

I See A Darkness

"Depth is the location of the struggle, which sometimes draws space into the bottomlessness of a black hole and sometimes draws it towards the light"¹.

Let There Be Light

Where there is light, there shall be knowledge: a formula wizened by age and wrinkled by repetition, yet a formula that retains enough vitality to continue to influence colloquial speech and philosophical discourse. The roots of the association between light and knowledge are buried deep within the fertile soil of Attic Greece, where "we find ... what we've always taken as a metaphor of vision, the Socratic myth of the cave (dark room) ... where those (who have been first in everything) must be brought to their term, forcing them to face the light-giving source ... to contemplate the real which is the invisible."² These flickering flames of insight that are supposed to have illuminated the way out of the caves of ignorance, roared into bright intensity in the radical reconfigurations of eighteenth century European society that constitute that evocatively named project, the Enlightenment.

In parallel to the semantic doubling of illumination as both knowledge and light, those terms which betray a connection to the cave and the unlit world undergo a corollary denigration. Thus the shadowy, the dim, the obscure, the murky, the dark and, most significantly, the black become articulated as lack and absence. The claim that "[b]lackness would appear to be a rock of negativity: from Sanskrit to ancient Greek to modern European languages, blackness is associated with dirt, degradation and impurity"³ expresses something of this socio-linguistic process but the negativity of darkness exceeds simple imputations of generic contamination to ultimately define the ignorant and the unknown. Thus we hear of reasoning rejected as obscure, individuals identified as dim-witted, analyses criticised as unilluminating or images dismissed as murky or, as we will hear, opaque.

Camera Obscura

Given the epistemological depth and cultural breadth of the knowledge/light coupling within the European context, it should come as no surprise that the historical development of photography bears the scars of its influence. Indeed, according to Richard Dyer, "[t]he aesthetic technology of photography, as it has been invented, refined and elaborated ... produced both an astonishing set of technologies of light and certain fundamental philosophical, scientific and aesthetic perceptions of the nature of light"⁴.

The optical device of the camera obscura simultaneously occupied a significant position in the technical genealogy of photography and the conceptual evolution of Enlightenment thought. In this latter respect, philosopher John Locke was by no means unique in the eighteenth century in deploying the camera obscura as an analogue for human cognition and comprehension. "For, methinks, the understanding is not much unlike a closet wholly shut from light, with only some little opening left ... to let in external visible resemblances ... Would the pictures coming into such a dark room but stay there and lie so orderly as to be found upon occasion it would very much resemble the understanding of man"⁵. Locke's work - like that of many of his contemporaries - advanced a notion of subjectivity that positioned an observer within a darkened interior of ignorance until brightness from outside pierced the gloom in the form of experience and education.

¹ Gilles Deleuze *Cinema 1: The Movement Image* (London: Athlone Press, 1992) p. 111

² Paul Virilio *The Aesthetics of Disappearance* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1991) p. 26

³ Christopher L. Miller *Blank Darkness: Africanist Discourse in French* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1985) p. 29

⁴ Richard Dyer *White* (London: Routledge, 1997) p. 103

⁵ John Locke *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* II, xi, 17, cited in Jonathan Crary *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (London: MIT Press, 1992) p. 43

The early Enlightenment account of subjectivity - as passive, stable and obedient - could not be sustained into modernity, where "[a] more adaptable, autonomous and productive observer was needed in both discourse and practice - to conform to the new functions of the body and to a vast proliferation of indifferent and convertible signs and images"⁶.

The Dark Stuff

If the camera obscura once operated symbolically to valorise knowledge as light, a more recent figure provides a resonant image that is orientated in a different direction. For philosophers like Paul Virilio and Jean Baudrillard as much as for our vernacular vocabulary, the figure of the black hole stands for the implosion of knowledge, again represented by light, but light which cannot escape the "concentration of matter which has a gravitational field strong enough to curve spacetime completely round upon itself"⁷.

Given its role as metaphor for reason at the point of exhaustion, it is appropriate that this cosmological phenomenon is itself surrounded in confusion. "As recently as the early 1970's black holes were still considered theoretical curiosities, not taken seriously (Einstein himself thought that black holes were 'a blemish to be removed from his theory by a better mathematical formulation')"⁸. Today, astronomers can still proclaim "[w]e don't really know at all what the dark stuff is. We don't know very well how much of it there might be. The more we observe, the more doubts are raised"⁹.

Moreover, scientific speculation on the character of black holes specifically addresses their relation to the visible intelligibility of events, where the process by which "singular ends to collapsing objects are always shrouded in barriers ... is known as the hypothesis of *cosmic censorship*"¹⁰. Nor has scientific speculation ignored the potential epistemological repercussions. Indeed, one approach has argued that "[t]he black-hole universe certainly affects the way we can understand life and ourselves. It holds out little hope for immortality, but great opportunities to expand our vision of the world during this life ... They have further relevance to man's quest for meaning when faced with the infinite "¹¹.

Hello Darkness, My Old Friend

The camera obscura and the black hole figuratively frame the enterprise of knowledge; one constitutes a progressive model of knowledge as light dispelling the darkness of ignorance, the other a dissipative one in which darkness cumulatively subsumes light beyond the reach of visibility. At this point, artistic practices that renegotiate an aesthetics of light attract particular significance, not least when darkness stands for a loss of meaning.

In Lawrence Sterne's paraliterary endeavour, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*, the notorious black page that interrupts the text, readable as a memento mori for Yorick's death, becomes a powerful evocation against conventional legibility. Similarly, Thomas De Quincey's opium reveries condense the critical opposition of the Romantics to the illuminating pretensions of their Enlightenment forebears, where "to descend, not metaphorically, but literally, to descend, into chasms and sunless abysses, depths below depths ... the state of gloom which attended these gorgeous spectacles, amounting at least to utter darkness ... cannot be approached by words ... the sense of space, and in the end, the sense of time were both powerfully affected"¹². A similar strategic imperative seems to animate Ad Reinhardt's black square paintings in the 1960's, in which a "clearly defined object, independent and separate from all other objects and circumstances, in which we cannot see whatever we choose or make of it anything we want,

⁶ Jonathan Crary op cit. p. 149

⁷ John Gribbin *Companion to the Cosmos* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1996) p. 60

⁸ John Horgan *The End of Science* (London: Abacus, 1998) p. 111

⁹ Astronomer Vera Rubin quoted in Philip and Phylis Morrison *The Ring of Truth: An Inquiry into How We Know What We Know* (New York: Random House, 1987) p. 262

¹⁰ Jayant V. Narlikar *From Black Clouds to Black Holes* (Singapore: World Scientific, 1995) p. 139

¹¹ John Taylor *Black Holes: The End of the Universe?* (London: Souvenir Press, 1973) p. 166 and p. 162

¹² Thomas De Quincey *The Pleasures and Pains of Opium* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1995) p. 41

whose meaning is not detachable or translatable. A free, unmanipulated and unmanipulatable, useless, unmarketable, irreducible, unphotographable, unreproducible, inexplicable icon"¹³.

As Reinhardt's explanation insinuates, the incorporation of elements of darkness can register a certain opacity into the visual field, dislocating images from the reductive process of illuminating analysis according to an index of representation. This conjecture suggests the feasibility of an opaque photography outside the conventional documentaries of light that may be correlated with the opaque literature mobilised by Ronald Sukenick, Arthur Saltzman and Ian Wallace.

In opaque literature, "the outlines ... are blurred, out-of-focus, or else the circumspection of the symbol is so sharp that there is no other meaning than the shape and the context of the symbol itself; its permutations through space implying concepts or ideas about the act of reading in its own right instead of as a function of understanding"¹⁴. By extension, in opaque photography, "[t]he spectator would approach art as he does a landscape. A landscape doesn't demand from a spectator his 'understanding', his imputations of significance, his anxieties and sympathies; it demands rather, his absence, that he not add anything to it"¹⁵.

With Edgar Martins' *Black Holes and Other Inconsistencies*, we encounter this unsettling landscape of opacity. The spectator is confronted by images that at once solicit our scrutiny yet simultaneously stir up an "unconscious spirit, lost in darkness, [where] light which has become opaque, *lumen opacatum*"¹⁶ and where meaning is rendered fugitive. We have travelled far from the enlightening camera obscura and even Roland Barthes' "*camera lucida*"¹⁷. Yet we have not been fully absorbed into the 'cosmic censorship' of the black hole, where, beyond the 'event horizon', no light could ever escape, no meaning would be amenable. Edgar Martins' photographs evoke for me a disturbing elegy of an exhausted reason where meaning flickers at the shadowy threshold of visibility just before it succumbs to that unlit finality where the "[s]ilence of the image ... requires (or should require!) no commentary. But silence of the object, too, which photography wrests from the thunderous context of the real world"¹⁸.

Angus Carlyle
2002

(first published in 'Black Holes & Other Inconsistencies, Edgar Martins, The Moth House 2002)

¹³ Ad Reinhardt "The Black Square Paintings" in ed. Barbara Rose *Art as Art: The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1991) p. 83

¹⁴ Ian Wallace "Literature - Transparent and Opaque" *The Avant Garde Tradition in Literature* in ed. Richard Kostelantz (Buffalo, New York: Prometheus, 1982) p. 343

¹⁵ Susan Sontag "The Aesthetics of Silence", *Styles of Radical Will* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1969) p. 16

¹⁶ Gilles Deleuze *Cinema 1: The Movement Image* (London: Athlone Press, 1992) pp. 50 - 51

¹⁷ Roland Barthes *Camera Lucida* (London: Vintage, 1982) p. 106

¹⁸ Jean Baudrillard *The Perfect Crime* (London: Verso, 1996) p. 86