

## Black & White-outs

Notes on Monochromy and the Moving Image

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As a place of profane delight, the cinema depends on stories and audience identification by way of the image. In the cinema experience, the transition from black to image is synonymous with the start of the show. But what about when the projected film remains black or the screen shows no more than a virgin white? The viewer is then thrown back on himself and is brought face to face with the basic conditions of the medium. The real is reduced to the possible. This essay explores the lines within which the dysfunctional use of monochrome images takes place and where the soundtrack, as an audible complement, is usually allotted a conspicuous role.

Apart from the transition from the opening titles to the film itself, and from the film to the closing credits, the change of scene is the most common use of black in films. This technique goes back to cinema's pioneering years in the early twentieth century. Such film-makers as Porter and Griffith frequently used the fade-in and fade-out while shooting by opening and closing the diaphragm. Since then the use of black for scene changes has become established, although since the appearance of sound films in the late twenties notably less use has been made of dissolves from image to black and vice versa. The black dissolve as a form of punctuation articulates the transition from one space to another, and from one time to another. (1) The longer the black eclipse, the more compelling the ellipsis.

Blackness in the form of a hard cut cuts out the ellipsis and detracts from the homogeneous (and realistic) nature of the narrative space, and signifies an interruption or caesura. To give one example, a short period of blackness at the moment of Christ's crucifixion in Pasolini's *Il Vangelo secondo Matteo* (1964) has a disruptive effect on the viewer. In Bruce Connor's *Marilyn Times Five* (1973), a film composed of erotic found footage of Marilyn Monroe, blackness cuts through the viewer's voyeurism. The viewer is cut off from the image and is thrown back on himself. If a film contains more black (or other monochrome tints) than images, this 'absence' of depiction itself assumes the status of an image.

The image is defined by its limits and it is in the intermediate space between image and the negation/ questioning of the image that in art history benchmarks are recurrently found for its re-interpretation. In literature, Stéphane Mallarmé's *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* (1874) broke open the white page prismatically. The Suprematist Kasimir Malevitch, in his *Black Square* (1915), and in the sixties the Abstract Expressionist Ad Reinhardt, in his *Black Paintings*, both ended up with a black canvas, but coming from different directions. With his ready-mades (1913-17), Marcel Duchamp introduced everyday objects into the gallery setting. John Cage's

4'33" (1952), which he wrote after seeing his friend Robert Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* (1951), left the piano untouched and thus accentuated silence and background noise. And there is Yves Klein too, who in 1958 showed an empty exhibition space. These are conceptual works that reflect on the general conditions, the constants and structures of possible concretisations of the real. These 'end points' count as points of reference because, being a radical gesture, they define the medium in a different way, always new.

And what about film? The darkness of the cinema and the black leader that forms a prelude form a natural substrate for the genesis of the film image. A number of experimental film-makers set to work on this leader itself, without using a camera at all. Here are several historical examples. (2) For his *Projection Instructions* (1976), Morgan Fisher used the black surface as a support for text. By accentuating the materiality of the projection in this way, he deconstructed the film experience. Other film-makers see the film-strip as a surface on which the most varied graphic markings can be made. When the strips are run through the projector, graphic patterns vibrate on the screen. This is the case for example in the work of Dieter Roth who in *Dot* (1956-1962) made perforations of different sizes, and Len Lye who described his *Free Radicals* (1979) as "white ziggle-zag-splutter scratches... in quite doodling fashion". Another experimental tradition is the Flickerfilm. A conventional film projects shows 24 images per second. Flickerfilms use these single photograms as compositional building blocks. By alternating short black and white sequences, quasi-stroboscopic effects are achieved. Tony Conrad's *The Flicker* (1966) is a milestone in this genre.

Despite all this, the one person in the experimental tradition who tackled the film medium most iconoclastically was undoubtedly the French lettrist artist Maurice Lemaître. His work is versatile and extremely varied. He deconstructed cinema in every possible way from the fifties on. In *Nada, le dernier film* (1978) he was the creator of what might be labelled the ultimate black film. The opening sequence shows the title and the author. This is followed by three minutes of black without sound, after which appears the word FIN. But Lemaître went even further. In the early eighties he devised films without film, in which, using a live act, words were read through the loudspeakers, or else he linked the 'film experience' to smell, taste and touch. In social acts and performances that assume the complicity of the audience, Lemaître turned all the constituents of the cinema experience upside down in order to demonstrate that cinema was an exhausted medium. His work always played on the contrast between the passively receptive cinema and the living event-based space (the theatre).

### **Disrobing the representational form**

The approach taken by Guy Debord, another of the initial lettrists, was more fundamental than the intentionally playful and sometimes farcical subversiveness of

Lemaître. Debord's *Hurléments en Faveur de Sade* (1952), the first in a series of six critical social theory films that consisted largely of existing visual material, contained in its first scenario, which appeared in *ION* magazine, images of riot, parades of troops in India, girls and portraits of lettrists. The second version, which appeared in the Belgian surrealist magazine *Les Lèvres nues*, no longer contained any images, and it is this version that was made. In this film, which lasts an hour, sequences of white images are alternated with black. The work contains about twenty minutes of dialogue, sentences taken out of their original setting (newspapers, literary and art criticism, the statute book, etc.) and read out without expression by five voices. Whenever you hear a voice the picture is white. The rest of the time is spent in black silence. After the closing sentence, "*Nous vivons en enfants perdus nos aventures incomplètes*" (We live our incomplete adventures as lost children), another 24 minutes of black film runs through the projector. What Debord (who was best known in broader circles for his influential 1967 essay *La société du spectacle*) wanted to demonstrate in *Hurléments en Faveur de Sade* was that the analysis of the modern world takes place by way of a critique of forms of representation, in other words a critique of the social role of images. The principle of reversal (a semantics of white/black images combined with what the author himself called "*des phrases détournées*" (phrases twisted to fit another context)) is a weapon Debord appropriated against the consumer society because it rejects the relationship between language and reality pre-formed by the mass media. The rejection of entertainment as an experience is rooted in the rejection of any form of ideology. The task of art is considered to be the creation of an awareness of situations. According to the Situationists (a group of kindred spirits whose members included, apart from Debord, Gilles Wolman and Jean Isidore Isou) the classic avant-garde is not capable of this. "*Les arts futurs seront des bouleversements de situations, ou rien*" (the arts of the future will be a complete change of situations or nothing at all) appears in a line of dialogue in *Hurléments en Faveur de Sade*.

As François Albera (3) rightly pointed out, it was Jean-Luc Godard who drew the practical conclusions from the aesthetically political rebellion of the Situationists. This had a demonstrable and direct influence on the 'sociological' Godard of the sixties, even including the use of moments of blackness in *Ciné-tracts* (1968), which were created on the barricades of May '68 and *Vladimir et Rosa* (1970), a committed socially critical film which he co-produced with Jean-Pierre Gorin.

Giorgio Agamben (4) also draws a parallel with Godard in an essay on Guy Debord's film work, based on the notion that there is a close link between the cinema and history. Following in Walter Benjamin's footsteps, Agamben does not see this as a chronological history but as a messianic one with two main features. It is a history of salvation (something has to be saved) and an eschatological history (something has to be accomplished, judged). One of the characteristics of cinema is its ability to be simultaneously in and out of the present time and chronological history. According to Agamben it is this view that Godard shared with Debord when, in *Histoire(s) du*

cinéma (1988-1998), he used only existing visual material. In addition he points to the primacy of montage as the linking element between the two: *“On n’a plus besoin de tourner, on ne fera que répéter et arrêter.”* (There will no longer be any need to film, all we shall do is repeat and stop). He sees ‘repetition’ and the ‘stop’ as the explicit conditions that make montage possible (and cinema in general). It goes without saying that neither term is defined in classical terms, respectively as the return of something identical and an interval in a chronological progression. He defines repetition as *“le retour en possibilité de ce qui a été. La répétition restitue la possibilité de ce qui a été, le rend à nouveau possible”* (the possible return of what has been. Repetition restores the possibility of what has been, renders it possible again) and the stop as *“une puissance d’arrêt qui travaille l’image elle-même, qui la soustrait au pouvoir narratif pour l’exposer en tant que telle”*, (a stopping force that works the image itself, that withdraws it from the narrative power to expose it as such). These two transcendent conditions of montage (to put it in Kantian terms) are still inseparably linked. They both fulfil the cinema’s messianic task.

Agamben says that the artist’s work cannot be seen purely in terms of creation. He sees an act of de-creation in every act of creation. *“Deleuze a dit un jour, à propos du cinéma, que tout acte de création est aussi un acte de résistance. Mais que signifie résister? C’est avant tout avoir la force de de-crée ce qui existe, de-crée le réel, être plus fort que le fait qui est là. Tout acte de création est aussi un acte de pensée, et un acte de pensée est un acte créative, car la pensée se définit avant tout par sa capacité de dé-crée le réel.”* (Deleuze once said of cinema that every act of creation is also an act of resistance. But what does resistance mean? It is above all the power to de-create that which exists, to de-create the real, to be more powerful than the fact that is there. Every act of creation also is an act of thinking and an act of thinking is a creative act, since thinking can above all be defined by its capacity to de-create the real.) “The fact that is there”; under this heading we can also put the images the media mediate for us and which Debord undermines in his films: that which is pure fact, what has been, but turned out not to be capable of projecting its power and possibility to what is in principle impossible, the past. Lastly, Agamben wonders what the visual status is of an image processed in this way by the powers of repetition and the stop. He thinks that we should revise our traditional Hegelian conception of the expression of things through a medium that effaces itself: *“L’image qui a été travaillée par la répétition et l’arrêt est un moyen, un médium qui ne disparaît pas dans ce qu’il nous donne à voir. C’est ce que j’appellerais un ‘moyen pur’, qui se montre en tant que tel. L’image se donne elle-même à voir au lieu de disparaître dans ce qu’elle nous donne à voir.”* (The image that has been worked by the repetition and the stop is a means, a medium that does not disappear in what it shows us. It is what I would call a ‘pure means’, that presents itself as such. The image shows itself instead of disappearing in what it shows.) According to Agamben, from his first films Debord shows us the image as such, as an unresolved zone between the real and the possible.

The disrobing of the material form of representation, and with it the ideological system, as Debord did in *Hurlements en Faveur de Sade*, still remains very topical and will always remain so. The most recent example – though of course in another form – in which the legacy of this sort of radical political-aesthetic revolt persists, is Daniel Knorr's *European Influenza* project (2005) for the Romanian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. Just like Debord, Knorr and the curator Marius Babas start from the notion that history structures our thinking. Their project deals with the laborious processes of identification that Eastern Central European countries, and Romania in particular, are going through in the post-communist space of Europe. Their persuasive exhibition consisted of simply leaving empty this somewhat dilapidated pavilion with its traces of past exhibitions. The only object in the bare space was a pile of publications, a copy of which you could take free of charge. This compact publication of no less than 910 pages, with a virgin white cover, contained essay-like articles by sociologists and political theorists, cultural theorists and artists. There could be no more appropriate setting in which to reflect on the pandemic of Europe and the role that falls to art than in the surroundings of this ageing biennale with its utterly worn-out format of national pavilions. A fine example of text in context. By leaving the exhibition space empty, a vacuum is formed, a counter-space in which to think about the processes going on in Europe. Knorr and Babas' intervention links up with the Situationists' concept of 'situation construite', and with the form of collective revolution connected to everyday life, and the fundamental importance to art that Debord attached to a critique of forms of representation.

### **Black, white and the modern fact**

Even though, because of its radicality, Debord's *Hurlements en Faveur de Sade* represents a zero, it is no more than the point of reference – albeit absolute – of a specific philosophical-aesthetic course. Other artists arrived at the monochrome image in film by other routes. Monochrome in film is a postwar phenomenon, inseparably linked to modern cinema. (5) The postwar modern cinema is a combination of uprooting, despair and searching. It is a cinema that encircles a blind spot or a black hole. While classic cinema was synonymous with the desire to see, modern cinema makes an issue of this desire. Modern cinema brings us face to face with the irony of images: their redundancy, their misleading or impenetrable nature. It is also a cinema that is concerned with catastrophe, the impossibility of the image in a modern world. Gilles Deleuze put it like this: "*Le fait moderne, c'est que nous ne croyons plus en ce monde. Nous ne croyons même pas aux événements qui nous arrivent, l'amour, la mort, comme s'ils ne nous concernaient qu'à moitié. Ce n'est pas nous qui faisons du cinéma, c'est le monde qui nous apparaît comme un mauvais film. ... C'est le lien de l'homme et du monde qui se trouve rompu. Dès lors, c'est ce lien qui doit devenir objet de croyance: il est l'impossible qui ne peut être redonné que dans une foi. La croyance ne s'adresse plus à un monde autre, ou transformé.*"

*L'homme est dans le monde comme dans une situation optique et sonore pure. La réaction dont l'homme est dépossédé ne peut être remplacé que par la croyance. Seule la croyance au monde peut relier l'homme à ce qu'il voit et entend. Il faut que le cinéma filme, non pas le monde, mais la croyance à ce monde, notre seul lien.*" (It is a modern fact that we no longer believe in this world. We do not even believe in what happens to us, in love, in death, as if it only half concerned us. It is not we who make cinema, it is the world that looks to us like a bad film. ... It is this link between man and the world that is broken. Therefore, it is this link that must become the object of belief: it is the impossible that can only be restored to us in a belief. Faith no longer addresses a different or transformed world. Man takes his place in the world as in a purely optical and auditory situation. The reaction of which man has been deprived can only be replaced by faith. Only faith in the world can link man to what he sees and hears. Cinema must not film the world, but the faith in this world, which is our only link.) (6)

In his analysis of modern cinema Deleuze also points to the decisive importance of the "absence of the image", the black or white film screen. It is a matter of a dialectical relationship between the image and its absence, whereby the interval frees itself up: *"D'une part ce qui compte n'est plus l'association des images, la manière dont elles s'associent, mais l'interstice entre deux images; d'autre part, la coupure dans une suite d'images n'est plus une coupure rationnelle qui marque la fin de l'une ou le début d'une autre, mais une coupure dite irrationnelle qui n'appartient ni à l'une ni à l'autre, et se met à valoir pour elle-même."* (On the one hand, what no longer counts is the association of images, the manner in which they are associated, but the gap between two images; on the other hand, the break in a sequence of images is no longer a rational break that marks the end of one image or the beginning of another, but a so-called irrational break that does not belong to either one and demonstrates its own worth.) (7)

Black and white lengths of film in cinema represent an aesthetic of the breach, the negation. What they have in common with their kin in monochrome painting is that they open onto an extra-pictorial space, and have a direct relationship with the invisible and the inexpressible. Unlike in painting, as we shall see later, sound plays an essential part in the narrative economy of the film.

But first it is important to briefly consider the characteristic properties of black and white, which are alchemical poles and each other's opposites in spatialisation. Because of their specific spatial effect (black makes things smaller, white bigger), in painting they are often played off against each other in a relationship between figure and background. One can say there is a figure-background situation in a cinema with its white screen in a blacked-out environment.

Black is characterised by density. Black absorbs; it is unexpressive and untranslatable. A black surface hardly reflects anything; it is intransitive. The black image always curves back on itself. The black image in film is the place out of which light is born. It is relevant to compare it with the universe, the cosmic chaos from out

of which anything is possible. The black image, synonymous with potentiality, is something on which the viewer's eye can rest.

Honesty compels me to admit that the black in film is hardly ever completely black, but is more a question of dark greys. This is a consequence of the projector's lightbeam and the ambient light in the auditorium. This is why for several films Maurice Lemaître used optical sound tape, which is more opaque than normal black film. For Ken McMullen's film *Blackness* (1973), a completely black short film with music by Brian Eno, the film was made as impenetrable to light as possible using a special treatment. It is known that for his hand-painted films, Stan Brakhage preferred to use Indian ink.

In contrast to black images, white ones are rarefied. They reflect and radiate. They stimulate the retina. White is light beyond the zero point. There is something inaccessible in a white image; it dematerialises things. In the cinema a beam of white light on a white screen results in the illumination of the audience, which puts them in a state of permanent alertness.

Although both black and white projected photograms make their presence felt by the absence of an image, whereby the invisible becomes the visible expression of an experience that can only be conveyed in the form of an idea, their registers are different. In film, black acts as a counter-image, the space in which something that cannot (or can no longer) be lit directly is depicted. "*Tout le noir, les yeux fermés sur l'excès du désastre*" a line of dialogue from Guy Debord's *Hurlements en Faveur de Sade*, puts it most radically. Black usually has something to do with the inadequacy of the image, the difficult relationship between image and memory. The term black-out unites the two aspects: the darkening (or disappearance of the image) and a deficiency of consciousness.

If the black image in a film is usually a mental space, the white always remains anchored in the perceptual space. Whereas black stands for underlit, white stands for overlit. The term white-out refers to the experience you can have in polar regions where as a consequence of excessive light the ground and the air are sometimes indistinguishable from each other. Differentiation and outlines are no longer possible. Despite the fact that Michel Lorand and Joëlle Tuerlinckx recently created works based on an entirely white projected image, about which more below, there are relatively few examples of the use of full white in the film and video traditions. The best known is *Zen for Film* (1964), an early work by Nam June Paik in the Fluxus tradition. This was a loop of transparent film that accumulated more and more scratches and dust every time it passed through the projector, and was inspired by what silence means in music as demonstrated by Cage's *4'33"*. This 'anti-film', whose aim is to avoid representation, invites the viewer to counter the flood of images in the society around us with his own inner images.

## **Echo and resonance**

The fact that there are so few audiovisual works containing sequences of white images is due to two factors. First of all a technical element of editing involving continuity. Black is the natural substrate for the genesis of the film image and is therefore also the logical basis on which to fall back in the case of any malfunction. A second factor concerns the acoustic image, above all the fact that white does not make sound as free as black does. In contrast to white, black encourages looking inwards. Experiences in the dark arouse that which lies dormant inside us. Black is oceanic. When the black avoids the senses it is because it creates its own space, an auditory space in which resonance occupies a central position. Conversely, white creates more of a sound without memory. Walther Ruttmann's *Wochenende* (1929) is an historical rarity regarding the relationship between cinema and sound – one might call it a sound film without images. This eleven-minute long, quite narrative-based sound collage kaleidoscopically depicts the varied impressions an unknown protagonist has to digest in the course of a weekend in an anonymous metropolis. In its associative, highly concentrated acoustic images we hear scraps of conversation, a typewriter, the roaring of a racing car, blaring factory sirens, marching soldiers and suchlike. Like Ruttmann's well-known silent documentary *Symphonie einer Grossstadt* (1927), *Wochenende* evokes the new city life. This work was created using the then innovative technology of optical sound film, which enabled short excerpts of sound to be edited together.

There is such a thing as the synergy of the senses. When you see a vase shatter in a silent film, it evokes an inner auditory image. We know from silent films at their peak, in the late twenties, that the highly developed visual language was able to evoke an acoustic counter-space in the mind. The appearance of sound films a few years later signified a return to the start: filmed theatre in which sound and image were related like Siamese twins. What makes *Wochenende* interesting as a sound play (or sound film) is that Ruttmann used comparable editing techniques for the sound as he had two years previously for the picture in *Symphonie einer Grossstadt*. His sound montage is so very striking because it does not have to take on the unequal competition of the image. Twenty years before it was invented, Ruttmann had thus already created a form of 'musique concrète', an acoustic space opened to the world.

Sixty years later came a radically different experience: Stan Brakhage makes music marks on mainly black strips of film. His films aim for an inner vision. As a film-maker he was fascinated by the synapses in our brains and alternative means of perception such as peripheral vision and what he calls 'hypnagogic' viewing, the optical feedback you get when you look with your eyes closed. In his *Passage Through: a Ritual* (1990) the main focus is a piano composition by Philip Corner, inspired by *The Riddle of Lumen* (1974) which, like most of Brakhage's films, was soundless. When Brakhage received the cassette by post, he was so moved by the music that he immediately asked to be allowed to 'film' it. The picture is almost all black and is only sporadically interrupted by short, colourful images almost like a dream sequence.



Since the musical excerpts are spread out and there is quite a lot of flexibility in the composition itself, silence also becomes an important ingredient. *Passage Through: a Ritual* is a tough ride for the viewer because he is kept in a permanent state of anticipation and tension. However, the experience is more than worth the trouble, because only very few films explore so subliminally the resonance between the image (and its absence) and sound. The blackness of the image and the silence in the music open up the senses. This film is one of Brakhage's most spiritual pieces.

While black liberates the sound, in Brakhage's case it is not, as in Ruttmann's work, a matter of real and recognisable sounds, but an ethereal piece for piano whose transparency comes close to that of certain works by Morton Feldman. What the blackness here sets free is above all sonority, timbre.

One person who expresses very well the position timbre occupies in music is Jean-Luc Nancy. (8) According to him, timbre does not adapt to the rhythm, nor does it ever adjust to the style of writing. It is on the level of the sensory, and perception. He himself quotes Antoine Bonnet : (9) "*Le timbre est le nom moderne du son. ... Le timbre est le réel de la musique.*" (Timbre is the modern word for sound. ... The timbre is the realness of music.) According to Nancy, the timbre resonates with and in the whole range of the sensory registers. He refers to resonance as "*la mimesis mutuelle des sens*". "*La résonance est à la fois celle d'un corps sonore pour lui-même et celle de la sonorité dans un corps écoutant qui, lui-même, sonne en écoutant*" (the mutual mimesis of the senses. The resonance is simultaneously that of a sonorous body for itself and that of the sonority in a listening body that, itself, sounds while listening) (10), which aptly describes the experience you have in a cinema watching *A Passage Through: a Ritual*. There is not only the sound. The experience of visual deprivation means that the sparse images that appear also resonate in their turn as part of this whole. They are images that gain a lasting after-image, an echo.

Echo and resonance are also to be found in Marguerite Duras' *L'homme atlantique* (1981), where, as in *Agatha et les lectures illimitées* (1981), this register is linked to static pictures shot on the Normandy coast. In contrast to the music in Brakhage's films, the voice-over here plays a pivotal part in relation to the blackness. Of these two films it is *L'homme atlantique*, a short film of forty minutes in which a woman tells about her separation from the man she loves, that opts most resolutely for blackness.

The film tells the autobiographical story of the relationship between an older heterosexual woman (Duras) and her most recent partner (Yann Andréa), a homosexual man more than thirty years her junior. Andréa himself appears in front of the camera. This too is modern cinema, meaning the balance of power between the author and the actor, behind and in front of the camera. Whereby the actor is asked not to play a character, but to 'be' himself. In Duras' film the black strip of film divides up the acting in a dialectic between image and counter-image that embodies the relationship between Duras and Andréa. The black sequences become progressively longer and at the end the film is entirely black, 'inhabited' only by Duras' voice: "*Le*

*film restera ainsi, comme il est. Je n'ai plus d'images à lui donner. Je ne sais plus où nous sommes, dans quelle histoire nous sommes égarés*" (Thus the film remains as it is. I have no more images to give it. I no longer know where we are, in which story we became lost.)

### **The impossible image**

The use of the intermediate space (or hiatus), which Deleuze sees as characteristic of modern cinema, is something Duras does to the full between the visual and acoustic images, so that the textual component occupies a privileged position. In Jean-Luc Nancy's view, word and image are related in the same way as soul and body: the one forms the limit of the other, and is its interpretative horizon: "*Ce qu'Image montre, Texte le dé-montre. Il le retire en le justifiant. Ce que Texte expose, Image le pose et le dépose. Ce qu'Image configure, Texte le défigure. Ce qu'il envisage, elle le dévisage. Ce qu'elle peint, il le dépeint. Mais cela même, leur chose et leur cause commune, cela distinctement oscille entre les deux dans un espace mince comme une feuille: recto le texte et verso l'image, ou vice (image)-versa (texte).*" (What the image shows, the text un-shows. It removes it by justifying it. That which text reveals, the Image places and displaces. That which the Image configures, the Text disfigures. That which the one envisages, the other dis-envisages. That which the one paints, the other unpaints. But this itself, their thing and their common cause, this clearly oscillates between the two in a space as thin as a leaf: the text on the front and the image on the back, or vice (image)-versa (text).) (11) In a generative sense, Duras shuttles between the two. *L'homme atlantique* deals with its own material: image and desire. Loss, absence and memory can no longer be externalised in a traditional image, something recognisable to which one can relate. The only thing that can express it is the 'impossible image'. The images in the first part (the ocean seen from a hotel window, a silent man, etc.) stand for an end point, infinity, and have already been 'unemptied'. The progressive increase in the number of strips of black film means that in the end these figurative havens disappear too. All that remains is Duras' voice-over. In order to interpret this voice's free space, Michel Chion makes an analogy between the coastline in the film and the film screen (empty) as a shore: "*C'est ce cadre évident, cette fenêtre noire créée par la projection de la pellicule noire qui fait qu'il y a toujours un film, et c'est par rapport à ce lieu cadre, fixé, que la voix peut jouer dans la dimension de l'illimité, du sans-lieu, de la perte. Parce qu'il y a un lieu, et ce lieu est celui du pas-tout-voir: ainsi peut-on définir le mieux, sans doute, après André Bazin, l'écran du cinéma.*" (It is this obvious frame, this black window created by the projection of the black film that ensures that there still is a film, and it is with regard to this fixed frame-space that the voice can play in the dimension of the unlimited, of placelessness, of loss. Because there is a place and that place is one of not-seeing-all, this is undoubtedly the best way, according to André Bazin, to define the cinema screen. (12)

A number of musical qualities are compositionally important to the voice, just as they are to the image (and its absence): the interval, the cadence, silence, tonality, resonance, etc. Véronique Campan (13) points out the structural importance sound and sonority have in Duras' work in appealing to an inner space: "*Le son, dans son incessante modulation, empêche aucune forme de se fixer et porte à ne pas voir. Mais il est tendu vers cette image qui n'existe qu'en puissance, et ne trouve qu'en moi, dans le montage second qui s'opère entre vision, écoute, souvenir et désir, le lieu de son effectuation.*" (Sound, in its incessant modulation, does not prevent any form from fixing itself and tends to make you not see it. But it reaches out towards this image, which only exists potentially, and finds only in me, in the second montage that occurs between seeing, hearing, memory and desire, the site of its completion.)

Two more recent, and in subject and treatment strikingly different, examples of an internalised space brought about by the use of black images are worth a short mention here.

The Palestinian artist Larissa Sansour uses the image/ black counter-image system to tell about a social-political deadlock. Her *Gaza* (2003) installation, in a four-minute video loop, shows the open sky, filmed with the camera perpendicular to the ground, across which pass regular low-altitude flights by Israeli military helicopters. These images are alternated with short black passages. *Gaza* is projected onto a screen fixed to the ceiling so that the viewers find themselves in the same position of impotence in the face of ongoing terrorisation as the inhabitants of the Gaza Strip. The transitions from image to black and back again are done with fades. In this loop installation, the dissolves do not in the traditional sense represent the transition from one place to another or one time to another, but a permanent state of deadlock. In the black passages you hear the hubbub of the Palestinians as they search through the rubble of their bombed homes. The alternation of black and the open sky, where the sound of the helicopters is an emphatic presence, creates a tense atmosphere. The end of an attack is never a relief, it is just the moment you can start to be afraid again.

Sansour connects the unthinkable aspect of the event with the black image, especially with the auditory mental space onto which the black image opens. Bresson has already spoken of this: "*Lorsqu'un son peut remplacer une image, supprimer l'image ou la neutraliser. L'oreille va davantage vers le dedans, l'oeil vers le dehors.*" (When sound is able to replace an image, eliminate the image or neutralise it. The ear turns more inwards, the eye outwards.) (14) The fact, the harsh reality, can be translated only into the reverse of the image, its eclipse. Sansour indicates how the Palestinian impasse leads to an impasse in representation. *Gaza* internalises the way reality has become a residual category in which only losers are involved – and even if they appear in front of the camera in mass-media obscenities, all they now embody is the cliché.

In Susan Philipsz' *The Dead* (2000) the artist's singing voice underlies a film that is

entirely black. The title refers to James Joyce's last short story, written in 1907, which John Huston filmed eighty years later. Philipsz concentrates on a key moment in the film, a performance of the Irish folksong *The Lass of Aughrim* at the end of a party. The song tells the story of a woman who is left by her husband, and prompts a woman there to muse on a lover who, she believed, had many years previously died for her. In the following article Caoimhim Mac Giolla Leith (15) looks specifically at this film and at Susan Philipsz' methods. Philipsz, who is always exploring the relationship between the subjective and the collective, made two versions of *The Dead*, one a 12-inch vinyl record and the other a 35 mm installation. As a result of its repeated passage through the projector, the black strip of film accumulates scratches and small spots that correspondingly emphasise the concrete material nature of the installation setting and, more abstractly, reinforce the cognizance of the passing of time. The black acts as a projection plane, and creates a mental – but not evocative – space for the viewer in which they can put their own private memories and feelings of absence and loss. A particular characteristic of Philipsz' intonement of lyrics (because they are not for a public performance) is her highly personal and intimistic way of singing. The fact that *The Dead* is shown in an exhibition space (and not a cinema) gives the work the nature of an object. The viewer is free to move around a room that is not obliterated by the darkness. The light from the surroundings and the projection are related in an egalitarian way, while the room, empty except for the projector, provides a sounding board for Philipsz' fragile, detached voice.

### **White and void**

If black is the basis from which the image emerges, if black means closing the eyes to the surfeit of images, as Agamben calls it "*le fond où les images sont si présentes qu'on ne peut plus les voir*", (The background against which the images are so present that one can no longer see them) (16) then white is the void where there is no longer any image. Emptiness has a reciprocal association with fullness. As a form of elimination, the white image has a dialectically striking relationship with what it eliminates.

Someone who repeatedly makes this clear in his work, in among other things his project on the genocide in Rwanda, *Let There be Light* (1994-98), is the Chilean artist Alfredo Jaar. His installation *Lament of the Images* (2002), which was shown at *Documenta 11*, consists of a dark room with three white illuminated texts worked into one wall and an adjoining bright room with a projection screen bathed in blinding white light. The left-hand panel of text in the darkened room tells of the release of Nelson Mandela, covered by the media 'en masse' in 1990. You see a man who, while imprisoned, worked in the limestone quarries, now looking at the light as if blinded. No photo exists of Mandela weeping on the day of his release. Legend has it that this is to do with the limestone, whose blinding light is said to have deprived him of the ability to shed tears. The middle panel is about Bill Gates, who is the

owner of, or holds the reproduction rights to over 65 million images, unique historical images and pictures of works of art, part of which are kept in a former stone quarry in the American state of Pennsylvania. The right-hand panel reflects on the Pentagon, which, before the start of the war in Afghanistan, acquired exclusive rights to all satellite images of that country and those surrounding it. This led to a 'white-out' of the war operation, so that not a single independent image could any longer be seen. What Jaar wants to demonstrate in his installation is that it is made impossible for us to have a sense of reality, and that we constantly have a blind spot. We are blinded. Images are denied us and looking is sometimes made impossible. The white projection screen is the symbolic focus of this. The black room with the three panels of text is a metaphor for the place where images are buried and for their unrealised power.

The *Theatres* series (1976-99) by the Japanese conceptual photographer Hiroshi Sugimoto is a very interesting variant on the emptiness-fullness pattern, because it is also an allegory of time and space. He photographs films playing in a cinema, using a very slow shutter speed. The time taken for the photographic exposure corresponds to the duration of the film and means that in the photo the film screen appears white. All the film images are concentrated and annihilated in the white projection screen. In contrast, the darkened cinema becomes recognisable as a result of the light from the invisible film. In Sugimoto's pictures the white emptiness embodies virtuality.

We now return to the moving image with two white video works made in 2005 by the Belgian artists Michel Lorand and Joëlle Tuerlinckx.

Michel Lorand's *Epilogue* is a postscript to his trilogy of video installations called *3 Short Stories* (2004-2005), in which women muse on a break-up in voice-overs with a textual score by Lorand. Broken and impossible relationships inspired the artist to examine the relations between a literary text and the image. Lorand's work is characterised by his visualisation of an inner reality. Having extensively probed the space between text and image in *Medée*, *Cut* and *Camera Obscura*, the three parts of the trilogy, in his visual strategy for *Epilogue* he makes symbolic use of the void. The accumulation of ineradicable images of people and being psychologically marked by them, and the memory of situations you carry physically inside you, are staged symbolically in the whiteness. In the voice-over, by the actress Hanna Schygulla, we hear that this presence of 'uninvited guests' can in circumstances of extreme fatigue sometimes temporarily cancel itself out, "*comme un film qui soudain s'interrompt*" (like a film that suddenly interrupts itself), to make way for an unexpected silence. It is in these moments of suspension that "*la légèreté du vide de votre mémoire vous accorde l'illusion du temps oublié*" (the lightness of the void of your memory gives you the illusion of forgotten time).

In Kasimir Malevitch's suprematist philosophy, white was the equivalent of infinity, depth and freedom. In Christian mythology it symbolises purity, cleansing,

transcendancy and suchlike. Michel Lorand takes a materialistic attitude. In his work white is equivalent to emptiness, but without still being a virtuality, a mirror onto which we can project our own images. It is striking that his white, which was transferred from film to video, is not one hundred percent virginal and is moreover framed by opening and closing credits which emphasise the medium itself. In fact he is showing a 'white-out', not as the familiar phenomenon of the loss or removal of sensory limits, but with its lesser-known cinematographic connotation. In film one gets a white-out when the overexposed end of a roll of film is projected. Normally it is cut away in editing, though some experimental films and documentaries use it as a constitutive element. In film, the white-out is not a dematerialising white and is far from serene or pure. A restless textured veil of scratches, spots and patches hangs in front of the image so that as a viewer one is kept outside. The image does not swallow you up like Derek Jarman's *Blue* (1993), about which more later. Lorand makes us aware that we are sitting in front of a screen and that white is a finite space. Distance is important to an artist. While in the work of Marguerite Duras and Susan Philipsz black leads the viewer to a natural mental space, in Lorand's case it is distorted by the use of white.

It is well known that the voice-over has a power and control over the image. Serge Daney once called this "*un contrat, sur le dos de l'image*" (A contract at the expense of the image). The same applies to Lorand, except that unlike *Cut* or *Camera Obscura*, the last two parts of his trilogy, there is no longer any pictorial image. There is a wide, yawning emptiness up against which the authorial voice rubs. As a consequence of the objectifying nature of white, the indicative accentuation of the material experience of the screening by such things as visual interference, the physical perception is emphasised, in contrast to the subjectifying, oceanic black. In this way Lorand guards his text, whose literalness is accentuated, from erosion by mental projection.

An epilogue is a closing address. Derek Jarman's film *Blue* is a totally monochrome film that can also be considered as an epilogue. It is an autobiographical coda on the threshold of death. In a voice-over, the film-maker wonders how he can express the inexpressible – the AIDS experience – in images. In this film, observations on the disease and everyday things alternate with poetic contemplations. Jarman made the film after he had gone blind as a result of AIDS. In contrast to Lorand, he tries for a form of empathy in his meditation on blindness and AIDS, and the projected image in Yves Klein blue is an instrument to that end. Blue, considered in colour psychology to be calming, is what he saw when he was given eye-drops to relieve his blindness. In contrast to the passive black, blue stimulates the retina just like white, but unlike the inaccessible, dematerialising white (also a locus of emptiness), blue combines intensity with spiritual depth. Yves Klein saw blue as remaining outside the dimensions that are a part of the other colours. In his view blue was the invisible becoming visible. Jarman put this in a transcendent perspective: "Blue protects white

from innocence/ Blue drags black with it/ Blue is darkness made visible.” Like other film-makers who sought sanctuary in monochromy, he raises the matter of the impossible image: “The image is a prison of the soul, your heredity, your education, your vices and aspirations, your qualities, your psychological world.” At the same time he takes it further. It is not the impossible as a rhetorical figure that interests him (as it does Duras), but what lies beyond the image. Like Klein, Jarman sees blue as infinite possibility, as that which can overcome the fear of the void.

In the case of Joëlle Tuerlinckx, whose film and video work is part of a broader range of activities in the plastic arts, the a-transcendent primacy of the real fully applies. Her work introduces cuts and makes non-hierarchical connections within the continuum of the real. In a collection of posthumous notes, Serge Daney writes, “*Le cinéma moderne a fixé, photographié, des rapports et non les choses*”. (Modern cinema has fixed, photographed, the connections but not the things) (17) Tuerlinckx’ improvisations with the real are interesting in this respect. They present a scene that is the location for the struggle between looking and things and where emptiness is the condition under which things exist. In an essay on the artist, Michael Newman (18) relates the notion of emptiness to that of the situation: “If ‘representation’ is concerned with the artwork as picture, and ‘expression’ with it as object, what one could call ‘voiding’ must deal with the artwork as situation. The problem is to avoid transforming the place into a representation of itself.” He says that marking off the void is the way pure multiplicity appears in a situation. Tuerlinckx’ films are also developed in accordance with situations, with reference to which Newman points out that the marking off of emptiness appears *internally* within the moving image. One way this happens is by what he calls “scotomisation”, cutting out a piece of reality, interruptions which are both spatial and temporal at the same time.

It is notable that to this end Tuerlinckx often makes use of white, which she sees as synonymous with a gap in the real, even in her installations. *Het witte moment* (1997), an art integration project for the Flemish Community’s Ferraris Building in Brussels, comprises an architectural cross-section. She painted part of the corridor on the tenth floor ultra-white. As she wrote in her notes on the project, “*Comment la réalité semble extra-ordinaire de sensation lorsqu’elle entoure un objet blanc*”. (How extraordinary a sensation reality seems when it surrounds a white object.) For the users of the building, she considered her work to be a temporary form of detachment and realisation. In the same year she created *Flash Vision* in Luzern, a piece with a great physical impact that is also known under the title *Bildlicht Weiss Blick Blind Schwarz*. An extremely powerful flashlight completely blinds the visitor for several seconds. Retinal persistence then leads to them seeing a totally black image, out of which perception slowly returns. The short period of white-out, the flash, is characterised by an energy void and total shutdown of the senses. The black aftershock represents a moment of pure, unadulterated consciousness. The white experience contains a suspended moment, a form of resistance to the fact that we are present here and now. In its turn, the black is the moment of return to the flow of

time.

What distinguishes Tuerlinckx from the artists we have mentioned above is that her work is independent of traditional visual representation and is free of any sort of inherited symbolic or metaphorical debt. She exposes the real by sensory impressions alone.

Tuerlinckx' film and video work comprises a great many categories and subcategories. New ones are always being added. Such as *Série blanche (barres, bâtons, objets + effets spéciaux)* (2000-2005), which is part of *FILMS D'ETUDE*. This series brings together various videos in which Tuerlinckx holds a white stick or strip in her hands in front of the camera. The artist calls them "*réactions 'à blanc' au réel filmé*" (reactions 'in white' to a filmed reality). You situate the object in the primary colour of white in the space, whereas black, which according to her has a censoring effect, counteracts this. This principle is expanded upon in *Le Visiteur parfait (Der perfekte Besucher)* (2005). It is a 'mono-dialogue' between Willem Oorebeek (the Visitor) and Tuerlinckx herself (the Voice) and is the result of audio recordings made from day to day at the Kunsthalle Münster in the course of a week. The artists observe the city and frame the ambient sounds by opening and closing the windows. Their conversation covers just about everything. Changing aspects of Münster attract the attention of their eyes or ears. There is room for wonder. The Visitor thinks out loud or loses himself in his thoughts. At the post-production stage Tuerlinckx re-adapted parts of this material for a video by adding a monochrome white image. The white should be seen as a form of sensory adjustment to the needs of the audience, which, in the cinema, Tuerlinckx deliberately deprives of any illusion by means of the reflected light from the projection screen. A uniform white image always accentuates a physical, perceptual space. This means material impressions take priority over mental ones. There is a density in the real that is able to bring out the sound rather than the image. In addition, everything is already present in the real, without its having to be invented. The artist calls it "*véracité pur d'un troublant moment présent*". (The pure veracity of a disturbing present moment.) The French word '*troublant*' is also '*trou blanc*' ('white hole'). One can see the white screen as a tuning fork and as a tribute to Mallarmé. In exactly the same way as he passed through the white page, Tuerlinckx passes through the white screen.

The subtitle of this article is 'Notes on Monochromy and the Moving Image'. I thereby wanted to point out the difference in motifs and the audiovisual strategies used. Does the artist, by means of a visual and acoustic image, wish to show a reality outside himself or does he want to depict an inner reality? Does he make his point by means of representation and symbolism or does he attach a strictly sensory philosophy to it? Does he emphasise the concrete materiality of the medium or does he place himself in a meta-lingual perspective? Or one or more combinations of all these? In this sense, apart from touching on a number of inherent characteristics linked to black and white and the acoustic and visual image, I found it important to look more closely at several authors' use of black and white.



The vacuum represented by the white, black and blue image (in Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet's *Moses und Aaron* (1971) there is even quite a long strip of pink film) is relative. Absence always refers to a flipside to which (or a broader situation within which) this dialectic relates. The limits again and again redefine the conditions that open up possibilities.

Translated from Dutch by Gregory Ball

## NOTES

(1) A film that diametrically reverses this pattern is *Branca de neve* (2000), deeply impregnated with autobiography, it is about the impossibility of visualising poetry or of filming it at all, and is by the Portuguese film-maker João Cesar Monteiro, who died in 2003. This work is inspired by a lyrical dialogue between the characters from *Snow White*, written by the Swiss author Robert Walser. After shooting in three locations with costumed actors, Monteiro decided not to show any images. Apart from pictures of Robert Walser's dead body at the beginning and a sequence of the silent Monteiro at the end, the film consists entirely of dialogues on black strips of film which every ten minutes or so are interrupted by short passages of blue sky.

(2) A more panoramic view of the way experimental film-makers have handled the black image in their work is to be found in: Yann Beauvais, 'Le film noir dans le cinéma expérimental', in: Yann Beauvais (ed.), *Poussière d'image. Articles de film (1979-1998)* (Les Editions Paris expérimental, Paris 1998) 149-159.

(3) François Albera, *L'Avant-garde au cinéma* (Armand Colin Cinéma, Paris 2005) 138-139.

(4) Giorgio Agamben, 'Le cinéma de Guy Debord', in : *Image et mémoire. Écrits sur l'image, la danse et le cinéma* (Desclée de Brouwer, Paris 2004) 87-96.

(5) The first public screening of a film took place in Paris at the end of 1885. What followed can be roughly divided into four periods. The primitive film up to 1915; the classic film (pre-war), the modern film (from the war to about 1975); the mannerist or post-modern film (from 1975 up to the present) in which self-reference and the clip ethos won out over making contact with the world and the persistent eye. This is a matter of periods of social-cultural dominance, within which, in the post-modern cinema today (or what the French call '*l'après-cinéma*'), the other periods still continue a parallel existence. Classic cinema leads a taxidermic existence on television and in the visual media industry; Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Abbas Kiarostami and several others are the heirs of modern film, from which period several dinosaurs still survive; in the audiovisual area of the plastic arts a colony of amateur archaeologists focuses on the visual registers of primitive film.

(6) Gilles Deleuze, *L'image-temps* (Les éditions de Minuit, Paris 1985) 223.

(7) *Ibid.* 260.

(8) Jean-Luc Nancy, *A l'écoute* (Galilée, Paris 2002).

(9) *Ibid.* 76.

(10) *Ibid.* 77.

(11) Jean-Luc Nancy, *Au fond des images* (Galilée, Paris 2003) 144.

(12) Michel Chion, *La voix au cinéma* (Edition de l'Étoile/ Cahiers du Cinéma, Paris 1982) 112.

(13) Véronique Campan, 'Ecouter, ce n'est pas voir', in: *L'écran intérieur, Cinergon*

12, (2001-2002) 93.

(14) Robert Bresson, *Notes sur le cinématographe*, (Gallimard, Paris 1995 (1975)) 62-63.

(15) Caoimhin Macgiollaleith, 'Susan Philipsz's *The Dead*', in: *argosfestival 2005* (argos editions, Brussels 2005) **I**

(16) Giorgio Agamben, 'Le cinéma de Guy Debord', 93.

(17) Serge Daney, *L'Exercice a été profitable, Monsieur* (P.O.L., Paris 1993) 81.

(18) Michael Newman, 'Joëlle Tuerlinckx's Filmwork: Time, Multiplicity, Void' in: *argosfestival 2005* (argos editions, Brussels 2005).