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Black Screens, White Frames: Gilles Deleuze and the Filmmaking Machine, by Tanya Shilina-Conte. Oxford University Press, 2024, 328 pp.

James McFarland

Gilles Deleuze's effect on film theory has been immense, and seems only to be growing. D. N. Rodowick's *Deleuze's Time Machine*, Anna Powell's *Deleuze and Horror*, Barry Nevin's *Cracking Gilles Deleuze's Crystal*, along with a number of essay collections such as *The Brain is the Screen: Deleuze and the Philosophy of Cinema*, edited by Gregory Flaxman, and Rodowick's *Afterimages of Gilles Deleuze's Film Philosophy* document this lively direction in the intellectual response to motion pictures. To this burgeoning subdiscipline can be added Tanya Shilina-Conte's *Black Screens, White Frames: Gilles Deleuze and the Filmmaking Machine*. Using the motif of the monotone screen to review the entire history of cinema, Shilina-Conte's treatise is simultaneously a new interpretation of cinema, a commentary on Deleuze's film theory and philosophy, more broadly, and an aesthetic work in its own right. A topic that might at first appear narrow and recondite proves to be a window on generative absence as such.

Though she demonstrates a thorough understanding of Deleuze's thought, Shilina-Conte rests her treatise on far more than just that one philosopher's work. Throughout the book, she anchors her reflections in a wide range of film theoretical works, both classic and up-to-the-minute. *Black Screens, White Frames* exhibits a confident familiarity with early film going back to the turn of the twentieth century, European art film, cinema in a number of avant-garde artistic movements from Lettrism to Fluxus to the Situationists. Shilina-Conte is comfortable in the world of Iranian and Arab film, in the world of experimental film, and she can also propound eloquently on the controversial black screen that ended the television series *The Sopranos*, or speculate on the visible proximity of a black cinema screen to the mysterious monolith in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). Such variants of the cinematic black screen as the crash screens on personal computers or the face of an inactive smart phone also make their appearance.

The film-philosophical premise of Shilina-Conte's research raises cinema as a technological tradition at the heart of contemporary visual and auditory art. Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square* is a touchstone of her thinking, moving it away from questions of narrative genre and character representation, and toward aesthetic traditions within which the commodity character of cinema plays little role. "The book advances the concept of the filmmaking machine

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as an abstract art machine in constant production", Shilina-Conte tells us early on, "which shifts our understanding of absence in cinema from negative to generative theorization" (4).

After an opening overview of the whole project, the book's first chapter addresses the way that early cinema discovered and deployed the black screen. Because Deleuze himself has little directly to say about this preliminary phase of protocinematic history, Shilina-Conte uses Deleuze's contemporary Paul Virilio and his notion of "picnolepsy" (18), a series of tiny epileptic effacements of awareness, to characterise the recognition of the disruptive effects on narrative time of black screens. Already at this very early period of cinema, the black screen is not just an absence of a visual image but that absence *for a certain length of time*, and the durational character of the black screen disengages it from the narrative duration of the represented story with which it contrasts. This visible black screen that symbolises the unrepresented minutes, hours, days, years between narrative episodes communicates in Shilina-Conte's account with the invisible black screens that separate the distinct frames of photochemical film projection and that are normally synthesised into cinema's illusion of movement. The limit to cinematic imagery that the black screen represents does not just exist at the narrative extremes, but inhabits inconspicuously the very mechanism of cinematic representation. This begins to give an idea of the scope of Shilina-Conte's reflections.

Chapter Two extends the historical consideration into the development of classical Hollywood montage. Here, the gradual supersession of the dilating iris by the fade in and fade out marks the development of a coherent and predictable narrative syntax characteristic of the classical Hollywood style. Not only does the fade punctuate the narration, but the rarefaction of visible differences of a black or (more rarely) white screen uncovers in its chromatic simplicity a zero degree against which the entire regime of colour will emerge. In its utter simplicity and consequent stillness, the black screen serves a similar role with respect to camera movement and the geometric dynamics of the shot. And finally, the rational significance of fade-ins and fade-outs in the system of classical editing establishes a standard against which such art films as *Persona* (Ingmar Bergman, 1966) or *Last Year at Marienbad* (*L'année dernière à Marienbad*, Alain Resnais, 1961) react with disruptive fades to white.

This is followed by a consideration of more avant-garde modes of cinema, where the corporeal and cerebral aspects of film viewing are not presupposed but played with and explored. Here the monochromatic screen has a disruptive, deterritorialising effect on film experience. The work of Stan Brakhage serves as Shilina-Conte's primary cinematic reference point, but the chapter more generally demonstrates a thorough grasp of experimental film and its history. The ease with which Shilina-Conte moves from the entertainment cinema of Griffith and Hitchcock in the prior chapter to the experimental work of Brakhage and Jean-Luc Godard's *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1988–99) here makes clear the leverage that her black screen fulcrum gives to raise cinematic reflections. And this chapter extends her consideration of the black screen into a sophisticated discussion of Henri Bergson's theory of perception in *Matter and Memory*, and its relation to Deleuze's philosophy. Here is where the film-philosophical possibility that cinema could illuminate the metaphysics of perception itself comes into focus.

Her next chapter develops a concept of "minor cinema" (155), derived from Deleuze and Guattari's book on *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. "Minor" here does not mean unimportant

or unambitious. Rather, "minor" art as Deleuze and Guattari use the term takes up the accepted conventions of the hegemonic artistic tradition and bends them to subversive ends. Shilina-Conte, following D. N. Rodowick's lead, extends the term into cinema and identifies a "minoritarian" cinema produced outside the central European and American film studios, often by representatives of marginalised political and national populations. Here Shilina-Conte opens an explicitly political aspect to her thinking, one that is also visible in her moving 2018 essay on the Iranian filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami. If Shilina-Conte's confident mastery of traditional film history, classical film theory, and experimental film were not impressive enough, we find in this chapter a grasp of global cinema that is equally convincing.

The fifth chapter, which centres around Deleuze's work on the concept of the fold, further exhibits Shilina-Conte's philosophical perspicuity. Deleuze develops his idea of *le pli* (which echoes in French the Latinate abstractions of implication, explication, complication) in a discussion of the Baroque which seems quite distant from his work on cinema. Shilina-Conte follows Deleuze into the philosophy of Leibniz, of Charles Sanders Pierce, as well as a range of contemporary philosophers who have worked in this tradition, most centrally Laura U. Marks, keeping the cinematic context in view. The discussion then moves into a fascinating consideration of the first photographic image of a black hole, published in 2019, and the young scientist Katie Bouman, whose face became indelibly associated with its capture. This leads eventually to a concept of *effacement* that promises to help conceptualise the fraught intersections of race and cinema in new and revealing ways. Again, the reader is dazzled by Shalini-Conte's liveliness and range.

The final chapter then considers post-cinema, our world of mobile phone videos, prestige television, vlogs, CGI and digital videos that have exploded the traditional context of traditional film. Here, the propensity for black screens on mobile phones and tablets to become mirrors for the viewer guides a wide-ranging consideration of avant-garde installations and contemporary world cinema. The new positions that moving images have come to occupy in our mediated environment call for the kind of profound philosophical reflection that Shilina-Conte offers here.

The aesthetic seriousness of Shilina-Conte's discussion does not preclude a playfulness in her presentation that is very winning. She enters her discussion in person at various points, explaining the origin of an argument or insight in a personal experience in the movie theatre or the classroom or the conference hall. The introduction has a synesthetic structure, with an Overture and Movements drawn from musical composition, while its detailed explications of monochromatic or empty screens take their cue from Wallace Stevens's "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." This playfulness reflects the unusual proximity of Shilina-Conte's writing to artistic production itself; the treatise is linked to a "research-creative component in the form of a feature-length remix-assemblage *This Video Does Not Exist*" (5), which she describes elsewhere as "a montage of monochrome screens in film history" (256). The paradoxical existence of this self-subverting video in the background of the treatise (which, despite its title, does in fact exist), creates a *mise-en-abyme* of generative absences that ramify throughout the cinematic field.

There is perhaps a certain pleasant irony in the fact that Shilina-Conte's work on generative absence in the context of cinema, whether the absence of the visual image in the monochromatic screen, or, in her work on cinematic muteness, the absence of an audible voice; the absence of the marginalised populations responsible for minoritarian cinemas, or the absence of filmmakers as

such in the burgeoning world of post-cinema; that this work is likely to make her a significant presence in the discipline of film philosophy and beyond. *Black Screens, White Frames* is a worthy contribution to the Deleuzian reception of cinema.

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