

# The Credibility of Presence and the Reality of Existence

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I will try to reflect on the fact that with the new media/virtual environments is possible today to argue that the common characteristics of emerging technologies and virtual environments are the elimination of duration - the collapse of time into real time. The later is interchanged with the credibility of presence which is more and more substituting the reality of existence. A specific articulation of this intersection between virtual environments and specific regimes of visibility /reality of presence/ producing a discrete telepresence in the world is in my opinion realized in the feature film *Blue* directed by the late film director Derek Jarman in 1993.

In the film *Blue* for 75 minutes a blue screen is shown in front of the spectator. It is the sole image throughout the film, which provides a canvas for the audience, listening to evocative words, music and sounds. There are various ways of displaying the text in the film: inner speech, repetitious preoccupying phrases, or unconscious spoken thoughts.<sup>(1)</sup> My interest lies not in a sociological reading or reinterpretation of the text in the film, but in the representational system superimposing and depicting the text in the film on the blue coloured canvas.<sup>(2)</sup>

In Jarman's film the institution of the subject within the visible is presented by the disembodied voice of an ill person who is deliriously speaking throughout the film, anchoring the disease into the field of discourse.

People afflicted with AIDS show horrible visual signs of bodily deterioration: the disintegration of the skin,

sarcomas, blindness and the degeneration of the body as a whole. Jarman has incorporated into the film 'Blue' his personal blindness, a consequence of AIDS. Jarman chooses to depict this with a blue canvas; the zero degree of representation. Jarman moved from the disintegration of film structure to that of the viewer's sight. The institution of the subject suffering with AIDS within the visible is carried out by the absence of a 'truly sick body'. Moreover, Derek Jarman not only refused to reiterate the conventional pieties surrounding representations of an HIV positive person, but brought to light (paraphrasing Sally Stein) the hidden agendas inscribed in the particular mode of representation of our culture and times.<sup>(3)</sup> In the film 'Blue' this is carried out more so with the strategically incorporated logic of the visualization of new media and the regime of visibility carried out by new media technologies, rather than the medium itself: film.

Jarman successfully conveys the complexities underpinning information systems and various subject positions with the way in which meaning and identities are constructed and endlessly re-negotiated. Using the instauration of blindness in the film as the zero degree of representation, Jarman subverts some of the basic parameters of the new paradigm of visibility produced by new technology and the position of the eyewitness within it. Today all methods of proving a statement depend on technological instruments and tools, and the constitution of scientific 'truth' is, to a profound degree, mediated by technology.<sup>(4)</sup>

Pragmatic acceptance of axioms and specific methods of proof have entered a variety of sciences. Scientific statements have to be effectuated and are thus decisively mediated by technology. Pragmatic performativity is the post-modern sense of truth.<sup>(5)</sup> Lyotard emphasizes

repeatedly the increase of scientific knowledge through its mediation with technology. The whole process is thus seeing through its mediation through technology.<sup>(6)</sup>

Let me clarify this process of "seeing through its mediation through technology" by returning for a moment to photography - summarizing its inner principle by relying on Paul Virilio (despite the fact that he was not referring to photography!). "Everything I see is in principle within my reach, at least within reach of my sight, marked on the map of the 'I can'."<sup>(7)</sup> Photography enables the encoding of a topographical memory by establishing a dialectical loop between seeing and mapping. As Virilio claims, it is possible to speak of generations of vision and even of visual heredity from one generation to the next. However, following Virilio<sup>(8)</sup> the perception developed by new media and technologies (which is called the 'logistics of perception'), destroyed these earlier modes of representation preserved in the 'I can' of seeing. The logistics of perception inaugurates the production of a vision machine and the possibility of achieving sightless vision, whereby a video camera or virtual technology would be controlled by a computer. Today new media apparatuses (from virtual reality to cyberspace) confer upon us a whole range of visual prosthetics which confront us with an ever-changing positioning of the subject. Changes within our bodies as well as a systematic 'production' of blindness, and an absence of certainty within the visibility of our world. As Virilio would say, the bulk of what I see is no longer within my reach. We have to ask ourselves: What does one see when one's eyes, depending on such instruments, are reduced to a state of rigid and practically invariable structural immobility? However, this is only one side of the paradigm of new media technology. On the other side, in the 20th century, the sciences are increasingly permeated with technology. "Technological instruments and apparatuses hold a central role within scientific research processes. These technological tools, however, cost huge amounts of money. Consequently, the state and political institutions function as important and decisive mediators in the accomplishment of scientific knowledge. The process of knowledge is increasingly judged in terms of input (quantity) and output (quality). Science is linked to the system of political power."<sup>(9)</sup>

The blindness of the naked human eye is thus paradoxically reinforced by the growing tendency of

using increasingly sophisticated electronic technologies, not only in science, but also in the leading ideological and repressive state apparatuses (particularly within the legal system and the police). Virilio is speaking of hyper-realist representational models, within the police and legal systems, to the extent that human witnesses are losing their credibility: the human eye no longer remains an eyewitness. On the one side of the paradigm of new media technology we are witnessing the systematic production of blindness, and on the other, the frightening hyper-realism of a system of total visibility, which is particularly reinforced in legal and police procedures. The tendency of the leading scopic regime of new media technologies is to produce blindness while, simultaneously, creating a whole range of techniques to produce the credibility of the presence of objects and humans, instead of trying to demonstrate their real existence. Today this latter process can be illustrated by military and espionage strategies: "It is more vital to trick the enemy about the virtuality of the missile's passage, about the very credibility of its presence, than to confuse him about the reality of its existence".<sup>(10)</sup>

These main features which are currently produced by new media technology (blindness of the natural human eye, hyper-realism in legal and police procedures and a whole range of techniques for producing the credibility of the presence of objects, humans, etc.) are strategically incorporated and subverted in the film 'Blue'. With the instauration of blindness in the film via the blue canvas as the zero degree of representation Jarman emphasizes this duality. The absence of the sick body and, last but not least, of any physical body in the film, creates the illusion of total disembodiment, and is paradoxically a subversive answer to the constant production of disembodiment through new technologies.

The created illusion of disembodiment thus raises the question, "How do we put bodies back into the picture?"<sup>(11)</sup> The answer is - as juridical presence! The body of the HIV infected person, an 'object' already lost, is shaped by its very absence. On the other hand, with the text heard throughout the film, which is so detailed in existential, medical and legal particularities about the post-modern condition of persons suffering from HIV, a clear demand is made for the juridical presence and the rights of those afflicted with AIDS within the structures of power in contemporary society. Through this relationship between the logic of representation of new

technologies and media and the representation of AIDS, it is therefore possible to elaborate a different logic of representations of absence/presence as were previously proposed in the case of hysteria. Instead of physical presence and juridical absence, physical absence and legal presence is produced. Physical absence and legal presence, as proposed by Jarman, subvert the logic of a mass-produced simulated presence on the one side, and a mass blindness of the 'natural' human eye on the other.

Looking to the binary pair of presence/absence in connection with the film 'Blue' and with the new media/virtual environments, it is also possible to argue that the common characteristics of emerging technologies and virtual environments are the elimination of duration: the collapse of time into real time. In the film *Blue* these characteristics serve as reminders of the dimension of time, which as Paul Virilio suggests, is under siege by real time technologies: "They kill 'present' time by isolating its presence here and now for the sake of another commutative space that is no longer composed of our 'concrete presence' in the world, but of a 'discrete telepresence' whose enigma remains forever intact".<sup>(12)</sup>

If a "bounded image is seen from a distance . . . it exists unto itself and offers a perceptual experience. Images that implicate the viewer in some way, however, as is the case with interactive or immersive media, are unbounded. They require experiential cognition. The latter puts the critical viewer in an untenable position: one must assimilate an image to comprehend it, yet it must also be dismantled in order to reflect upon it."<sup>(13)</sup> For Druckrey the discursive operations information systems in the late 20th Century as proffered through cyberspace are characterized by going beyond identity and meaning formations to provide a catalyst for agency and therefore empowerment. The creative potential of different visual systems is represented through an interface or 'connections'.<sup>(14)</sup>

Meaning and phenomenology, representation and perception are merged. The moment of reading an image within such a system has the effect "not as a navigation of the image, but of a lived moment, so that the efficacy of an image is equal to the experience of it".<sup>(15)</sup> Thus it is the lived moment of being connected which is charged with possibilities. "It is the passion of this lived moment of connection between the user, part of the real world

and the controlled system of predictable outcomes encoded into the software of the symbolic, accessed through the hardware, which offers scope for disruptive nihilistic behaviour."<sup>(16)</sup> The film 'Blue' introduces these questions of the re-examination of the human body experientiality in an age of virtuality which is concerned with the apparent de-materialization of experience. Looking in more detail at the reception of the blue canvas, we can argue that it is framed as a film screen, but due to its insistent and suspended immateriality, which lasts for more than an hour, the blue canvas functions as an immersive spatial container, which slowly forces the viewer into a specific interactivity, an immersion of sight and body. The film confirms Druckrey's statement regarding the reception of the cinematic image by the viewer that has not only the effect of navigation by the image, but of a lived moment. The effect of the image is an experience of the encounter not simply with the blue space, but with a person who is dying of AIDS, embodied through his proper experientiality within the blue canvas in front of us. This question can be rephrased to ask: How does this specific practice of text/image relate to society? The practical dimension is found in emphasizing the practical impact which includes, first and foremost, a strengthening of experience centered in personal subjectivity. There is a demand for a 'subjectivity' which perceives the contradictions within the social body because this subjectivity explores its own desires and drives.<sup>(17)</sup>

The implications of this shift to the experiential from the perceptual reception of the image can be drawn from Gianni Vattimo's juxtapositioning of Walter Benjamin and Martin Heidegger. Vattimo tried to explain the essence of Benjamin's essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1936) through Heidegger's 'The Origin of the Work of Art' (1936), emphasizing that both accentuate the disorientation in the contemporary perceptions of art as the direct result of contemporary art works. For Heidegger as well as for Benjamin, the essence of technology is the manipulation of all things. Technology expresses simultaneously the completion and the end of metaphysics. Benjamin as seen through Heidegger, and Heidegger interpreted via Benjamin, offers new aesthetic concepts that can and will take on the challenges of a post-modern society, which is a society of mass media conglomeration.

Benjamin purportedly links the experience of art within the media society, with the experience of a 'shock', while Heidegger makes use of the term 'stoss' (translating to 'blow'). 'Shock' and 'Stoss' mirror the urbanites nervous and intellectual fluctuations, inconstancies and hypersensitivity. Vattimo argues that in aesthetics a shift from the focus on work to a focus on experience must occur.<sup>(18)</sup> This is just what we are witnessing in the film 'Blue'. Jarman's dismantling of the image, resulting in it's zero point, causes an overlapping of the experience of a person with AIDS with the viewer's experience of immersion in the blue canvas. Art offers a privileged position for the experience of an alternative countryside, wilderness or terrain.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. The text in the film is about AIDS, about dying from AIDS and the inner feelings of a sick person who knows exactly that his/her end is near. On the one hand, Jarman develops a strong critique about the hospitalization process of a person suffering from AIDS, about the amount of drugs needed to slow down not the disease but the process of dying, and, last but not least, about the whole social system (medical, social and legal) which is unfavourable to persons affected by AIDS. Jarman meticulously describes the whole personal drama of a sick person, especially the loss of vision and of becoming blind: "My retina is a distant planet. I played this scenario for the last six years. ... My vision will never come back... The virus rages, I have no friends now. I lost the sight... I shall not win the battle with the virus..." – Citation from the film Blue.
2. Jarman: "I am helpless. I can't see him. Just the sound. In the pandemonium of the image I present you the universe of blue". – Citation from the film Blue.
3. Cf. Sally Stein, 'Making Connections With The Camera: Photography and Social Mobility in the Career of Jacob Riis', in *Afterimage*, Vol. 10, No. 10, (May 1983), p.14.
4. Cf. Paetzold, 'Definitions of the Postmodern Status of Knowledge', in Heinz Paetzold, *The Discourse of the Postmodern and the Discourse of the Avant-Garde*, Jan van Eyck Akademie, Maastricht 1994, op. cit., pp. 14-21.
5. Ibid, p. 16.
6. Cf. Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1984, pp. 42-52.
7. Paul Virilio, *Vision Machine*, British Film Institute and Indiana University Press, London and Bloomington, Indiana 1994, p. 7.
8. Cf. Ibid., Chapters 1 and 2.
9. Paetzold, op. cit., p.15.
10. Cf. Virilio, op. cit., pp. 43-44.
11. Cf. N. Katherine Hayles, 'Embodied Virtuality: Or How to Put Bodies Back into the Picture', in Mary Anne Moser and Douglas MacLoed (Eds.), *Immersed in Technology: Art and Virtual Environments*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. and London 1996, p. 4.
12. Paul Virilio, 'The Third Interval: A Critical Transition', in Verena Andermatt Conley (Ed.), *Rethinking Technologies*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1993, p. 4.
13. Timothy Druckrey, 'The Transient Image', in *A Symposium on the Changing Status of the Image*, Banff, Canada, November 4 and 5, 1994, quoted in Mary Anne Moser's Introduction to *Immersed in Technology: Art and Virtual Environments*, p. XVIII.
14. I am referring here to Helen Cadwallader's report and evaluation of the presentation of Timothy Druckrey's paper 'Crash, Crisis, Containment and Cyberia' given at the 5th International Conference on Cyberspace, Cyberconf, Madrid, June 1996, in Helen Cadwallader, '5th International Conference on Cyberspace', in *Mute*, No. 6, London 1996, p. 4.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Cf. Paetzold, op. cit., p. 63.
18. Cf. Gianni Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, Oxford University Press, Cambridge and Oxford 1992, p. 58. For a helpful account on this see Paetzold, 'Vattimo and the 'Weak' Being', in Paetzold, op. cit., p. 44-45