
Video Essay: Human Trials - Cinema, Subjectivity, and the White Of/f the I

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Research Statement

The premise of Vincenzo Natali's 2003 absurdist comedy *Nothing* is a simple one. The film's two protagonists - both of them caricatures of the 'dumbass' stalled adolescents that frequently populate North American comedy - suddenly find themselves in a world that has become an empty and boundless white space. The infinite white void that the duo now discover outside their house is a strange place of a tofu-like consistency upon which heavy objects bounce like beachballs, and the film uses this set-up to deliver some enjoyable slapstick. While the film at times suffers from a lack of novelty or wit, it does pointedly draw attention to the stupefying mass of items and commodities from everyday life, all of which are glaringly offset by the infinite white environment. We encounter these things because, as the pair of men venture out into the nothingness, they array themselves in ridiculous combat gear comprised of kitchen items and sports accessories. It's a move that draws attention to the weird excess of the objects themselves as well as to the neuroses of the two 'man-child' protagonists. (The trail of items they leave behind them in order to navigate 'the nothing' are mundane insignia of childhood; crayons, toy cars, Swiss army knives, tennis balls.) Even if unintended, a critique of the ever increasing circulation of signs, the centrality of consumption, and the fetishized status of the object within modern society is implicit during these sequences of the film.

Of course, if they had seen *The Matrix* (the Wachowskis, 1999) just a few years earlier, the protagonists of *Nothing* might have suspected that they had somehow entered 'The Construct', that computer-generated 'loading program' wherein Morpheus and Neo sit chewing the metaphysical fat. Had they seen *Bruce Almighty* (Tom Shadyac, 2003), they might have suspected, instead, that they had simply died and gone to bleached out, blissful Morgan Freeman Heaven. In fact, the place that they have actually stumbled on is a trope, one that might be called *the white void* or the *whitescape*, a visual convention familiar to viewers not just from cinema, but from photography, music video, and the space of the contemporary art gallery.

In 'Human Trials', I examine this familiar visual trope as it has developed in cinema. I observe its resonances with the 'void room' exhibits of Yves Klein in the late 1950s and early 1960s and the art photography of Richard Avedon, but I could just as easily have examined the music videos of artists such as Talking Heads ('Once in a Lifetime', 1981), Madonna ('Lucky Star', 1983), and Tyler the Creator ('Yonkers', 2011). *A short segment from the latter music video can be found in the essay.* Of course, I could also have traced the trope back further to Kasimir Malevich's influential experimental painting 'Black Square' (1915), the pinnacle of 'Suprematism'. Notably, Malevich's painting employs the colour white as a framing device that facilitates a direct expression not of the world, but of "the world of feeling", and does so via the non-objective, abstract qualities of an image (in this case, the black square). Needless to say, this runs counter to the more conventional qualities of traditional representational art. Indeed, as should be apparent in the video essay, Malevich's use of the white void to elicit a non-objective expression of 'feeling' resonates with the more affirmative qualities of the 'white void' visual as they emerge within certain films in my study.[\[1\]](#)

An emphasis on feeling was also much to the fore in Yves Klein's first 'void' exhibit at the Iris Clert Gallery in Paris: official invitations asked guests to grace the exhibit with their "affective presence".[\[2\]](#) After contributing his own 'affective presencing' to the occasion, Albert Camus was moved to record an enigmatic entry in his notebook; "With the Void, Full Powers."[\[3\]](#) Such was the popularity of Klein's 'La Vide' that it ran a week longer than expected and was subsequently reimagined in later installations by the artist. Klein himself claimed that visitors would often remain in the radiant white space for hours in a heightened emotional state. Twenty years later, the seminal art critic Brian O'Doherty would observe the way in which a room essentially the same as that which Klein created - a "white cube", as O'Doherty puts it - had become the standard exhibition space in most art galleries.

The white room - the white void, this *infinite white space* - is a visual we are deeply familiar with, then. What I examine in my video essay is an overview of prominent examples of the 'white void' - or 'whitescape' (to use David Batchelor's suggestive term[\[4\]](#)) - as they have occurred in cinema. In its most memorable articulations, I argue, it is used to examine the production of 'subjectivity' and to bring the concept of 'the human' into stark relief. In many cases, the films also centre on protagonists who - having transgressed against the established social order - are subjected to the judgement of their community.

The video essay is split into four sections.

1. White Wall / Black Hole: The Abstract Machine of

Subjectivity

The first section focuses on the concept of 'the human' and on the production of 'the subject'. In this it takes its cue, in part, from Jørgen Leth's influential film *The Perfect Human* (1968), and, in part, from the concept of 'faciality' in the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. For the latter, the face – the face of the human, but, beyond that, the face of Jesus Christ (as exemplary of the legislative 'white-man' face that underwrites Western metaphysics) – functions as a 'master signifier' in the sign-system (*signifiance*) which has come to dominate human social interaction. This sign-system is the slick 'white wall' of representation – described, suggestively, by Stephen O'Connell as a "slippery surface"[\[5\]](#) – whereon signs proliferate and spiral in an infinite reverberation. In conjunction with this sign-system – but also resisting it – there exists another signifying system (*subjectification*), which is also associated with the face. Here the face is not that of a central master-signifier (such as the face of God), however, but the site of the 'black hole' of the subject. In *subjectification*, the subject pursues the vectors of its own desires. Inevitably, such desires tend to develop in response to the ever increasing signs produced by *signifiance*, but the subject may also trace their desires elsewhere – take passages, lines of flight – that react against such signs, 'betraying' the established social orders consecrated in the sign-system.[\[6\]](#)

In the video essay, then, the imagery of the 'white void' should never be understood simply as imparting an *absence* of signs. It might just as easily be taken as the thick, totalising, and opaque veneer of the dense sign-system (*signifiance*) in which the human is engulfed, and by which the subject is situated and produced. Later in the video essay, I return to the black holes of subjectification and to the prospect of 'lines of flight'.

2. Societies of Control

In the second section of the video essay, I reflect on the way in which the human subject – the 'biopolitical' subject as Michel Foucault would describe it – is produced and marshalled by the dominant signifying forces of its environment. Here the 'white void' visual is examined in relation to mechanisms of control. Such control is typically centred in the reassuring, legislative sign-system of the established social order, and thus the visual of the 'whitescape' in much visual culture can be understood to indicate the illusion of freedom – indeed, a sense of infinite freedom – that is integral to the functioning of this sign-system. Yet it is a freedom which, despite its apparent openness, is more insidiously grounded in the subject's total exposure (before the law, before the social order). In addition to the use of the whitescape as a metaphor here, I also invoke the not-at-all metaphorical but material and physiological powers

of the colour white as a technology of control. Indeed, in a Foucauldian analysis of the use of the colour white in spaces such as prisons, hospitals, and universities, Kathleen Connellan has provided an illuminating study of white as just such a 'control mechanism'.^[7] Echoing Connellan's study, in the video essay, I point to the ways in which *THX 1138* (George Lucas, 1971), in particular, presents a dystopic view of the material powers of the colour white, while at the same time providing a metaphor for the way in which the distinction between the social spaces of freedom and those of imprisonment can be seen to dissolve. (While I don't draw attention to it in the video essay, it's worth noting, too, that the entire social structure of the dystopic white world of *THX 1138* seems to revolve around the face of Jesus Christ. The latter - now rechristened Omm, and thereby a conflation of spirituality and electricity - exists as a single but ubiquitous image, a master-signifier to whom the bio-engineered citizens of this control society can confess their fears and anxieties.)

3. Trial & Judgement

It is intriguing that, in a number of instances, the use of the 'white void' or 'whitescape' visual in cinema corresponds with scenes of trial, judgement, and condemnation. Perhaps the earliest example stems from one of the most celebrated works in film history, Carl Theodor Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928), in which the trial of Joan (Maria Falconetti) is delivered in a space that - as much as possible - reduces all trace and texture of the 'material' world. Instead, the film invests in the abstract white décor of the courtroom and prison, and (later, in the exterior shots) the vaporous white sky behind the protagonists' faces and bodies. In my video essay, I draw attention to the repetition of this particular motif of 'judgement' in both *THX 1138* and *The Man Who Wasn't There* (the Coen brothers, 2001), and hone in on the way that a certain gestural quality within the camera movement (and the human faces that this movement scans) can be understood to migrate intertextually between the three films.

This section also addresses other modes of 'trial' and 'judgement' that pertain to the use of the white void in visual culture. For instance, the strategy of aesthetic detachment involved in the everyday advertising of the consumer item can be understood to be put under the microscope in Leth's *The Perfect Human*. In *THX 1138*, meanwhile, the concepts of idealism, spirituality, and purity that have been - historically - associated with the colour white in Western thinking can also be seen to be implicated in the West's positioning of 'the other', in particular the other as located in the face of colour. (Deleuze, too, notes the way the abstract machine of 'faciality' enshrines the white-man face as its master signifier and how this underwrites the structures inherent in racism.) A final

valence of the term 'trial' within my study relates to *Beyond the Black Rainbow* (Panos Cosmatos, 2010) and *Under the Skin* (Jonathan Glazer, 2013). Cosmatos's film involves a 'human trial' in the very specific sense of clinical laboratory research, and it is telling that the sequence that depicts this (decidedly 'new age') experiment makes a very concentrated use of the 'white void' visual. In *Under the Skin*, meanwhile, humanity is something that is performed - attempted, essayed, 'tried on' - by the film's alien protagonist.

4. Lines of Flight

Taking in both his work with Guattari and his own studies on cinema, we can observe certain points of tension in Deleuze's philosophy when it comes to his critique of the 'white wall' sign-system on the one hand and, on the other, his attitude to elements such as the spiritual dimensions of the colour white and 'lyrical abstraction', the nomadic terrain of 'smooth space', and the expressive qualities of the face. This can be otherwise articulated as the tension between Deleuze's critique of configurations of social space as a 'totalised whole' and his endorsement of potentially affirmative openings on to a 'plane of consistency', a 'smooth space', or the 'any-space-whatever'. In each case, though these are quite contrary conceptions of space, the 'images' of such spaces could plausibly be represented or 'figured' by a depiction of an abstract whitescape. Yet in each case the *import* or the meaning would differ profoundly. In the first, a whitescape might depict a specific authoritarian, sign-encoded social formation: spuriously legible, determinable, stable. In the second, a whitescape might depict a temporary shelter, a 'block of space-time' that opens up before nomadic singularities rather than stable subjectivities, a transitory processual space of flight, transition, and becoming. Intriguingly, *The Passion of Joan of Arc* features both iterations of the whitescape simultaneously, whereupon the white can be associated with the judgemental, authoritarian agencies of the trial *and at the same time* with the lines of flight inherent in Joan's passion. As such, in this final section of the video essay, I return to the 'whitescape' and 'the face' not simply as sites of subjectification and submission, but as sites of passion and passage, of affective transitions and processes, of lines of flight.

Ultimately, it is hoped that the video essay - which itself features a substantial amount of commentary - can appeal to the viewer on its own terms, both as a piece of videographical analysis and as a more poetic meditation on the topic at hand. These poetic qualities emerge primarily in the edit, through the use of graphic matches and the opening up of a dialogue between the films in the study.

[1] "[A] blissful sense of liberating non-objectivity drew me forth into the 'desert', where nothing is real except feeling ... and so feeling became the

substance of my life". Kasimir Malevich, *The Non-Objective World - The Manifesto of Suprematism* (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2003), 68.

[2] See Nuit Banai, *Yves Klein* (Reaktion Books, 2014), 91.

[3] Quoted in Brian O'Doherty, *White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, (University of California Press, 1999), .89. According to Banai, Camus actually wrote the phrase on a scrap of paper and handed the fragment to Klein at the event. *Yves Klein*, 91.

[4] David Batchelor, *Chromaphobia* (Reaktion Books, 2000).

[5] Stephen O'Connell, "Dandyism: Every Name In History Is I", in *Deleuze and Guattari: Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers*, ed. Gary Genosko. (Routledge, 2001), 1213-1229.

[6] O'Connell gives an excellent overview of these elements in the work of Deleuze and Guattari. Relevant sections within the work of Deleuze and Guattari itself include "587 B.C. - A.D. 70: On Several Regimes of Signs" in Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 111-148, "Year Zero: Faciality", *ibid.*, 167-207, and Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, "On the Superiority of Anglo-American Literature", in *Dialogues II*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Columbia University Press, 2007), 36-76.

[7] Kathleen Connellan. "The Psychic Life of White: Power and Space", *Organization Studies* 34, no. 10 (2013): 1529-1549.

Notes on Contributor

I am a media scholar and journalist. I completed my doctorate in Trinity College Dublin, where I have lectured in a number of subject areas, including on Digital Film Theory and Practice. I have also taught Film and Media Studies in the National University of Ireland Galway. I am a former Visiting Research Fellowship at the Moore Institute in NUI Galway. My research interests include iconography and affect, remix culture, and intertextuality.