems to explore such themes as power and exclusion.**

DZ: This sequence engages with the questions of reversal of hierarchy and loss of power, coupled with personal entanglements and individual sensitivities within the dining community.

Before we proceed, I would like to mention a quote by Reinhard Haller, an Austrian psychiatrist and psychotherapist who authored the book, titled 'Die Macht der Kränkung', which one can translate as 'The Power of Grievance'. The quote goes (translating from German): "In the beginning there was a grievance [or an insult]. Nothing affects our motivation, well-being, quality of life and our self-esteem as grievances. Since grievances affect [us] at [our] core, and we experience them as an attack on the entire ego. They lead to a lasting shock to the self and its values. [...]. Grievances are the beginning of a conflict and hostility, of humiliation and revenge, of illness and suffering."

Dana Michel, one of the artists with whom I collaborated in this film, has worked with the notion of reversal of hierarchy in her artistic work. When we were creating this sequence, we were talking about it, and she had this idea of casting the director of the film on the floor and excluding him from the dining group. Having executed this idea in the film, we now observe the man (me) devouring seafood on the floor like an animal, ostracised from the community.

When I started working with Robert Steijn, we were both wondering who the Thrower (of the slat) would be in the Prologue, and it became clear quite quickly that it would be me. So the idea here is that the film starts off with the man experiencing an injury in the Prologue, and it continues in the dining sequence with the question of loss of power and control. And this sets in motion a journey, a search for meaning and understanding. Personally, it grew even more compelling to me because of my personal story at the time, which I won't divulge here, and the experience of isolation during COVID lockdowns, among other things.

**Could you talk about the notions (or perhaps myths) underpinning the sequence Cinematic Flying, which features a man with two wooden strips for wings?**

DZ: Breath is the life energy that manifests itself in all living creatures and inanimate objects. The practice of breath regulation (Pranayama) helps control this life energy and bring the body and mind together. This sequence centres on the act of breathing

and reduction of senses. I had this wet fabric on my face, and it was quite hard to breathe. I must say when working on this material in post-production, I realised how listening to someone's deep breathing on a big screen can really affect you as a viewer. So cinematically, this works on many levels.

Robert Steijn tacked together two or three different practices in this sequence. The breathing exercise is connected to a shamanic body that takes on different shapes, known as shapeshifting. I use two wooden strips for wings, which meet each other on my back, forming a hybrid creature, someone between a predator, a bird, and a warrior. The creature attempts to achieve the physically impossible: it wants to escape into the sky, survey the city, and reach for the Sun (like the Icarus myth), but it is not yet able to. At this point of the journey, I still cannot fly. However, at the end of the film, there is a shift to the feeling of liberation, where I start dancing and perhaps can even fly again.

**As the camera spans onward, a desert stretches out before us, and three persons are seen lying on the ground between the boulders. How does the sequence Cinematic Grounding interrogate the relationship between the body and terrain?**

DZ: What we witness here is a practice of passivity. We lie on our backs in the desert, feel the terrain and imagine that it is supporting us. We do not move; we are at the mercy of silence and the environment. Our bodies and minds experience peace and relaxation as we turn our attention inward. The desert challenges our bodies to become passive and just to receive. There is no active search; there is an observation and an absorption of all impressions in the environment, without any judgement.

**Next, the camera rotates across the monochrome colour space, and the mantra is heard, calling on the youths in the frame to reimagine “seeing and being seen.”**

DZ: The “non-image method” of Lilach Pnina Livne is used here, that is in the event of an encounter, any image that exists between two or more people is (partially) hidden. What we normally see is only a part of the world, which is also biased and dominated by the male gaze. The point here is to encounter the inner self of the other. We start by covering our faces with glitter to create a new form of ourselves. Then we practise our gaze with the task of “seeing and being seen.” We hold hands and face one another. We look intently into each other's eyes while a woman repeats a mantra. We want to fathom what this “seeing and being seen” actually means, and we want to escape the old logic of observation by internalising a new one. Thus, we exercise our perception.

**In the sequence Cinematic Breathing, the body swells and shrinks, coinciding with the rhythm of breathing. What were you exploring in this practice?**

DZ: Breathing accompanies us throughout our entire lives. We can observe breathing

through the subtle movement of parts of our body, which brings us back to this essential activity. This practice connects us with the pulse of life. If there are any blockages in the body, the breathing movement is reduced. The practice thus stimulates a psycho-physical cleansing process when the whole body breathes. Such practices are independent of the external world and are therefore existential in their nature. For this reason, the scene is reduced to a minimum and is shrouded in darkness while we are following Linda Samaraweerova's instructions.

### **Could you talk about the turning point that comes after Cinematic Catharsis?**

DZ: The dissolution of the 360° perspective occurs after Cinematic Catharsis, and it is accompanied by the creation of new spaces. That symbolises the emergence of a new perception, marked by an emotional breakthrough and inner transformation. This new perspective overcomes all previous boundaries and limitations.

### **As the camera continues to pan, we find ourselves amid the fog. When it clears, we observe an unclothed man in a meadow walking backwards, and then we see a woman pulling out a piece of gauze from her mouth. Could you talk about the metaphorical significance of the choreographic arrangement in this sequence?**

DZ: Here, peculiar tensions arise in a choreographic arrangement of three different practices. Walking backwards is a practice that aims to bring consciousness into a different state by transforming the repetitive and monotonous action. Swallowing a piece of gauze is one of the six classic cleansing techniques from Hatha yoga. It is believed to open the heart and communication centre, revealing any existing blockages in the body. Through such an intensive sensation, one's existence is experienced like that of an invertebrate animal. And the last one is the deer dance, inspired by the St. Hubertus legend. According to the Christian myth, a hunter encounters a stag but does not kill it, as he sees the sign of God in its beauty. The stag then becomes addicted to the hunter's loving gaze. It follows him whenever the hunter enters the woods, trying to be in his field of vision at all times. The hunter no longer has time for himself or other animals, and out of pure irritation he stabs the stag and buries it in the ground.

### **In the sequence Cinematic Fears, you draw inspiration from Sylvia Wynter's critical writings, as you mention in the notes on the film. How did you translate these ideas cinematically?**

DZ: This practice, inspired by Sylvia Wynter's writings on the European colonial ideas of humanity, mixes personal stories, current concerns, and future desires. The sequence, created together with Dana Michel, engages with the predominant notion of humanity, which was formulated in Europe and was significantly influenced by Christianity and Charles Darwin's theory. The Afro-Anglo-American tap dance, accompanied by the

incessant roar of two men writhing on the floor, depicts existential fears in the dungeon-like, spider web-covered cellar.

**Moving on to Cinematic Regeneration and Release. In the final sequences, you bring viewers back to nature and natural elements. Why is this pertinent to the story?**

DZ: The bottomline here is trusting our instincts and expanding the meaning and use of natural elements, which is the subject of Yoan Sorin's research. In addition to its good thermal conductivity, clay has a strong detoxification potential. These properties support the cleansing and calming effect of clay. Clay not only boasts a regenerating effect on individual bodies, it can also bring a community together in a sort of sculptural arrangement.

As for Cinematic Release, it centres on the practice of letting go, in this case, letting go of haunting memories, which I symbolically burn on the water. Forgiveness liberates. It takes away fear and anxiety. So I burn the memories, bid farewell to the past, and enter the world with my first attempt at a dance with wooden strips.

*Interview by Sevara Pan  
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