

THE BLACK IMAGE: REVELATION OF SOUND AND SELF

Short essay by Margaux Guillemard

The idea of the silence of the oeuvre exists in every single field of art. Non-representational pieces found their expression and place in music, with for example the silent piece *4'33"* by John Cage (1948), in painting with Kazimir Malevich's *Carré noir sur fond blanc* (1913), in theatre with the play without actors *The Blind* by Denis Marleau (2002). Each piece broke down with the conventions of representation, played with the expected, and even beyond, they defied the nature of their discipline.

Through the cancellation of the element which defines its nature, the silence of representation creates a tension in the absence of the expected. Such an aesthetic choice impacts on the spectator's relationship to the oeuvre. The points of reference are therefore lost, non-existent the classical narrative is absent and the meaning intangible.

When it comes to *watching* a film, spectators experience a weave of both visuals and sounds, and this for a defined and elongated time. It is the *art of the full*,¹ thought and perceived in terms of effects of presence, density, and of multi-sensorial stimulations. It offers moments where, in immobility, the image feeds the eyes and the sound nourishes the ears.

The idea of a filmic object *without sound*, even though rare and associated with primitive cinema, is imaginable; while the idea of a film *without image* seems unconceivable. In film, the status of the image prevails; it is and has always been its main source of expression and information. While on the other side, sound mainly accompanies the image, it is most of the time used as an element of confirmation. What the visual word narrates, the soundscape suggests, reinforces. What the onscreen narrative reveals, the sonorous elements supports. The immateriality of sound makes it an invisible slave of the fixed and graspable visual world.

However, since the birth of editing (1897), sequences *without image* populate our screens, under many forms, of all lengths and in all film genres. They first shed light as simple transitional tools but promptly became powerful and independent aesthetic elements of film. Whether it is in horror films (like in *The Blair Witch Project*, Eduardo Sanchez), romantic comedies (*About Time*, Richard Curtis), anticipation films (*Her*, Spike Jonze), experimental films (in flicker-films, for example), and so on, they impacted in the reshaping of cinematic relationships. Imageless moments, by liberating the sound from the image, rebalance the usual relationship between sound and image, allowing it to become independent and attain maturity. Along with this, this kind of visual silence, by stimulating the spectator's imagination, allows a new form of relationship between spectator and author to be created, a new kind of

¹ José Moure

sensuous and internal language to be invented, and *resonant* images to be generated.

I. THE BLACK IMAGE: OMNIPRESENT AND INVISIBLE

Black is intrinsically associated with the cinematic device: from the process of the camera obscura, to the original colour of the untouched celluloid before light prints its shapes on it, the black strip that separates each celluloid photogram, the darkness of the movie theatre. Many kinds of blackness can occur during a cinematic screening, but if blackness is inherent to the medium, moments of black within the filmic object, as the result of an artistic choice, are also omnipresent.

The most well known ones are the fades (fades in, fades out, fade-to-black), brief visual intervals used as spatiotemporal transition tools. Like the *blank* pages of a book, they envelop the film by opening and closing it like the first and last page, and they create breathing spaces between the distinctive filmic chapters. But in many other films, moments of black are not used only practically to separate one narrative moment from another; they can be unique and singularly powerful moments where another kind of narrative is created.

NATURES OF BLACK

The black image can be seen, aesthetically, as the most extreme, radical form of visual silence in film. When the image is completely black, the common idea of representation is shaken: figurative image is passed over in silence, and visual movement is muted. No other colour than the absence of colour is represented, and in the context of a screening in a dark room, the screen unity harmonizes with the rest of the room, creating a dark cocoon in which the spectator is emerged.

Researching cases of such radical visual silence - by its total absence of on-screen representation - allows realising how much 'imageless' moments abound in film. Their diversity is shown in the wide range of film movements, epochs and genres in which they can be found, in the multiplicity of the nature of sounds accompanying it, and their nature as well.

Two main types of black images can be drawn: the diegetic moments of blacks, the *dark black*, from the non-diegetic ones, the *absolute black*.

On the one hand, the *dark black* sequences, in which the spectators are plunged in darkness, are directly linked to the obscurity in the story of the film. It can be expressed through effects of *embodiment*: for example, if the character faints, the spectators are plunged into the obscurity with him/her. Many examples of dark black images can be found in Gaspar Noé's film *Enter the void* (2009), where most of the time the spectator sees through the eyes of the main character, a drug addict. Here, dark black scenes are used to create a feeling of unease and vertigo, in relation to the character's physical experience, as

moments of blackness happen all along the film, every time he closes his eyes or faints.

Dark black moments in film can also be found under effects of *masking*: when a character walks in front of the camera, when a cloud passes, when the camera zooms in on something dark, hiding the light from the lens. This kind of black can be found, for example, in *Anatomy of a relationship* (Moulet, 1975) - a film in which, in the midst of the 1970's sexual revolution, a couple of young French intellectuals decide to turn off the light in order to experiment with their first 'honest and equal' sexual relationship. Twice, for twenty seconds, the spectator is plunged in the dark, under the duvet, with the characters. The dark black image in this context is born from the lack, the absence of light, in the reality of the film, through the eye of the camera. This black allows a normality of vision; it is in harmony with what happens in the diegesis. It isn't a surprising, unexplained darkness, its existence is logical and coherent with the narrative expectations.

On the other hand, the *absolute black* is the kind of black that proudly assumes its nature. This black goes beyond functional (*fade to black*) and diegetic (*dark black*) uses. Its practice is closer to minimalist art in that it incarnates an idea, a concept, a symbol. Its onscreen appearance isn't expected nor explainable regarding the narrative. It is independent, lasts in time, and made to be explicitly visible.

The absolute black acts as a refusal of the figurative image and of representation. Here, blackness is detached from the visual story and incarnates the irrepresentable nature of the scene, where no image can portray its essence better than the absence of image itself. The enigma around its existence can consequently profoundly upset our codes of representation.

Both kinds of black image can be found in all cinematic genres, and are used for different reasons. *The Blair Witch project*, *Laurence Anyways* and *Belleville Baby* will be the three films which will concisely be used to explore the phenomenological impact of the black image on the spectator.

II. THE DARK BLACK/ A GYMNASTIC OF THE MIND

Because imagining can be worst than seeing, it is common to find dark blacks in horror films. In *The Blair Witch Project*, a powerful marriage between dark sequences and sound is used to enhance suspense, fear, horror. In this horror movie -retracing a mysterious investigation in a forest by three students, shot with a subjective handheld camera, without additional lighting-, the creatures attack their victims at night, in the obscurity of the forest. However, if they are masked by the darkness, the creatures are audible. This combination of hidden identity, black images and horrific sounds of unknown origin forces the characters and spectator to be regardful to the soundscape, to use their power of deduction and imagination in order to decode the sounds, and to construct their own idea of what the creatures might be, where they are located, if they might attack or not. Sound becomes then the first element of information and

appreciation of the story, and darkness the place for the sudden emergence of the unknown. Under this constant visual tension, the spectator listens to all sounds in a capacity of fearful suspicion, anticipation and self- protection.

This use of black images suggests that imagining is worse and more terrifying than seeing, as this visual silence does not draw the borders of the horror and the spectator's imagination of the horror becomes limitless. By being part of the process of the construction of the images, the spectator revisits her own fears and her emotional responses potentially inscribe themselves more profoundly and persist for longer in her unconscious. It offers a spatio-temporal frame within which the spectator's personal unconscious fears and phobias are tapped; from this, terrifying personal images are generated and potentially revisited, camping out in the spectator's psyche.

Other examples of dark black can be found in comedies, thrillers, documentaries, sci-fi films. Each time, the choice of the combination black image and sound unveils the power of suggestion, and enhances the effects of the genre (comical, horror, etc.). And it demonstrates that by calling for the spectator's imagination and capacity of inference, by inviting her to participate and letting her appropriate herself the visual representation, the intensity of the experience is reinforced.

III. THE ABSOLUTE BLACK: MEDDLING WITH THE ABSTRACTION

Concerning the absolute black, it is common to find cases in experimental movies like flicker films - films made of rapid successions of photograms chosen for the power of their contrast, for example between positive and negative, figuration and abstraction - or in most Lettrist films, with for example Guy Debord's *Hurlements en Faveur de Sade*, in which half of the film is both silent visually and sound-wise.

Often the absolute black is a political gesture, acting as a refusal of classical representational rules. It is a black against figuration, visual representation and the supremacy of images and what they imply. It subverts the spectator's expectations and reshapes her approach to cinema, disturbing her viewing experience and the way she looks at things and people, by creating an abstract world where no visual judgement has been fixed yet.

In Xavier Dolan's *Laurence Anyways*, we follow the story of an accomplished novelist and literature teacher who reveals, in the black opening sequence, his desire to become his true-self: a woman. By hiding the speakers from sight, Dolan casts doubt on the character's gender and raises the possibility of erroneous presumptions of the sex of the character. By opening the film with visual silence and generating a mystery around the identity of the characters, Dolan valorises Laurence's words and negates the importance of her physical appearance.

The use of absolute black is part of a game between figuration and non-figuration to give more importance to a purpose than an image, and potentially

reshape the spectator's perception of the subject matter of the film. Dolan engages the spectator from the start, pulling her close to the voice of the character, and putting her on the side of the trans-woman. The black is used to shape how the spectator looks at people that are normally considered marginal. What is important is not the *person* behind these words, but the *idea* behind them; not *who* says what but *what* is said; not the *medium* but the *message*.

But also, the black image can be a material in which the spectator can meddle.

In the documentary essay film *Belleville Baby*, Mia Engberg transposes the phone conversations she had with Vincent, a Parisian gangster who she lived a passionate love story with in her twenties. The film is like a large black canvas not entirely painted by the filmmaker, a sort of dark backdrop on which the director pinned a few visual reminiscences from both her past and her more recent life, without ever distinctly representing Vincent or her on screen. The voices of the characters, their words, silences, thoughts, remembrances, are the key elements of the film; they guide the spectator throughout the film- essay and establish an abstract world located somewhere unknown, or maybe nowhere.

The wide space left for interpretation by the abstract and visual void allows the spectator to interfere with the film. Thanks to evocations of the memories of the characters ("*The very first one*" and later "*the very last one*"), their discussions on their past relationship ("*Do you remember the small room under the roofs?*") and what they have become since, the spectator is encouraged to gradually create her own representation of those ghostly characters but also identify with the universality of the stories of this man and woman. They could be anyone, they could be us.

A singular intimacy is created between the film and the audience, the sound and the spectator. To fill the visual gaps left by the absence of representation, the spectator is invited, thanks to the sonorous evocations, to enter her internal world of personal stories and pick up ages from her own experiences. The film becomes a fluid and flexible texture within which the spectator can, by using the sounds as starting points for a journey inside her memories, walk freely through her imagination, projecting her own images, and potentially herself, on screen.

IV. A NEW FILMIC FORM

In *Film Theory: an introduction through the senses*, Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener posed that "Cinema seems poised to leave behind its function as a medium (for the representation of reality) in order to become a life form (and thus a reality in its own right)."

EQUALITY BETWEEN AUTHOR AND SPECTATOR

The aesthetic choice of visual silence rebalances the relationship between the author and the spectator; the fact that one dimension of the film (the figurative visual representation) is 'missing' or kept untouched creates a space of equality between them. There is no 'truth' of the image; the filmmaker does

not dictate his or her own perception of the scene to the spectator. He makes it an enigma, allowing the spectator to seize the scene.

By taking the radical risk of muting the image, he proves his belief in the intellectual capacities and creative talents of his spectator. The author seems to be telling his spectator two things: firstly, that visual representation in cinema is not essential to appreciate a film, and secondly that she can, during the screening, be the creator of her own meaning and visual representation. The relationship between the truth of the film (and of the artist) and that of the spectator is consequently less tense and patronising. With the black image, their relationship is not unidirectional, but cyclic, forged out of their collaboration. Film and spectator are made inseparable, they are two parts of an independent and dynamic system, in which both elements need the other to make the whole and create meaning.

By offering a representational enigma whose visual meaning will have to be solved by the spectator, the combination of black image and sound shifts the constrained and relatively passive position of the spectator away from images. The artist behind the aesthetic choice of this visual silence withdraws to invite the spectator to participate in a creative adventure and share the artistic responsibility.

In the case of black sequence in cinema, I see the artist as both the 'architect' of a building and of the sound that traverses it; the sound as the 'guide' of the visit, and the spectator as the 'visitor' of the building. The artist-architect sets a structure, a space and time within which the spectator-visitor will explore the building. But the spectator's hand isn't being held by the artist, telling her what to look at or not, or what is in the frame and what isn't. The visit is guided by the sound, which will unconsciously orientate the spectators, attracting them to take one door or another.

But in this architecture there is no 'good' or 'bad' path. Each spectator-visitor is free to go in any direction, enter any door, or look out of any windows. The spectator-visitor constructs her own mental architecture within the building, creating infinite singular paths within the space and time of the visit of the building.

EMANCIPATION OF SOUND, IN ITS DEPTH AND NECESSITY

In the architecture of black images, sound holds an important position. It becomes a rich and complex element that is fundamental to the spectator's cinematic experience. First because sound is no longer "a stowaway which always quietly acts in favour of the image and the whole piece."; with the silence of the image, sound becomes the narrative. It abandons its status as the element of confirmation of the image to become an independent material around which the scene will be created. Without forcing the spectator, it guides her gently and provides her with the information she needs to comprehend the architectural scene in the dark; it becomes the material that triggers an introspective exploration within the black scene.

The sound theorist Daniel Deshays wrote, "If the image knows how to cut the space up to circulate the sight and hold the narrative strongly, sound hasn't taken the plunge yet." Thanks to the use of those long visual silences, sound can finally "take the plunge". It is no longer discreetly 'in favour of the image', but becomes a deep and complex independent texture. This sonorous complexity can be found in the diversity of the nature of sound (develop?). In the context of such visual silence, sound sees its apogee and emancipation. Freed from the visual authority of the image, its qualities, notability and necessity are held up.

However, the alliance of the black screen and rich sound texture is not only beneficial to the rebalancing of the relationship between author and spectator, and of the relationship between sound and image. By stimulating the spectator's intellect and creativity, it offers to her another audio-visual approach to the film, inviting her to create new kinds of cinematic images: the resonant images.

RESONANT IMAGES: ENVISIONING THE SOUNDS

According to the film theorist Jacques Aumont, the image and its frame limit the spectator's imagination. He says: "The spectator is surrounded, like imprisoned: her gaze embraces the whole space, but that space is finite, arrested, limited." The black image in a dark room breaks down the frame and softens the visual imbalance between the lit screen and the dark room. And with the silence of the image and of the frame, the spectator's gaze isn't limited, but enlarged; and the space of representation soars with the visual thoughts of the spectator. This allows another kind of image to emerge within the dark room: resonant images internally generated by the spectators.

What distinguish the figurative cinematic images from the sound images are their location, their visual limitation, and their construction. Figurative images are fixed representations from the film projected on-screen. In an instant, they create a representation of something and dictate what should be seen by the spectator. While, on the other side, resonant images, whose emergence are allowed thanks to the absence of a figurative image on screen, are inner visual representations generated within the spectator's unconscious thanks to the combination of visual silence and sound narrative. These images are constructed as a reaction to the visual silence to fill the void on screen; they are inspired and generated gradually thanks to the aural information. While the screen is silent, the spectator draws the contours of the sound's images a little at a time through a process of internalisation and interpretation of the sound, in a space where the look can freely create. Those sounds echo within the spectator's imagination and generate a personal representation of the sound story. Their representation is not fixed, complete or stable; these images appear as soon as the sound resonates, and can also disappear as soon as the representational sound goes silent.

Resonant images depend on each spectator's experiences, capacity of inference, creativity, imagination, and memories. The spectator is perceptively surrounded by darkness, but thanks to the guidance of sound, she creates her

own cinematic journey. As a radical form of art, this absence of image opens a space and a time for the echo of silence (the story, the meaning, the metaphor the spectator will have injected) to resonate within the spectator. This journey is personal, and because sounds and words provoke something different within each spectator, an infinite number of resonant images are created within the cinema space. Thanks to this kind of visual silence, the film suddenly becomes less rigid, more malleable, fragile, and human. Within the darkness, the film asks for the spectator's participation and creativity to be nourished and singularly completed.

DOUBLE PROJECTION

If the black image provokes the creation of a new kind of images, the resonant images, these images also find a 'new kind of screen'. There are now multiples spaces of projection within the dark room: the cinema screen, and the 'screens' within each spectator. This visual silence creates a double projection within the screening space whereby the spectator becomes the projector of her own images, which are in turn a reflection of her own projections (desires, fears, memories, etc.). A friend of Marguerite Duras one day wrote to her: "You used to say: 'When we read, we find ourselves, and when we go to the cinema, we lose ourselves.' but when we see your films, we don't get lost. It is in the dark that we find ourselves."

Blackness acts like a margin of cinematic freedom so the spectator can be found alone with herself. Cinematic black images are like a fluid and infinite texture of endless possibility, walking everywhere in the cinematic universe, allowing the spectator to ease her way, and take her place in the film. The spectator gets lost first in the darkness of the room in order to better find herself in her inner being.

V. SUMMARY

Cinema, in all senses, would benefit from an evolution towards more ubiquitous, numerous, and longer black silences. It would allow the spectator to have a different relationship with images that is less distant and passive, at a time where all forms of screens and images take a significant place in our daily life. This visual silence offers a unique counter-point against this visual abundance which lessens our dependence on images within a cinematic framework. By placing more importance on silent images, spectators will hopefully finally find within the dark room an intimate space for a singular, creative, active, personal experience that is reality in its own right, far away from the profusion of realistic and figurative representations.

The proliferation and lengthening of moments of black in all genres contribute to this reshaping of film into a life form. An imageless cinema is the cinema of suggestion, uncertainty, felt experience and fragility because it plays with the senses of the spectator, recalls for her memories and allows her to create personal images.