

## John Smith's *The Black Tower*: Close-Up Views of What Cannot Be Shown

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After the title *The Black Tower* has scrolled through the screen (its appearance is accompanied by a slowly-building hissing noise), the picture initially remains black. In a sober voice, a man begins to tell a story:

“I first noticed it in spring last year—it must have been early April.”

Now we hear birds chirping and street noise in the background. The voice continues:

“I remember it well—it was a Saturday morning and I’d been to the corner shop to buy some food for a fried breakfast. For some reason the shop was closed so I decided to cut through a back-street to the supermarket on the High Road. It was a bright morning but most of the street was still in shadow—I found



myself walking very close to the front walls and hedges in order to expose my face to the thin strip of warm sunlight that ran the length of the street.”

Finally, the first picture appears: a dense black shape looms behind a terrace of typical London houses.

“It was from here that I first saw it, its crest protruding over the roofs on the other side of the road. Surprised that I hadn’t noticed it before, I wondered what it was and then forgot about it for several weeks.”

The picture disappears, we are plunged back into darkness—until, after about half a minute, the next picture is shown, another motionless shot: now we see the tower between two apartment blocks. As the narrator keeps talking and various noises accompany his story (an engine fails to start, cars pass by, birds chirp), the prevailing characteristic on the visual level is the lack of information: the picture remains black much of the time. When *The Black Tower* (1985–87) was broadcast on Channel 4 in Great Britain on December 19, 1988, numerous viewers complained to the station, including one woman who wanted to know whether something was wrong with the show and why no prior warning had been given.<sup>1</sup> But what sort of warning did she have in mind? Should the station have let viewers know that the following broadcast would consist of many black and a few red, blue, and yellow rectangles and feature only a small number of shots of houses, trees, and other things that ordinarily appear in films? The scant visual content apparently confused people, as a number of other responses indicated. The narrator’s voice makes a promise that the pictures fail to keep. Or is it the other way around?

The story is as simple as it is sinister: a man notices a black tower, seeing it again and again from different locations all over London; to his dismay, he realises that the tower is visible to him alone. After an especially eerie

encounter with the tower, he decides to stay home to avoid its presence. Strawberry ice cream becomes his only food, until an ambulance takes him to Langthorne Hospital (where the tower in turn awaits him); after a few weeks, he appears to have recovered and is released. The narrator then reencounters the tower far from London, in a forest in Shropshire. The camera now shows details of the tower, its crumbling brick walls and blind windows. The last words we hear the narrator say are,

“I opened the door and stepped into the darkness.”

Then the story starts over; a woman talks about her discovery of the tower in almost exactly the same words as the male narrator.

The visual level tells another story as well. The tower doubly explodes our view: when the picture turns dark, we can never be sure whether we see unexposed footage or a close-up of the black surface of the tower. That puts us right at the centre of the debate over film as material construction as opposed to a representation of reality. The critical engagement with the autonomy of pictures, of their effects and their ability to serve as a medium for the representation of things, first reaches culmination a mere four and a half minutes into the film: a black screen is followed by a series of colour fields, each associated with a different sound. Black (hissing and bubbling noises) gives way to brown (a buzzing sound) before reverting to black (undefined rustling); next are red (birds chirping), black (crackling and hissing noises), yellow (a liquid pouring into a container), white (bubbling), blue (squeaking and splashing), and, finally, black once more. Then the sequence of colours is repeated, though now without the sounds; it is instead accompanied by the following words, spoken by the narrator:

“The ‘Teasmade’ woke me up at eight-thirty and I jumped out of bed and rushed across the room to switch it off. It had rained again during the



night but I drew open the curtains to discover that the morning sky was bright and clear. Shivering, I quickly put on my clothes and lit the fire. In the kitchen, I poured myself some fruit juice and made porridge—while waiting for it to cook I did the washing up from the night before.”

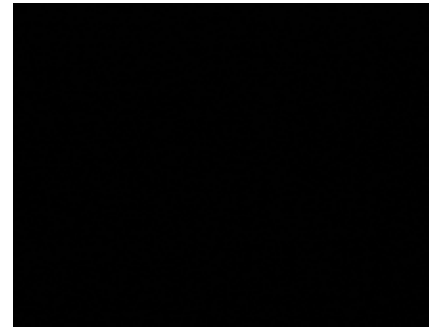
A third iteration follows (now without the voice, but with the soundtrack we heard earlier) in which the abstract colour fields become identified as representational images: the dark brown is now recognizable as a bedspread that the protagonist folds back as he gets out of bed to switch off the buzzing automatic tea maker. Black turns out to be the colour of the curtain behind which the morning sky comes into view; the red is revealed to be a piece of clothing; the other black, the inside of the fireplace, where the flames of the coals flicker; the yellow, a glass of orange juice; the white, bubbling porridge; the blue, the surface on which the dishes are set after rinsing. Is it a coincidence that John Smith chose the primary colours red, yellow, and blue as well as black and white for this sequence—the only colours (other than grey) Piet Mondrian used in his mature work? Mondrian described the three primary colours as the “most inward”<sup>2</sup> to which all hues one might see in the outside world were ultimately reducible. In his abstract painting, he was in pursuit of the universal, of what underlay all individual appearances. Theo van Doesburg established one distinction between abstract and concrete painting: whereas the former is related to the outside world, in the latter, colours and shapes stand for themselves.<sup>3</sup> In that sense, Barnett Newman’s series of paintings *Who’s Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue* (1966–70) is a response to Mondrian. Newman wants to relieve the colours of ideas and foreground their expressive quality.<sup>4</sup> The short sequence in *The Black Tower* I have just described wavers between these two poles of representation and expressiveness, with varying amplitudes. At first, each colour is isolated in a close-up shot of the object so that it floods the screen. At the same moment, the soundtrack already hints at the genesis of the colour field, although it initially seems that



no direct connection exists between image and sound beyond their simultaneity. Red, yellow, and blue have a strong, almost shock-like impact, all the more as they do not appear in the same intensity anywhere else in the film. In the second iteration, Smith plays with the associations that combinations of language and image may evoke. As though in an experiment in perception, we are confronted again with the same sequence of colours. Do we now recall and hear, as it were, the sounds that accompanied them earlier? Do we correlate the colours with the words? In the third step, the colour fields are set in motion and shown to be images of everyday objects and actions, which we may now unequivocally match to the elements of the story we have just been told.

I imagine that all of Mondrian's grids are (as Max Bill thought<sup>5</sup>) mere details within a vast and indeed infinite grid. Each of his pictures shows only one part, one constellation among many. We zoom in for a moment on this enormous grid, whose totality defies our comprehension, to see the lines and colours of which it is composed. If we zoom out from the surface of the black tower and look for textual evidence of the real building, we learn that, in the 1980s, John Smith moved within East London, to Colville Road, Leytonstone. The view from his window included his little garden, the railway tracks behind it, a cemetery, and, on the horizon, a matt black silhouette that seemed to absorb light like a black hole. A neighbour told Smith that the building was the psychiatric ward of a geriatric hospital (in reality, it was a water tower), which may have inspired his associations of darkness, fear, and doom.<sup>6</sup> The gigantic building was visible from many different perspectives, which Smith "collected" over time. So the story of a man persecuted by a black tower was built around various locations where the tower could be seen: a hospital, a cemetery, a prison (or rather, a high wall that the narrator tells us encloses a prison), a building that we are told is a factory (behind another wall), a church, trees. Smith says:

"I collected a series of images and then wrote a story around them.  
[...] I wanted the film to play with



the edge between immersion in a psychological narrative and seeing the film for what it is—a material construction, an assemblage of assorted parts. So there are gradual movements between totally abstract manipulations of images and very straightforward narrative.”<sup>7</sup>

In Alfred Hitchcock’s *Spellbound* (1945), the screen turns completely white, being taken up in its entirety by the milk shown in the preceding shot. White agitates the protagonist so strongly that, as the earlier scene fades out, the viewer finds himself alone with his own associations of violence behind the monochrome rectangle. Gilles Deleuze mentions this sequence as an example in his reflections on framing and the extremes of scarcity (little visual information, down to the monochrome surface) and saturation that may take place in it. He notes: “If we see very few things in an image, this is because we do not know how to read it properly; we evaluate its rarefaction as badly as its saturation.”<sup>8</sup> “The visual image,” he argues, “has a legible function beyond its visible function.”<sup>9</sup> With the extreme use of rarefaction, *The Black Tower* insistently puts the legibility of the image to the test. Instead of congruence between image, sound, and narrative, Smith creates manifold “out-of-fields”: we do not see what we hear and do not hear what we see. We hear perfectly ordinary sounds and see time passing while cars drive into a tree on one side and disappear, or come out on the other side as different cars. We see a hand writing down the story that we are being told and see the letters disappearing and reappearing. The narrator’s voice, meanwhile, continues unaffected, in an even tone.

In a conversation, John Smith mentioned Flann O’Brien’s novel *The Third Policeman*. He had remembered that O’Brien’s story, like *The Black Tower*, has a circular structure, ending with the same words as with which it had begun. He had read the book long before the film was made, but perhaps the vision of ineluctability and inescapability had stuck somewhere in his recollection.

I subsequently read the novel; another parallel that struck me was that the book likewise brings up the most extraordinary incidents in an otherwise fairly simple and gently flowing narrative, whence the rising sense of discomfort that accompanies the reading. Both works have their comedic moments, but our sense of impending doom builds steadily. In both, the storytelling uses words to suggest a situation that cannot be represented. Something always remains outside the visible picture, in the “out-of-field.” Deleuze parses the potentially uncanny effect of this complex as follows: “In one case, the out-of-field designates that which exists elsewhere, to one side or around; in the other case, the out-of-field testifies to a more disturbing presence, one which cannot even be said to exist, but rather to ‘insist’ or ‘subsist,’ a more radical Elsewhere, outside homogeneous space and time.”<sup>10</sup> In *The Black Tower*, this out-of-field effect is generated by the limited visual information supplied to the viewer or the exploration of extremes of oversupply and rarefaction.<sup>11</sup> In an interview, Smith recalls the viewers’ powerful responses when he first showed the film, mentioning that they sometimes let themselves be carried away by the story much more than he had expected.<sup>12</sup> That, it seems to me, would be due not so much to the gripping story but more to the combination of narrative with the absences that the film frequently engenders. The bulk of the movie plays out in a wide range of auditory, visual, and associative out-of-field places that, in connection with the story, gain a sinister quality—even though, at bottom, we see only what we always see in a film: a montage of details that are, in this instance, even repeatedly presented to us as such.

Before the film closes with a woman’s voice beginning to speak about her first encounter with the tower, we accompany the narrator on one of his forays, supposedly through the countryside in Shropshire, where he encounters the tower for the last time and approaches it. The camera then shows views of the tower: its brick walls, rusty pipe ends, the white cornice beneath the black mass, a worm’s-eye view looking up at the roof floating at a great height. Formerly an abstraction, a detail, a mental image, a projection, the tower becomes a tangible building bearing



visible traces of aging. Yet, after a mere half-minute of such quasi-documentary attention to detail, image and sound break apart again. The view of a wall is combined with sounds of passing cars. Whenever this picture returns, the chirping of the birds is interrupted and we hear the droning noise of cars on a heavily trafficked road, which at last also becomes visible: we see the view of the tower between two apartment blocks that had first appeared near the beginning of the film. Finally, the camera (which now frames the tower in a vista shot, though it never quite fits into the picture) tilts down the gigantic building, coming to rest on the door.

“I opened the door and stepped into the darkness.”

The picture turns black and we are plunged back into the interstice between representation, illusion, and film stock, now accompanied by a woman’s voice.

With only two exceptions, all shots shown until this moment had been recorded using a static camera. That is about to change: the closing shot begins by showing a clothesline in a garden before the camera tilts upward a bit and we see railway tracks and a passing train; then a cemetery comes into view and, finally, the familiar black silhouette. Meanwhile, we hear the following words:

“I first noticed it a few weeks after his death. I remember the day well as it was the first time I went to visit his grave. It was a bright morning, so I did a bit of washing and messed about in the garden for a couple of hours before catching the train to the cemetery. When I got there it took me ages to find the place where he was buried—the cemetery was enormous and the new grave was still marked with only a small wooden cross. I sat down beside it and wondered what epitaph would be carved in the stone. I closed my eyes and felt the warm

sun on my face. When I opened them again, I found myself staring at the tower. Surprised I hadn't noticed it before, I wondered what it was and then forgot about it for a few weeks."

This scene is the climax of Smith's play with the suggestive power of text-image combinations: the camera movement assembles different elements of the story, which are separated also by spatial and temporal distances, in a single image, revealing the construction of a "narrative abyss."<sup>13</sup> The film *The Black Tower* presents throughout as a process of negotiation in whose course the viewer attempts to reconcile what he sees, hears, and associates. On many occasions, the openness of pictures becomes thematic; for example, Smith stages colours as abstract surfaces or details, rendering the construction of film from specific choices of frame, sounds, and the passage of time in the operation of the motion-picture apparatus the true subject of the film. The material qualities of film stock insistently come to the fore as well, as black expands across the footage like a drawn-out interstice between pictures. Throughout the film, image, narrative, and sound are put together and taken apart again so that we are constantly busy interpreting what we perceive. As we attempt (and perennially fail) to assemble everything into a coherent whole, we experience a resounding demonstration of the illusionary power of film. But that is not all. We sit before the projection screen as though paralyzed; it is utterly dark around us, and as the drama invisibly escalates, we are torn between being affected by the story we are being told and an analytical experience of the physical reality of the medium, which opens the doors of the screening room onto absence, to what is out-of-field, what cannot be said or shown: film. Exposed and unexposed.

× Kathrin Meyer is a curator based in Hanover, Germany.

- 1 See 48. *Internationale Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen*, festival cat. (Oberhausen, 2002), 187.
- 2 Yve-Alain Bois, "The Iconoclast," in *Piet Mondrian 1872–1944*, eds. Joop Josten and Angelica Zander, exh. cat., Haags Gemeentemuseum, Den Haag; National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; Museum of Modern Art, New York (Milan: Leonardo Arte, 1994), 319.
- 3 See Max Imdahl, "Is It a Flag, or Is It a Painting?" Über mögliche Konsequenzen der konkreten Kunst," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1: *Zur Kunst der Moderne* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1996), 131–32.
- 4 See Barnett Newman, quoted in Armin Zweite, ed., *Barnett Newman: Bilder—Skulpturen—Graphik*, exh. cat., Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 1997), 149.
- 5 See Bois, "The Iconoclast," 360.
- 6 See Cornelia Parker, "John Smith's Body," in *John Smith: Film and Video Works 1972–2002*, eds. Josephine Lanyon and Mark Cosgrove (London: Picture This Moving Image/Watershed Media Centre, 2002), 9; and Nicky Hamlyn, "John Smith's Local Locations," in *ibid.*, 50–51.
- 7 "John Smith Talking Film with Cate Elwes: Trespassing Beyond the Frame," in *ibid.*, 67.
- 8 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema*, vol. 1: *The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (London: Continuum, 2005), 14.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 17.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 18.
- 11 Smith says about the use of close-ups and static camera shots in his films: "A close-up denies you the full picture [...] So you are forced to imagine. The monster in the horror film is always less frightening when you see it." in "John Smith Talking Film with Cate Elwes," 67.
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 *Ibid.*



All images, *The Black Tower*, 1985–87, 16mm, colour, sound, 24 min.