

On *The Flicker*

The Flicker consists of only five frames: A warning frame, two title frames, a black frame, and a white frame. The white frame is a windowpane, an outer limit, a transparency – which is itself a special form of darkness.¹ Half-settled into my seat the lights went dim and the glow of a solitary bulb was thrown directly onto the screen, spotlighting its synthetic weave and manufacturing a world. From a multitude of similarly composed emanations the 20th century performed as itself in the title role of a biopic shadow play. 100 years of dark theatres bombarded with luminous impulses. In the projection of a typical film a new frame appears on screen every 1/24th of a second. Between each, black in equal measure, resulting over the course of a two-hour film, in one hour of darkness. Within this special form of darkness modernity found its gait. What is it like to be like *The Flicker*?

One week earlier, full bladdered and at an afternoon matinée, I excused myself for a poorly timed bathroom break and found myself caught in just such a projection. Stranded, I was soon cast as a helpless bystander to the me-shaped silhouette obscuring the action on the cinema screen, my presence a rupture. Clouded by the darkness of my shadow, the hold of the Metalunan² tractor beam was severed, and if seized upon Cal and Ruth were now free to escape back to Earth. Unwittingly, my shadowy double had pried open the gate, the aisles filled, and a mass decampment was afoot. Left to simply ‘keep a lookout’ there was nowhere to hide when the searchlight finally traced me against the wall. Just as the projected image remains fixed to a celluloid film, to be caught in a projection is to be frozen in front of your own eyes, 24x a second. Between each though, darkness. What is it like to be like *The Flicker*?

What is its effect? Under the lightless conditions of night or a pre-projection theatre, the cones of my eyes responsible for colour vision are rendered non-functional. Reduced to an achromatic side-glance an image nevertheless appears, crowded with half-formed figures and spectral remembrances. A survivalist trait honed while hunting, the ability to recognize a lion’s stalk while veiled under night and brush allowed for safe return into the morning’s light. The sun would rise and the world reappeared, the lion’s creep revealed to be series of dream-images constituted of matted leaves strewn over boney branches. Where I once saw fangs there was now just a stump clothed in rotting bark.

Is to be like *The Flicker* to be like this dream? Lucretius speculated on the melding of dream- and movement-images, writing on the former in *On the Nature of Things*, “When the first image passes away and then another comes to birth in a different posture, the former seems to have changed its gesture. Again, because they are fine, the mind cannot discern them sharply, save those which it strains to see; therefore all that there are besides these pass away, save those for which it has made itself ready.” I try to sleep alongside Lucretius, but find myself caught within this rapid exchange. Each thought-gesture describing me back to myself as I test my own limit as dream-image.

It is this retinal puzzling that permits the invention of cinema, synthesizing from *The Flicker* a sensual spectacle. But this history is fixed and bright. Whether it’s inception is marked by the introduction of movement upon a screen or by the recording of distinct movement phases, by their successive presentation or by their projection onto a wall, once *The Flicker* had cracked the human eye, reality and dream bled into one another, imprinting night onto day and day onto night. To try to be like a dream left my being like a film.

But *The Flicker*? Into the night I strain to see its colour. A shade that resists categorization. It is ‘achromatic’ in that it reflects no light within the visible spectrum. It is the condition reached in the total absence of light, rendering it ‘non-visible’ and therefore purely theoretical. It is the ‘non-color’ that absorbs all other colours, ever darkening as they approach the horizon. Darkness is a condition of light, until it reaches black which contains all colour, all light. It comes before light and it is that which follows. What then do I see of *The Flicker*? Is it all light or the absence of light?

An aisle ahead, my question is taken up in a conversation between a neuroscientist and a filmmaker:

EK— For a forty-eighth of a second it is dark and for a forty-eighth of a second there is an image. This is an interesting kind of movement for the brain.

AK — What does the brain “see” of this? Does it see that black between images, the transport phase? Does it react independently to the moment in a transport phase when it is dark in the cinema for a forty-eighth of a second, ie. with signs that it creates itself and only understands itself?

EK — Similarly.

AK — Like in a dream?

EK — Or under the influence of drugs. It “sees” the black continuously, whereas the same brain “sees” the image as continuous, even if it is also “flickering.” A polyphonic expression.³

Is then to be like *The Flicker* to be like a drug? To be two things at once, conscious and non-conscious, dark and light, anxiously pacing in front of a screen like a psychoactive toad awaiting the lick of a stoner’s tongue. My thoughts, my perceptions, my mood all altered. And yet, I only get so high. As strong as the first hit was it is not sustained; my buzz fades 24x a second. When I was high I was *The Flicker*, but then I became the come-down. Its darkness the darkness that is the remainder when any object draws away from me. It is the darkness of the night sky after the star’s withdrawal. The colour out of space. To drift into that extraterrestrial darkness is to cohabit a sensual world full of non-human actors. They act upon me though they remain forever unseen.

Each frame modifies my body, just as it did theirs in 1966. Its maker “wanted them to see that they were being run by the power of this film. That it was not coming from them even though the experience of the film happened inside their body and not really in the space ... [He] wanted to really give people a chance to pretend that they were in control of the situation, but then to make it very painful and slowly clear — as though you’re slicing them very slowly — that it’s the film that is in control of what is going on.”⁴

Is then to be like *The Flicker* to be like a cyborg? Part carbon and part code. To feel that you’re fully in control right up until that moment that your memory is wiped and reprogrammed. To be scanned with luminous impulses and reprinted as a techno-human-machine-thing, responding only with, “do with me what you will, I was always already unknown, already withdrawn.”

Two hatted figures hid their faces and plugged their ears. The concussive return of the white frame was too much to bear. But me, I’m no more object now than when the lights first dimmed. *The Flicker* had made-me-over in its own image, but that image was already present even before I queued up. It was a revealing. A peeling back of skin, and stage, and screen, denuding the projection until it hardened under the brightness of its own flashing light. Its crystalline, glinting bit violently drilling the theatre’s subsurface, coughing up an inky oil that lubricated the seat covers. I slid down a row or two. As my eyes readjusted, I noticed that the ground around me was full of holes though nobody else seemed to care.

Is to be like *The Flicker* to be like a porous planet? An arterial network of entries and exits carrying blobs of black from below to above. The Black Lagoon as if it was the Creature itself. Its force hidden under rocky cover, accruing capital as it flows upward. Gaseous exhalations wafted up and down the aisles of the theatre. As above, so below. I thought, in its excess, that it might spill out into the lobby where the concession and posters are kept, carrying popped and un-popped kernels along with it. A slip-n-slide back out to the street, and daylight, and the city, but that too had been drilled. An over-handled planet with no place left to stand, but the seats remained full. Bodies pointed at backs of bodies. The floor had always been sticky, but now it was black. Total darkness, only its theory before my eyes, like right before the credits roll.

Is to be like *The Flicker* to be like the pre-universe? *Et sic in infinitum* like the monochrome. I watched Ad Reinhardt⁵ follow Robert Ryman⁶ follow Ad Reinhardt on the screen. A procession of a particular type of painter, all dense and obtuse. I longed instead for that shapeless state. Agnes Martin⁷ maybe. Actuality and potentiality co-existing at the horizon. This felt closer, but still not quite right. My eyes wandered. A plane extended. Not on the ‘x’ or ‘y’ axis, but on the ‘z’. The screen began to bulge.

It was at this point that I noticed a lightness begin to creep into my body. It’s effect was subtle, but strong enough to notice my grip tighten on the padded velvet of my arm rests. I looked to see if others in the audience were similarly

disturbed, but it seemed as if a superficial order to the rows of audience members remained. Then it appeared. There wasn’t one pair of eyes set on the screen in front. Instead their collective gaze was cast toward the theatre’s balcony. Someone had begun to levitate! Ushers frantically rushed up and down the aisles. In every direction I saw knuckles white with panic. No one was ready to float away, but the countdown to liftoff had begun.

The following events exceed my capacity to put them into words, but for her sake I will make the effort. In that theatre gravity’s tether was somehow broken. Maybe it was the intense pressure as each frame pressed against its neighbour. Black then white, then black then white. Pandemonium had broken loose. I heard a yell then a shriek, then a yell and a shriek. I recognized the source of the call. It was one of the hatted figures who had previously hidden her eyes. It was her that had been the first to lose her grip and she was now airborne. Her continued rise was steady and it wasn’t long before she hovered above the stunned audience, necks all cocked back. We watched as her hat fell. I saw her short grey hair tumble and the confused expression on her face. As she passed through the smoky projection beam her pace lessened and she became caught, pausing in place for just a moment. Her position not entirely fixed as she swayed ever so slightly from side to side. She looked like Joan Jonas⁸ blowing in *The Wind* and her silhouette carved the screen like Rubin’s Vase,⁹ appearing and disappearing in time with *The Flicker*.

It was clear that she was both trapped and afraid, yet none in the audience could provide any aid. Slowly, like a ship at sea, her route altered and her body began drifting toward the screen. Or perhaps the projector had refashioned itself as a sort of repellent tractor beam. The intense power of *The Flicker* was unforgiving and at the bleeding edge of her shadow new stories began to appear. It was ecstasy. I thought I saw a face emerge, or maybe a butterfly. Just like those films that had documented the last century here too was one creating a world, but this was not based on any collective impressions. Instead, this was a world created anew, every image or non-image a potential outcome. It was a film that apprehended the world in a way completely foreign to my mind’s conception. A film that was always already made. A trace of the world, like the sound of the ocean in a seashell.

Her pull to the screen was slow and steady. She, along with the rest of the audience, had gone silent. It was now clear that the technology was somehow running itself. She drew nearer and nearer and eventually became lost in the projection, and the world outside that bright beam disappeared. She was close enough to reach out and touch the screen. She extended the fingers of her right hand in an effort to push back against it, but they passed right through. Then went her wrist, and her forearm, and her elbow. Finally she was swallowed up whole by the screen, the projection, the light and the dark, by *The Flicker*.

The film stopped and the audience stayed silent. From the back I heard a cry, “where’d she go?” It seemed to snap some in the crowd out of their stupor, myself included. A panicked effort shortly ensued to pull back and peer behind the screen, but she was nowhere to be found. The cinema manager had been alerted and I waited with a few others until he and the police arrived, but they were full of questions and offered very little in the way of answers. They suggested it was a mass hallucination. I staggered home. It was a restless night as those unanswered questions played on repeat as I closed my eyes.

What is it like to be like *The Flicker*? The one person whose answer might have satisfied me had vanished and it was uncertain if, or when, or where she might return. I found no answer myself in the white or the black frame. Their rhythm left me cold and terrified and uncertain. But there was something in that suspect terror that begged for more. *The Flicker* persisted. Though it lasted only thirty minutes its effect made what came before and what followed indistinguishable. I thought that it may have come from a time before time, or after time, or, just as likely, from a place that didn’t include time at all.

What is it like to be like *The Flicker*? Perhaps it was better to let this question remain unanswered. I dispensed with whatever truths I had carried into the theatre with me that day. Now I saw things in a new light. *The Flicker* wanted to remain unknown and showed no signs of relenting.

1. Thomas Metzinger, *Being No One*, MIT Press, 2003, p. 169.

2. The Metalunans are a mutant species in the film *This Island Earth* (1955) that visit Earth in search of uranium and scientists, ultimately abducting Dr. Cal Meacham and Dr. Ruth Adams to help them defeat a *Zagon* attack of their home planet. The film is notable for its lauded special effects including the first on screen appearance of a tractor beam.

3. This interview appears in its entirety in Alexander Kluge’s *Cinema Stories*. I first encountered it in Martin Guttman’s essay ‘The Darkness of the Cave’ that is contained in the 2010 catalogue for Nadim Vardag’s exhibition at Augarten Contemporary, Vienna.

4. Tony Conrad ‘interview with Branden W. Joseph, Buffalo, NY, August 15-16, 1995’ from *Beyond the Dream Syndicate: Tony Conrad and the Arts after Cage*, New York, Zone Books, 2008, p.299

5. Ad Reinhardt is an American painter best known for his black-on-black paintings. He claimed that these were the “last paintings” that anyone could paint.

6. Robert Ryman is an American painter best known for his white-on-white paintings.

7. From Pace Gallery, which represents the estate of Agnes Martin, “Martin’s work is recognized as pure abstraction, in which space, metaphysics and internal emotion are explored.”

8. In Joan Jonas’ 1968 film *The Wind* the performers pass in front of a camera lens set against a sparse landscape and are seemingly blown about by a strong, unrelenting wind.

9. Rubin’s Vase is an ambiguous two-dimensional form that produces the optical effect of flipping between two opposing figure-ground relationships because of their shared common border.

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Reverse image: Audience at showing of Tony Conrad, *The Flicker*, 1965-66. Fourth New York Film Festival at Lincoln Center, September 15, 1966. Source photo: Elliott Landy