

Aporia in the Polder

Rietland (2025)

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Abstract

The detective genre promises that every gap between clue and truth exists only to be closed, staging modernity's preferred epistemology: persistent investigation will deliver what really happened, unmediated and complete. Slow cinema makes the opposite wager, refusing to instrumentalize time and holding the gap open. This essay argues that these two styles and their two temporal regimes (each presupposing a different kind of intelligence) are put at war in Sven Bresser's debut feature *Rietland* (2025). The film presents itself within the whodunit's coordinates—a reed cutter discovers a girl's body on his land and is consumed by guilt—yet withholds the revelation the genre promises, locking the detective's forward thrust and slow cinema's gravitational pull toward the present into an aporia it refuses to resolve. Reading the film through Nancy on the distinct and the uncanny landscape, alongside Castro-Gómez on the hubris of the zero point, the essay shows how this aporia is not only formal but inhabited: located in a protagonist who is at once detective and peasant, investigator and dweller. Here, guilt registers an ontological disturbance in the relation between land and dweller.

Keywords:

Intelligence, Cinema, *Rietland*, Epistemology, Nancy

A face, a field, a room. You've felt this before: a shot that goes on and on, showing you everything and the longer it lasts, the less you feel you're getting. Not because something is hidden. Because presence and possession aren't the same thing. Some cinema offers you everything and gives you nothing to hold. Jean-Luc Nancy was tantalized by this possibility of "the distinct": what is set apart in the very act of showing, withdrawn by the line that makes it visible. You cannot touch it, he argues, because it no longer belongs to the order of touch. Not forbidden, not concealed. Irresistibly impalpable. The moving image can sustain this withdrawal, holds the gap open, slaps you with the *horror vacui* in the uncanny valley between showing and grasping.

Then there is another cinema. The one that promises gaps exist only to be closed. The detective genre stands as an exemplar: clue accumulates into evidence, evidence into revelation, distance into resolution. It stages modernity's preferred epistemology—what Horkheimer and Adorno called instrumental reason, the form of knowing that is drenched in what Santiago Castro-Gómez terms the "hubris of the zero point". The arrogance to observe from nowhere, to access truth from a position unburdened by perspective, as if the knowing subject could dissolve into pure transparency. This is the fantasy that the detective genre stages: persistent investigation will eventually reveal what really happened, unmediated and complete, delivering both the truth and the guilty in a single gesture of epistemological closure. Here, looking long enough is not just inquiry but courtship, the assurance that persistence will end in a grasp. The whodunit's sequential logic thus tickles you with the promise of resolution; each scene exists to advance the investigation toward closure. The pleasure of the genre lies in this sequential accumulation toward its telos, in its hope to overcome the *vacui*.

The question, then, is what kind of intelligence each cinema presupposes — and what it forecloses. *Rietland* (2025), Sven Bresser's mist-thick and reed-choked debut feature, puts these two cinemas at war with each other. More precisely, it stages a battle between their two temporal regimes in order to tickle these logics till they choke. The film presents itself within the whodunit's coordinates: the reed cutter Johan (Gerrit Knobbe, himself an actual reed cutter) discovers a girl's dead body on his land and becomes consumed by guilt. Whether he's searching for a murderer or fleeing from a mirror, the film declines to say. In a similar way, the swaying reeds are simultaneously calming and threatening, an ambiguity never resolved. A crime, a corpse, a protagonist compelled to seek answers—the genre machinery is set in motion.



Still 1. *Rietland* (2025)



Still 2. *Mirror* (1975)

Yet *Rietland* is emphatically not *True Detective*. The guilty one is never revealed. Long takes of swaying reeds, extended sequences of Johan moving silently through the landscape, nearly unbearable stillnesses. The long takes often unhook time from its narrative purpose; the detective form gasps for its sequential oxygen. Slow cinema, as Tiago de Luca notes, renders time "eminently meaningless, at least in the way it refuses to be instrumentalized by representational content." Where the detective genre treats time as fastforwardable (a substrate to be accelerated toward resolution), *Rietland* insists on its irreducibility. Time pools in the swaying reeds—hypnotic and menacing at once, visually flirting with Tarkovsky's water grasses opening in *Solaris* or the wind-bent fields of *Mirror*.



Still 3. *Solaris* (1974)



Still 4. *Rietland* (2025)

The pacing is slow, with minimal narrative development. Yet neither does the film simply abandon narrative for pure contemplation. It holds the gap open: maintaining the drive toward investigation while systematically frustrating its fulfillment. The film sustains the gap between the detective's forward momentum toward resolution and slow cinema's gravitational pull toward the present moment. The landscape demands attention through durational exposure; the detective machinery keeps waiting for that duration to signify something, to yield investigative fruit. But the reeds simply sway. The mist refuses to lift. The film refuses to close this gap, locking these incompatible temporalities together and letting them wrestle. An aporia in Dutch polder aesthetics.

Yet the film stages this gap not only temporally but also within Johan himself. He is simultaneously the detective and the peasant—the investigator seeking to instrumentalize the landscape and the dweller attuned to its rhythms. The aporia is thus not only formal: it is inhabited and the film locates it in a specific body, a specific labor, a specific landscape under pressure. Johan is the last reed cutter in his line. His daughter has moved elsewhere, sometimes leaving only her own daughter in his care. Meanwhile, the pressure to instrumentalize comes from all sides. A business partner tells him: "je moet met je tijd mee gaan"—you have to move with the times. Chinese reeds flood the market at impossible prices. The solution is obvious: invest in machines, mechanize, scale up production. The pressure is epistemological as much as economic. Scale up, solve the case: the grammar is identical. Both treat the resistant particular (the landscape that won't yield, the crime that won't resolve) as a problem of insufficient technique.



Still 5. *Rietland* (2025)

But Johan knows what this logic demands. The land will be exhausted by the very rationality that promises to save him. He sits at the edge of a mode of production and a temporality that is disappearing, unable to stay, unable to adapt. His guilt registers this impossibility: he seeks a murderer with detective logic while simultaneously being the kind of figure—rooted, laboring, tied to land—that detective logic has no place for. Nancy's "Uncanny Landscape" traces this structure to the Christianization of Europe, which "suppressed paganism and broke people's relationship to nature." The uncanny is what instrumental reason repressed—other ways of knowing, intelligences not localized in mastering subjects. The polder is reason's landscape par excellence. That it still harbors what reason cannot master is the film's aporia. Johan's guilt, then, is not merely psychological but ontological: something has gone wrong in the relation between land and dweller, and the detective logic he cannot help deploying is both symptom and cause. He is modernity investigating its own crime.

What splits Johan internally erupts in the landscape itself. Where the girl's body was found, Johan discovers black tar pooling like a void—the gap materialized, an impossible abyss staring back. The tar won't come off. It clings to his hands, his clothes, refusing to wash away. When he tries to clean it, a black stone materializes in the washing machine and destroys it. Guilt becomes a substance that contaminates, that cannot be cleansed, that produces impossible objects. In a film so thoroughly grounded in Dutch material reality—with its neoliberal pressures and reed economics—magical realism makes its way in through the gap itself. The void in the field opens onto something that exceeds rational accounting, yet this magic offers no redemption. The stone doesn't reveal the truth; it breaks the machine meant to purify.

But *Rietland* is not mournful for its lost object. The film does not present slow cinema as the triumph of some alternative epistemology that will better or more fully deliver understanding. Nor does it offer leftist reverence for "the other"—for peasant wisdom, indigenous knowledge, or pre-modern modes of being that might redeem us from instrumental reason's violence. There is no fantasy here of recovering an authentic relation to land that modernity destroyed, no hope that we might access truth through attunement rather than investigation. The reedland's durational exposure offers no superior access to truth. The fight, in other words, is not won in service of the other temporality. None of these modalities prevail, and the film insists we remain within the gap between them—not as defeat but as a condition we actually inhabit. The aporia is not a problem to be overcome but a condition to be inhabited.

Guilt, then, registers a specific subjectivity at this juncture—the Dutch countryside as empire seems to unravel—caught between the forward thrust of investigation and the gravitational pull of presence, able neither to solve nor to stay. Put differently, *Rietland* suggests that this is not just Johan's private pathology but an affective texture of a historical condition. It dramatizes the discomfort of a nation that built itself on rational management of nature and colony alike and now finds neither the tools to stop nor the innocence to continue. The film stages this condition in every register it touches—as temporal collision, as epistemological impasse, as a contest between incompatible intelligences, as the historical predicament of a subject formed by the very rationality it cannot escape—and refuses to resolve any of them. To resolve would be to choose between seductive melancholia and redemptive futurity, to mourn the peasant or to believe in the machine.

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About the author

Aldo Kempen is a philosopher whose work moves between (continental) metaphilosophy, feminist philosophy of science and aesthetics, with a sustained concern for how philosophy's formal practices mediate its relation to science, politics and justice. He recently completed a PhD at the Open Universiteit with a dissertation on form, science and ontology in Derrida, Barad and Malabou, developing a position he calls formal pluralism. He has held a Fulbright Fellowship at UC Santa Cruz, a Descartes Fellowship at the ENS in Paris and a research position at the UdK Berlin, and currently teaches at Leiden University College The Hague. His writing has appeared in *Film-Philosophy*, *Paradigmi*, *Krisis* and *e-flux Journal*, and he is an editor at *Open Philosophy*. Kempen lives between Amsterdam and Berlin.

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