

## The Colour of the Invisible ; Methodological Remarks on Haptic and Optic Visual Modes

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Of all the arts, cinema is the one most bound up with representation. This may be argued for its indexical technology, that something has made an imprint of light on the film stock, as well as for the power of the reality-effect in its reception. The mimetic illusion of the temporal image seemed so perfect for some early commentators, that cinema even transgressed the duality of the world and its image altogether in their eyes ; cinema was “like life itself” and “now death was no longer final.” In the cinema, seeing is believing, in one sense or another.

I will argue that this is also the reason why cinema, both in its dominant and various marginal modes, continually challenges the bounds of representation of the image. This challenge proceeds through visual means, through offscreen space or colour techniques, which is what will concern us here. Abstraction is a concept often evoked by the notion of representation, as it is seen as its opposite. I will here explore how the dualism of representation-abstraction is thrown off balance in the use of colour.

The strong impact of the mimetic illusion was one of several arguments in the medium's early years why cinema was not an art. Its mechanical perfection in representation could not be reconciled with the romantic or modernist concepts of art, both of which depended on an artist's vision, his (the artist was most often male) decoding and interpretation of the world. If cinema was an automatic, mechanical re-production of the world, it couldn't be an art because there was no intermediary role of the artist between the work and the world. It is instructive for our cultural conventions of analogy to note how blind the spectator was to the silence of the early cinema and to its lack of colour and depth ; resemblance

is a contextual and historically changing property of the image.

Due to its temporality cinema was felt to develop ideas independently of the spectator, who was interrupted in his or her contemplation in front of the image when a cut or a camera movement demanded that he made sense of the new situation. Cinema was sensed to negate the creative subject at both ends of its process; the artist had no intermediary role between the world and its image, and the viewer had his thoughts stolen away by the image. For these reasons cinema was not regarded as an art.

This situation is why the advocates of cinema as a new art form highlighted the shortcomings of its mimetic illusion. The differences from the real world in the cinematographic image—the lack of sound, colour, depth, the fragmentation of the world produced by the frame—was what made cinema an art. The theorists of the mid-1910s restored the concept of art by giving back to the artist—the actor, the director or the cameraman—a role in *composing* the image, because it was in itself incomplete and artificial. Pointing out all of cinema's mimetic shortcomings also restored the spectator's control. The viewer had to *construct* a depth to the image as well as a continuation of space beyond the frame in order to make a world out of the film. Sound and colour had to be induced. The so-called formalist approach in film theory proceeds by playing down the presumed perfection of the representation, a perfection that always is at odds with representation, in order to restore a space for the creative subject in art.

For the German-American psychologist Hugo Münsterberg, writing in 1916, cinema stages not the world, but all the psychological processes in the human mind.<sup>1)</sup> Cinema objectively represents memory by using flashbacks. Human imagination is made visual by introducing sequences depicting possible events in the future. Emotion is placed before us when the image moves to represent exaltation, confusion, drunkenness, etc. Most important of all for Münsterberg, was cinema's capacity to objectively represent attention, which in his view corresponds exactly to the close-up where certain events or objects are focused on

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1) Hugo Münsterberg, *The Photoplay; A Psychological Study* [1916], NY: Dover 1970 (Part I; The Psychology of The Photoplay).

and others pushed out of frame into distraction.<sup>2)</sup> Cinema is thus not an image of the world, but a representation of an inner world of psychological processes.

This priority of the mental dimensions of the image does not lead Münsterberg to close readings of works, but he gives hypothetical examples of how human consciousness may be represented. This phenomenology of the film image has as a consequence a resistance to technological developments of the film medium such as the addition of sound, colour or a third dimension. These innovations actually give less space for mental processes on the part of the viewer. Mimetic illusion is at odds with the artistic dimensions in Münsterberg's view, and this puts him in opposition to what has always been a main attraction of the film image; its reality-effect.

Other theorists in the 1910s also emphasized the mental dimensions of the medium, like the Russian linguist Jakov Lintsbach who in the same year 1916, sought to devise a universal language on a cinematic fundament.<sup>3)</sup> Lintsbach maintains that cinema is based on basic iconic movements in the stream of images in consciousness, and for this reason could be at the core of a new universal language accessible to all, independent of cultural and historical contexts. Just like Münsterberg, Lintsbach stresses the incompleteness of mimetic illusion in cinema: Since the photographic image is too complete and thus too complex, he argues for a highly stylised cinema of animation, where reduced patterns of movements coincide with conceptual movements. This emphasis on a conceptual movement, instead of on a visual one, is also to dominate the perhaps most influential film theory of all time, that of Sergei Eisenstein, from the late 1920s to the 1940s.

A third example may serve to exemplify this prominence of a cinema of the mind in the 1910s. The American poet Vachel Lindsay finds that the motion picture resembles the hieroglyph, in that it proceeds by patterns of mental associations.<sup>4)</sup> Even if Lindsay had a very simple understanding of the functions

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2) Ibid., pp. 31-39.

3) Jakov Lintsbach, "Medvetandets bildström", *Aura, Filmvetenskaplig tidskrift*, no. 1, vol. 2, 1995: pp. 23-25.

of hieroglyphs, he bases the art of the motion picture on a mental process similar to that of the shot in film editing. Particular images give rise to mental processes that result in signification and ideas. For this reason, cinema hieroglyphics are not based on mimetic illusion, but on proceeding in the same forms as human thought.

These approaches seek to include cinema in the Arts, but they do so at the expense of cinema's fundamental technological differences from other media and art forms ; the storage of an audiovisual temporal flow. Some of the film theories in the twenties and thirties argue that the cinematic movement opens for perceptions radically different from those of our everyday vision and hearing. For these theorists, cinema's movement is inherently different from our perception of time and space. The creative dimension of cinema lies in its technology. By apparently excluding the creative powers of the human agent, cinema was approached as the technology where the romantic and modernist concepts of art could be criticised, contested and subverted. For Walter Benjamin of the Frankfurt School, for Dziga Vertov in the Soviet Constructivist movement and for the French filmmaker and theorist Jean Epstein, the 'inhuman' aspects of cinema could transform the concept of art altogether.

According to this position, the film image neither represents the spectator's perception of the outer world nor the basic human psychological processes. In the words of Jean Epstein, cinema leads to "another philosophy" different from ours because the cinematograph has "the intelligence of a machine".<sup>5)</sup> It may thus lead to new world views and serve to show spatial and temporal forms that are inaccessible to our perception with our everyday audio-optics. For Epstein, the cinematographical technology forms a new dimension of movement, where everything that appears to be solid to us is shown to be in constant movement. Cinema transgresses the solid perception and renders objects into a liquid or even

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4) Vachel Lindsay, *The Art of the Moving Picture* [1915], NY: MacMillan 1970, pp. 209-215.

5) Jean Epstein, "La philosophie du cinematographe", *L'intelligence d'une machine* [1946], reprinted in *Écrits sur le cinéma 1921-1953, tome 1*, Paris: Seghers 1974, p. 310.

a gas-like state.

This critique of the ontology of representation is at odds with much of modernist art discourses in that it sets the camera and the rest of film technology as the principal artist, and the viewer is confronted with a new dimension of space and time. The artistic subject has been substituted with the intelligence of a machine. In other words, up to the Second World War, there was no truly "realist" film theory, in which cinema's lifelikeness was advocated. This aspect of the medium was perhaps not only too evident to be worthy of theoretical concern, but it was also at odds with the dominant concept of art.

### Black and Blue

Against the background of these opposing views of cinema's relationship to the external and internal worlds, I would like to single out a set of practices for using colour, in order to look closer at their relationship to representation. Colour entertains highly ambivalent relations to representation, as it clearly adds a new dimension of likeness to the image, but which is not always a mechanical result of what has been in front of the camera lens. Colour is sometimes used to suspend the indexical capacities of the photographic image, and to produce gaps of invisibility within the image. I will look at some specific uses of colour to obtain invisible montages and manipulations of images. In other cases, I will demonstrate, colour is a code denoting invisibility within the story level, while still rendering this field visible to the viewer. I will finally look at the complex role of the white image, as a means to blur all contours and burn out all colours. Too much light renders the image invisible, and may denote blindness just as well as blackness does.

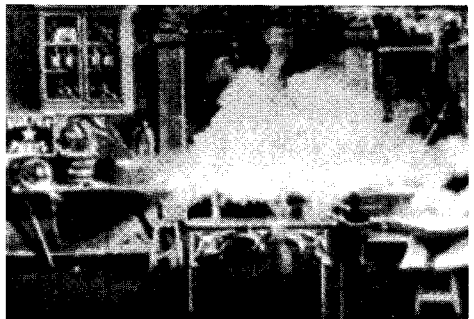
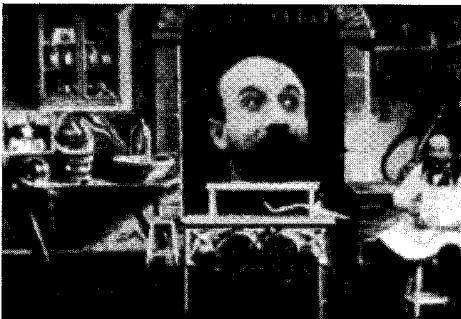
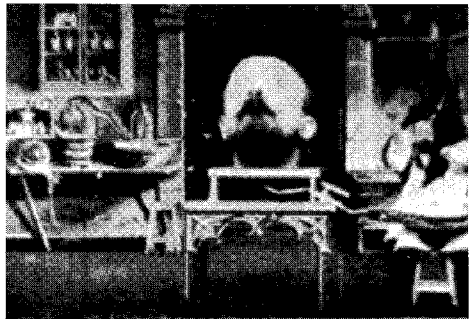
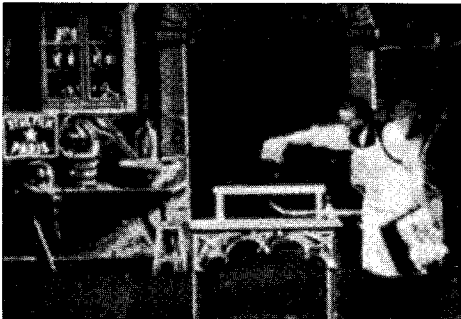
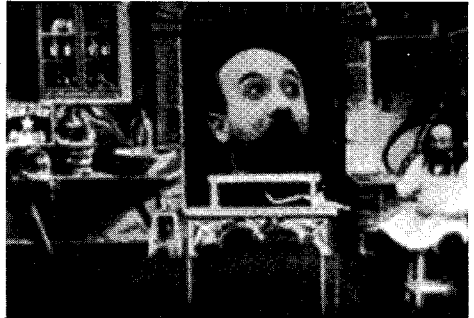
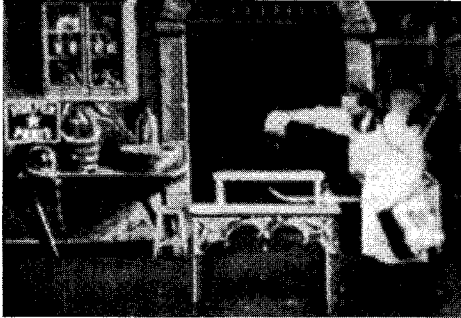
Within the medium most strongly bound up in representation, colour functions as a means to overcome the bounds of representation in different ways. Let us consider the use of black spaces within the image first. Within one of the first truly popular genres in motion pictures, actually stretching back to precinematographic spectacles like the magic lantern and the fantasmogoria, the transformation film, we find a very frequent use of black spaces in the image. This black space serves to make the multiple exposures of the image invisible.

This is the space for exposures at a different time from those of the rest of the image, which appears to be continuous in time and space. The borders of the black fields in the moving image conceal the montage process in the image, and give the impression that supernatural events are happening before us. The use of this technique was very widespread from the very first years of cinema, and relied on the spectator's expectation of a continuous and unitary image in the cinematograph. The black space is a means for all of the early transformation film genre, but one finds perhaps its most famous examples in Georges Méliès' films (e. g. *L'homme à la tête de caoutchouc*, 1902).

The black space is a blind spot for the spectator, where illusions may be produced. The invisible frame within the frame suspends one dimension of the photographic representation, as well as the perspectival properties of the image. The black space is a two-dimensional colour field. The invisibility of these techniques was quickly further refined during the 1910s and especially in the classical cinema, where back-projections, front-projections and matte shots all depend on this black field of the image, but where the borders of the different exposures match each other exactly, forming a seemingly continuous and seamless perspectival image. In video technology, these exactly same effects are achieved not through the black field of the image, but through the blue screen. Unlike the black spaces in the images of Méliès and others, the blue-screen techniques resemble the seamless continuity of the images of the classical cinema.

So both black and blue have this ambivalent status of colours of invisibility, as they serve invisible processes of montage. In the era of digital technique, these colour fields are no longer a necessary part of shooting, as "compositing" and "keying" are done in their entirety in the post-production process (if this term bears any meaning any longer in the digital era, when images theoretically don't have to be "shot" at all).

To return to the black fields of the image, these were also a part of chronophotographic inscriptions before the cinematograph. Edison's kinoscope films were mostly shot in his studio called "The Black Maria," since the image was so dependent on a strong artificial light as it was displayed for the spectator only for a very short instant. In order to make the motifs of the films—if it was a



George Méliès, *L'homme à la tête de caoutchouc*, 1902.

close-up of a kiss, a sneeze, a dance of veils or a staged boxing match—clearly stand out of the background of the image, this was painted black to reflect as little light as possible and to avoid any disturbance from the attention on the main event of the image. Edison's use of black spaces is not as much a blind spot in the image as it is formed by the continuation of an orderly separation between foreground and background in the tradition of Western painting.

Early chronophotographic studies of bodies in movement also used black backgrounds to make the object of study stand out more strongly. Just like Edison's kinoscope films, instantaneous photography, sometimes with exposure times of a thousandth of a second or less, depended on strong artificial lighting. But especially Étienne-Jules Marey's chronophotography took the black spaces of the image into the service of a scientific isolation of an object of study.<sup>6)</sup> Not only were humans, cats, horses and insects moving in a space totally abstracted from figuration, even the moving objects themselves were in some cases covered in black.<sup>7)</sup> To produce a perfectly geometric chart of human locomotion, a runner in Marey's "physiological station" was all dressed in black to be invisible in the image, with white phosphorescent stripes on his legs being the only visible pattern. This technique is informed by the empiricist scientific ideals of a physiologist working with several non-photographic sorts of inscriptions of movement, as the charting techniques have priority over any illusionist or mimetic attraction.

The black spaces in Marey's chronophotography are thus eminently invisible, and the mimetic attraction normally attributed to cinema is here fully transcended into abstract patterns demanding a scientific decoding. This is also true for the studies that occupied Marey at the end of his life, recording movements in "invisible" matter like water and air. Infusing photographically traceable substances in water and air, namely glass pearls and smoke, Marey created chronophotographic charts of movement estranged from any recognizable forms.<sup>8)</sup>

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6) Marta Braun, *Picturing Time ; The Work of Etienne-Jules Marey (1830-1904)*, Chicago : University of Chicago Press 1992, pp. 81-85.

7) All of Marey's chronophotographic experiments are represented at the brilliant online exhibition of the Cinémathèque française : [www.expo-marey.com](http://www.expo-marey.com).



Allow me to return to the paradoxical invisibility of the colour blue. In the blue-screen video technique, it serves to actually render dimensions of the image invisible. As a more singular experience, let us also recall the British film director Derek Jarman's film *Blue* (1993), consisting, apart from the titles, solely of a monochrome blue image, denoting the blindness of the director's near-terminal stages of his AIDS disease. We here encounter the blue colour as a code for invisibility, since it is not invisible to the spectator. On the contrary, we are asked to accept the monochrome blue as the colour seen by the blind director. Blue is the colour not only of sadness in our culture, but also of blindness.

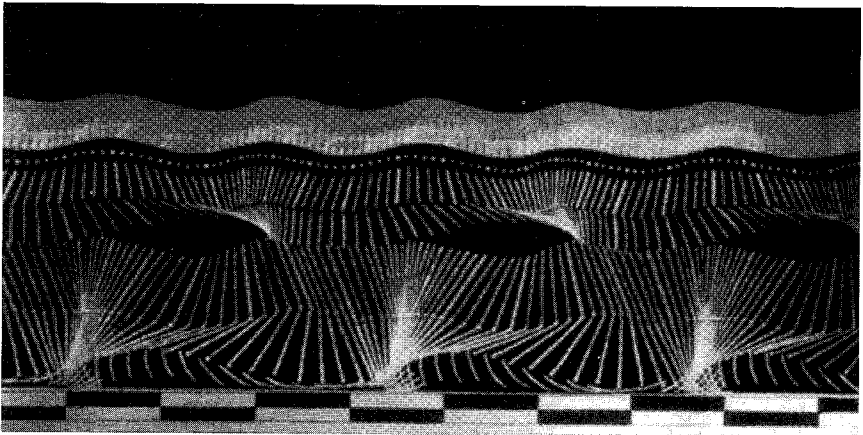
Another case where blue is not invisible to the spectator, but denotes invisibility on a diegetic plane, is in the conventions for tinting and toning films. These non-photographic colour processes were more common than black and white films in much of the silent film period, especially in the 1910s, and were applied as single colours to partial sections of the films. Tinting and toning sometimes appeared in combination with other techniques, as for instance hand and stencil colouring of chosen sections of the image. The films often had colour conventions for different kinds of shots. Exterior shots were often tinted green, interiors could be in sepia, but the strongest convention in tinting and toning was the use of blue for night scenes. For the contemporary audience, a blue tinted image signified that what was visible to the spectator in the image, was invisible to the characters as it was dark and it was night. For this reason it could be perfectly sensible that characters passed each other within centimetres without discovering it, or shot at each other at close range without hitting. Today, when films often are restored without colours, these sequences come across as absurd, as they have lost their traces of invisibility. The colours are gone, and if they are intact or restored, the audience's knowledge of these conventions is lost.

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- 8) Jonathan Crary claims that the "estrangement" of the represented object in relation to our everyday perception is much stronger in Eadweard Muybridge's chronophotography than in Marey's, but this is because he fails to take the many different techniques and forms of Marey's chronophotographic inscriptions into consideration. Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception; Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture*, Cambridge (Ma.): MIT Press 1999, p. 153.

### Fields of haptic space

The ambivalent status of colour—invisible, non-indexical or denoting invisibility—poses problems for various methodological approaches to representation in itself, as well as to methodologies of art history. The black fields of the early film image constitute a gap in representation, but are not abstract fields in the image. Abstraction may serve various purposes in art. It may seek to constitute fundamental elements for new means of communication, i.e. the basics for a new language, as in the cases of modernist avant-gardes. It is clear, however, that the black fields don't aspire to constitute signifying elements in themselves in early cinema. These fields for montage serve to break up the everyday logic of time and space, and to juxtapose phenomena that would be incommensurable outside the cinematic technology. The black spaces suspend the indexical by introducing invisible borders between images, but it does not serve an abstraction of the image.

Not even in the cases where the result appears to be an abstract image, as in the cases described in Marey's chronophotography, is there an abstraction in its modernist "purifying" sense at work. The abstract "schools" in art at the time of early cinema sought to purify art from its referential, representational and mimetic functions. Suprematist art, for instance the Russian painter Kasimir Malevich's black square, to keep with the black spaces, strove to empty the image of all representational aspects. In Marey's work, the black forms a contrast to make the photographic inscription more exact and interpretable. The black background of the image is there to exclude irrelevant information from the object of study, that is, to eliminate noise. The invisible parts of the image are the conditions for its intelligibility. It thus resembles the role of the spaces between words as the condition for writing. Allusions to the abstraction of modernist art in Marey's work are frequent, but nonetheless too hasty. The resemblance of forms should not lead us to believe they serve similar functions. The diagrams and chronometers in Marey's chronophotography are there to allow an analysis of movement, and thus maintain a strong representational force beyond the similarity with the world as we perceive it. Also, the true force of Marey's work



Etienne-Jules Marey, *Joinville Soldier Walking*, 1883.

is not within the single image, but between images, where the temporal relationships in movement are inferred.<sup>9)</sup> Marey's work thus depends on the invisible, the absent phases of an event, to render traces of movement in the outer world. Instead of an image embedded in the so-called "negative theology" of modernist art, Marey's chronophotography maintains a strong analytical force depending on its relation to an outer world.

So if the black squares in early cinema serve different purposes altogether from the abstract black square of Malevich, what is at stake in the representational domain of these images? I would like to suggest that we may perceive these black, and by extension blue, spaces as haptic modes of vision. This term has a long genealogy in art history, and I will only sketch some of its various uses here. It is important, however, to distinguish between the tactile and the haptic. The concept of a visual mode that invites touch is at odds with the practice of black fields in cinema. These are not possible to spatially occupy or "to live in", as they offer no spatial coordinates. Haptic space is not inhabitable space. For this reason, theories of tactile or haptic space drawing too literally on the metaphor of touch depend too much on unitary spatial coordinates.

Haptic space has been linked to seeing at close range, for instance by the art historian Adolf Hildebrand in 1893—the time of the breakthrough of chrono-

photography—and contrasted with perspectival long range vision.<sup>10)</sup> Hildebrand developed this distinction into an art historical approach, where distant vision was associated with schools of painting giving privilege to appearance and perspectival laws (as e. g. Hellenistic art), whereas close vision was related to the representation of the quality of the surface of things and of stylisation of forms (as in Egyptian art). The distinction between close and distant vision depends on the viewer's orientation within the spatial coordinates of the image, coordinates suspended in the black fields of chronophotography and early cinema.

Another central distinction is between the haptic and the abstract. The German art historian Wilhelm Worringer poses a division between abstraction and empathy (*Einfühlung*) in 1908, again as a principle for understanding art history. Abstraction is based on stylised geometrical forms, and belonging more to a tactile than to an optical relationship to the world. The *Einfühlung* refers to realist and mimetic art, based on the three-dimensional space constructing an assigned position for the viewing subject. Also for Worringer, this division was typified by the distinction between Egyptian (abstraction) and Greek art (*Einfühlung*). I believe these distinctions also to be at the core of the historical dichotomies between formalist and realist theories of cinema. Art historian Heinrich Wölfflin in 1915 also employs the concepts "tactile" and "visual" to describe a historical mode of vision, once again based on distance to the represented objects and events, developing throughout the classical era and making full circle with the modernist art of the early twentieth century. Also within the field of film theory, one will find references to the relationship between closeness and the tactile, as for instance in Philippe Dubois' discussion of the close-up.<sup>11)</sup>

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9) This is why Marey's chronophotography truly anticipates cinema, where movement also results from the spaces between the frames. I explore the theoretical aspects of this in: Trond Lundemo, *Bildets oppløsning; Filmens bevegelse i historisk og teoretisk perspektiv*, Oslo: Spartacus 1996.

10) In this passage, I draw on Jacques Aumont's discussion in: *L'image*, Paris: Nathan 1990, pp. 80–81, 90, 103–104.

11) Philippe Dubois, "Le gros plan primitif", *Revue Belge du cinéma* no. 10, Winter 1984–85, pp. 11–18.

These uses of the concepts of “tactile” and “haptic” run the risk of becoming either too teleological, implying a continuous development towards specific modes of vision in specific eras, or too strongly bound up in representational spatial coordinates. The black fields I discuss here are closer to the concepts of the “optic” and “haptic” introduced by the Austrian art historian Alois Riegl in his second edition of *Die spätromische Kunstindustrie* in 1901.<sup>12)</sup> The two concepts are not describing an opposition of senses, but rather different modes of vision. The haptic is an alternative to the “tactile”, a term deemed by Riegl as too connected to the fingers and to physical touch. Haptic vision is an investigating and scrutinizing mode of vision.

Riegl thus poses limitations to the optic vision, which takes in a coherently constructed visual composition based on abstract parameters as foreground and background, up and down, etc. Haptic vision goes up close, and senses the critical borders of the image. It still doesn't imply an abstract image, as Riegl's philosophy of art is based on form as a condition for perception. Our register of forms is also our interface with the world. Alois Riegl's concept of the haptic describes a vision beyond the spatial coordinates of perspective and abstract vectors of space, without for this reason defining it as consisting of abstract forms. Gilles Deleuze also uses Riegl's concepts in this sense in his discussion of Francis Bacon's painting, a study that could be read as a critique of the art historical dichotomies between the figurative and the abstract.<sup>13)</sup> The haptic introduces a concept with which one designates a visual mode beyond the bounds of the figurative, without referring to the realm of fundamental forms informing the aesthetics of modernist abstraction. The black spaces of early cinema strive

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12) Alois Riegl, *Die spätromische Kunstindustrie ; nach den Funden in Österreich-Ungarn, I Teil*, Wien : Der Kaiserlich-Königlichen Hof- und Staatsdruckerei 1901. In this work, Riegl employs the term *tactile* (“taktisch”), but claims in a remark on his work in 1902 that this should be substituted with “haptisch” throughout the work. This is explained in the second and third printings of the work, with the shortened title : *Spätromische Kunstindustrie*, Darmstadt : Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft 1927 (2<sup>nd</sup>) and 1964 (3<sup>rd</sup>), p. 32.

13) Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon ; Logique de la sensation*, Paris : Éditions de la différence 1981, p. 99.

out of its representational bounds, without being abstract forms in the image.

The haptic is not necessarily inhabitable, in the sense of logically navigable or "roamable". It does not assign a position for the body inside its composition. On the contrary, in the cases of the figures of invisibility discussed here, it is non-perspectival and two-dimensional. Haptic space is not necessarily one that invites you to physically touch it, but an investigating mode of vision. For this reason, I have argued against pushing the metaphor of touch too far in a physical direction. This has been done in a very influential vein of phenomenological film theory by the French critic André Bazin in the 1940s and 1950s, with the result that deep staging and perspectival conventions become the prescribed ideals for a realist film style. In his view it is the representational, perspectival image that comes out as tactile. Bazin defines the nature of photography in the very same ideals as what Leon Battista Alberti prescribed for painting some 500 years earlier: The image should be an open window to the world, and represent the world in the same ways as we perceive it with our unaided senses.<sup>14)</sup> Since photography mechanically fulfils these ideals, Bazin feels that it is the task of cinema to give a truthful image of the world, and this is achieved by assigning a place for the spectator in it. Just as with the "formalist" theory of the 1910s and 1920s, the freedom of choice and the mental activity of the viewer is at the core of Bazin's realist theory. The viewer should be given space and time to explore the image according to the same principles as she employs in the everyday perception. Consequently, Bazin prescribes long takes, depth-of-field and deep staging for cinema to achieve those realist aesthetics cut out for it. With this primacy on the viewer's free interaction with the image, Bazin often recurs to metaphors of touch to describe how the eye "roams" space.

The conditions for these wanderings in the image are the perspectival spatial conventions for the image, which in art history have been understood as a means for optic vision in opposition to haptic. It could be interesting to note that the film scholar David Bordwell also refers to a physical visual entrance into the

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14) André Bazin, "L'évolution du langage cinématographique" [1950-55], *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?*, Paris: Éditions du Cerf 1985, pp. 75-80.

depth of the image in relation to the spatial compositions of Ozu Yasujiro's films, employing tactile metaphors like "the eye roams and rummages" in the represented space.<sup>15)</sup> This conception of a tactile vision in the perspectival image is a theoretical shortcoming in itself, as it doesn't account for the strong cues for visual attention embedded in the perspectival conventions. These accounts also understand the concept of a haptic visual domain in a diametrically opposite sense to the one I am referring to here, in relation to the black fields of the image.

### Fade to white

The white image in cinema touches on some of the same representational and methodological questions as the black fields discussed above, but takes them further. The all-white image transgresses the realm of the haptic, as it no longer invites an investigation of its boundaries between fields in the image. It does engage the body in interesting ways, though. The "white-out" of the image doesn't introduce a field beyond representation, it usually invades all of the image and eradicates all lines and contours. In the white image, light is not filtered and differentiated. The image consists of white noise, as there are no figures or spatial distinctions to convey any means of orientation. When the film tears in the projector, or when the projectionist forgets to change reels, the spectator encounters a glaring, even painful white light. This attack on the spectator's eyes has sometimes been included in films as techniques of *Verfremdung*, as in the opening montage of Ingmar Bergman's *Persona* (1966), or to probe the cinematic technology in relation to human perception, as in Dziga Vertov's *The Man with the Movie Camera* (1929) and in various works of experimental cinema, as for instance in that of Stan Brakhage or Michael Snow.

The absence of the image is white in cinema, as the light of the projector beam passes unfiltered. As all perception depends on filtering and sorting information, the white light makes impossible these processes of making meaning. When the image is not divided into forms and sections, its space is undifferentiated and

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15) David Bordwell, *Ozu and the Poetics of Cinema*, London/Princeton: BFI/Princeton University Press 1988, p. 86.

meaningless. Western aesthetics strongly depends on distinctions and boundaries, between art forms, between genres and between what is art and what is not. It thus employs white as a presumed neutral space between art and not-art. The widespread denomination of “the white cube” for the gallery addresses these hierarchies demarcating art from not-art, by the use of white space between paintings to highlight and accentuate their artistic aura. When the whiteness instead invades the image, as in the unfulfilled canvases of Cézanne, or in the overexposed images of cinema, these distinctions are blurred, as the space of the artwork resists demarcations between sets and sections.

The white page or the blank canvas are central figures in the “negative theology” of the turn-of-the-century avant-gardes mentioned above. The romantic promise of the blank canvas or the white page, with its unlimited possibilities of what shall fill it, has been sung by many a poet. But the white light of the interrupted figuration in cinema is not an empty screen, it is an image where the projective filtering is suspended. The white image in cinema reveals that all light patterns exist simultaneously, with an eradication of form and figure as a result. Gilles Deleuze also observes, in the study on Francis Bacon’s painting mentioned above, that the canvas is never empty.<sup>16)</sup> Every image that presents something new, must first erase all the clichés and ubiquitous images of our society. The painter’s and director’s work start in an erasure of the conventional, established image.

The white light is another strong visual figure of blindness. Passages of burnt-out images may convey a character’s sensation of being temporarily blinded by the light. It thus often appears in images of the sky and the sun. One of the finest works in the Norwegian film history, *Nine Lives* by Arne Skouen (1969), employs this figure in the account of a famous Norwegian resistance fighter’s escape from the Germans. Jan Bålsrud becomes snow-blind on his long escape over the mountains to Sweden, and has to depend solely on his bodily balance in the course of his escape. Images of the white carpet of snow, or of the glaring sun in the clear sky, are exempt of perspectival cues, and convey a dizzy, bodily

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16) Deleuze, p. 14.



engagement in vision. This sequence describes how the tactile is engaged with the loss of sight. But it also projects an image of a single human figure surrounded by an undifferentiated white light. It thus conveys to the spectator a disorientation caused by an excessive light. *Nine Lives* presents blinding images to the spectator, and consequently probes the ambivalent role of white light as an image of maximum light and, simultaneously, of blindness.

The hesitant movements of the human body on the white carpet of snow describe another sensorial interface to the world than the vertical coordinates of optical space. The Western culture of the image has predominantly pursued a vertical order of the image. The two-dimensional representation of space has traditionally been painted as well as exhibited in a vertical position. The art historian Rosalind Krauss finds that Jackson Pollock's action painting breaks with this system of vectorial space.<sup>17)</sup> When the canvas is placed horizontally, as in Pollock's process of dripping paint, other modes of vision take over for the registers of up and down, front and background and of perspective. Pollock's approach to painting is of course eminently tactile, but also the horizontal mode engages the body in new ways. Krauss refers to the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty's discussion of phenomenological vectors in *Phénoménologie de la perception*, where he introduces a pre-objective, basic bodily means of orientation.<sup>18)</sup> This bodily a-priori is further developed by Jean-Paul Sartre in his *Being and Nothingness*, as an intentionality that connects the subject to the world.<sup>19)</sup> For Sartre sport is one way both to investigate and to improve these bodily vectors and his primary example is the white screen of snow which erases the spatial coordinates of a landscape. In the snow, everyone is partially blind, and this engages the bodily vectors discussed by the phenomenologists.

The image of the white, blinding light of snow is also an expression of a

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17) Rosalind Krauss, "A Voyage on the North Sea"; *Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*, London: Thames & Hudson 1999, p. 26.

18) Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, London: Routledge [1962] 1978, pp. 99-103, 139-146.

19) Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, New York: Washington Square Press 1956, pp. 742-743. Quoted from Krauss, pp. 58-59, n. 18.

psychological blindness. The unknowing imposter in Alfred Hitchcock's *Spellbound* (1945) has repressed a traumatic event from his skiing vacation, and any sight of parallel patterns on a white surface causes him to panic or faint. The white field is his blind spot because the excessive light of snow is related to murder. Only in his dreams, deliciously designed by Salvador Dali in this film, is the white allowed to appear, thus repressing it into an unconscious domain of the psyche. In the account offered by the phenomenologists, the hesitant bodily actions abstracted from optical space in the white snow are not only unconscious, but even a pre-subjective originary link between the human body and the world.

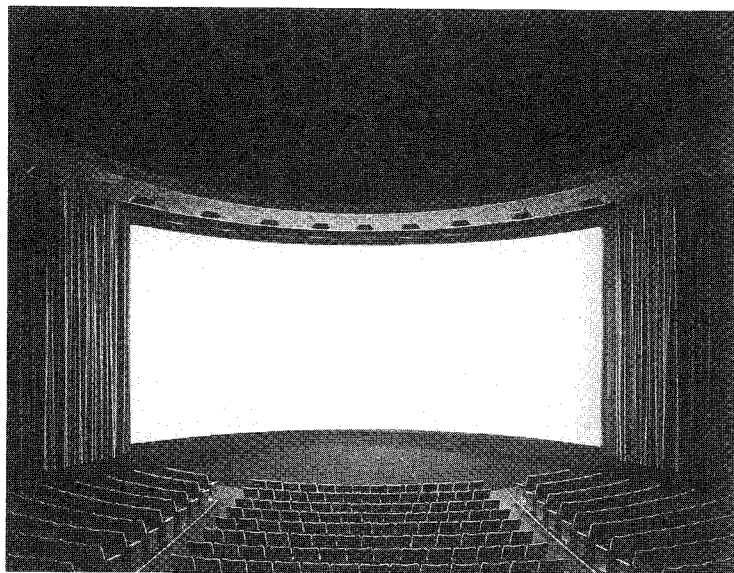
The image of hesitant, stumbling movements before the white field also describes the mediating role of the artist's body in the work of art. At least since Merleau-Ponty's discussion of "Cézanne's doubt" as the constituting artistic force of the painter's work, the interpretative movements of the hand and the body have been understood as criteria for art.<sup>20</sup> This is also the opening comment of the film *Le mystère Picasso* (Henri-Georges Clouzot, 1956), a work that sets out to understand the creative process by filming it. Picasso himself is filmed as he composes different ink drawings, under a supposition that the temporal extension of film will reveal the creative act of the genius. The spectator quite soon realises that nothing becomes clear from this diachronic depiction of painting and drawing. On the contrary, the functions of the gradually appearing forms and lines only become clear long after the fact. The artistic "doubt", the hesitant movements of the true artwork is commented upon in the introduction to the film; "We" are promised to be part of the artist's "blind struggle for balance before the engulfing white canvas". Art is created in a constitutive uncertainty of the body.

And this is where we re-encounter our opening discussion. Merleau-Ponty could not see cinema as a form of art because it is based on a mechanical exclusion of this hesitant, doubtful artistic subject. The body is not permitted to seek for firm ground in cinema, as everything is in movement.<sup>21</sup> In the white

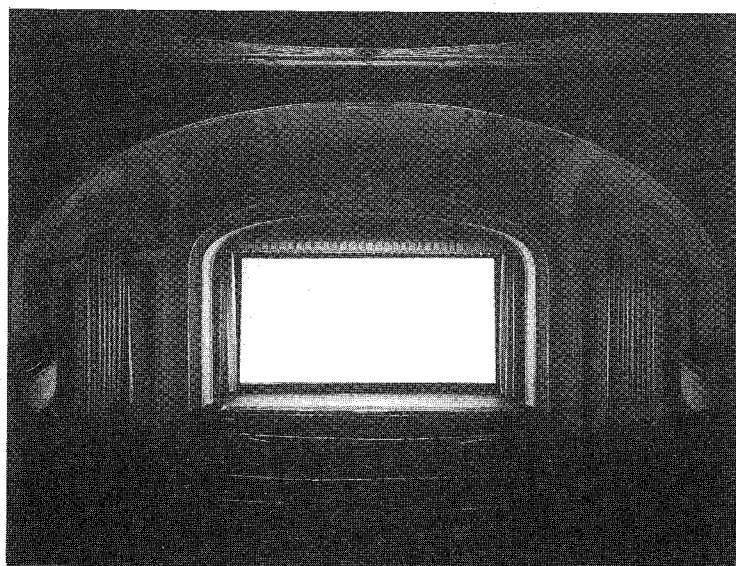
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20) Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Le doute de Cézanne" [1948], *Sens et non-sens*, Paris: Nagel 1966, pp. 15-44.

light, the mechanical movement exceeds any bounds of representation or figuration. One of the most evocative images of the abundance of light in the white image has not been made by a filmmaker, but by a Japanese photographer. SUGIMOTO Hiroshi has made a series of still photographs from cinemas where he has left the shutter open during the projection of an entire film. The result is of course a screen that is white. The white field contains every frame of the film, with the result that the abundance of information eradicates any form and figure whatsoever. The true image of a complete film is blank. This again refers to the complex state of representation and figuration in this art form most strongly bound up in representation and mimetic illusion. The excess of optical information results in an image of white noise where only a different approach to visual categories may help us to find our way. Sugimoto's photography gives us an image where each frame of film has been added on top of the preceding one, twenty-four times every second. This is perhaps, in the end, an image of the spectator's mind after seeing two hours of film? Or is it, rather, an image of the cinematographical technology's fundamental difference from our everyday perception of the world?



SUGIMOTO Hiroshi, *Cinerama Dome*.



SUGIMOTO Hiroshi, *Playhouse*.