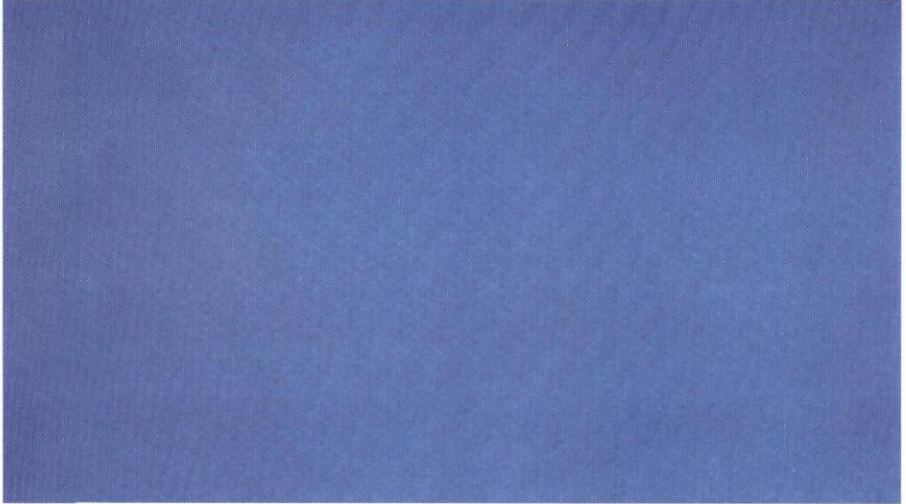




Marina Gržinić

*Hysteria: Physical Presence and Juridical Absence &  
AIDS: Physical Absence and Juridical Presence*



Derek Jarman, *Blue* (1993)

In the following essay I will examine the terms »presence« and its counterpart »absence« from two perspectives.<sup>1</sup> First, from a historical perspective, as historical constructions situated within the framework of contemporary discourses, practices, and applications. My question is how this binary pair (which has played one of the key roles in post-structuralist theory) is to be conceived today and to what extent it differs from that of the 19th century? I will approach these binary terms within the discursive contexts and representational systems of the 19th and 20th century in order to better grasp the roll they play, the assumptions they have fostered, and the belief systems they have confirmed. What is important is to determine to what scope were/are the representational politics of presence/absence used in the past and present.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Abigail Solomon-Godeau, »Who is Speaking Thus? Some Questions about Documentary Photography«, in Lorne Falk and Barbara Fischer (Eds.), *The Event Horizon*, The Coach House Press & Walter Philips Gallery, Banff and Toronto 1985, pp. 195-196.

Second, I will approach the duality of presence and absence semiotically, as part of a larger system of visual and representational communication, as both a conduit and an agent of ideologies, as a sign system which contains a contingency of visual and signifying codes which in turn determine reception and instrumentality. The »aesthetics and politics of presence/absence« is (if we refer to Victor Burgin) fundamentally concerned with the articulation of representational politics.<sup>2</sup> If we are trying to answer these questions we have to ask what is the »real of representation«?<sup>3</sup> We can claim that the binary terms of absence/presence function to ratify and affirm the complex ideological web that, at any moment in historical time, is perceived as reality *tout court*. This is also the reason why there is an initial aforementioned reference to semiotics. According to Julia Kristeva, »what semiotics had discovered is the fact that there is a general social law, that this law is the symbolic dimension which is given in language and that every social practice offers a specific expression of that law«. <sup>4</sup> Kristeva »links semiotics to the social. She calls societal law the 'symbolic', which is deeply embedded in language; the task of semiotics is to study the various social practices which express this social law«. <sup>5</sup> Thus, the function of semiotics is to »establish a heterogeneous logic of signifying practices and locate them by way of their subject in the historically determined relations of productions«. <sup>6</sup>

To grasp the politics of representation of presence/absence I will relocate it within the discursive contexts and representational systems of two illnesses: hysteria and AIDS, each of these representing the illness *par excellence* of a specific century (19th the former and 20th the latter). These illnesses function, as I intend to show, not only in relation to the duality of presence and absence, but moreover through specific ways of their representational politics, as a part of a larger visual-communication and social system. Two other important implications are present in my decision as to why hysteria and AIDS were chosen. First, I chose hysteria because of the association of

<sup>2</sup> This term was suggested by Abigail Solomon-Godeau when she referred to Victor Burgin's essays »Looking at Photographs« (1977) and »Photography, Phantasy, Function« (1980). Cf. Solomon-Godeau, *op. cit.*, p. 197.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 199.

<sup>4</sup> *The Kristeva Reader*, Toril Moi (Ed.), Oxford University Press, Oxford 1986, p. 25. For a helpful account on Kristeva's general approach to semiotic issues, see Heinz Paetzold, *The Discourse of the Postmodern and the Discourse of the Avant-Garde*, Jan van Eyck Akademie, Maastricht 1994, pp. 58-70.

<sup>5</sup> Paetzold, *op. cit.*, p. 58; cf. also Julia Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur. Essai sur l'abjection*, Editions du Seuil, Paris 1980.

<sup>6</sup> *The Kristeva Reader*, p. 32.

this illness to women – hysteria embodied the mainstream male image of a woman,<sup>7</sup> while AIDS is overtly connected to another discrimination mainstream image, to that of homosexuals. Both illnesses are used to describe fantasmatic and marginalized correspondences, acknowledging also specific historical conditions. Second, because of my interest to analyze the binary terms of presence/absence in connection with the way in which these terms correspond with a specific representational strategy, one representing the human body (i.e. representations of historically, gender and class-determined bodies). Hysteria, the illness of incongruence of image and thought, was recognized as an illness only through making visible the woman's hysterical body. AIDS, the disease *par excellence* of our times, because of specific representational techniques practiced in the media for the general public, coincides with new media technologies, virtual environments and/or cyberspace. All of them appear to be insisting on and fostering the erasure of the body. My thesis is that the mass media techniques of representations of AIDS are fostering the absence of the »real« sick body, similarly to the way contemporaneity is fostering the disembodiment of the subject within new media technologies. Never or rarely is it possible to see film documentaries of persons suffering from or dying of AIDS. This process has gone so far today that one of the theoretical options of investigation of the politics of representation of our present is to find ways of putting the body back into the picture.<sup>8</sup>

In the last part of this essay I will try to synthesize different interplays between presence/absence and hysteria/AIDS by using the semiotic square, a technique of discursive analysis developed by A. J. Greimas. The semiotic square was designed to disclose the implications inherent in such binary relationships, thus helping to make explicit the »hidden« meanings which »stabilize« and generate significance.

### *I. Hysteria: Physical Presence and Juridical Absence*

The first part of the title of this essay refers to a formulation which appears in Norman Bryson's study *The Logic of the Gaze*. There Bryson is interpreting the work of Theodore Géricault, who, in the beginning of the 19th century (1822-23), studied the influence of mental states on the human face

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1985.

<sup>8</sup> 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. & London 1996, p. 4.

and believed that the face accurately revealed the inner character, particularly in dementia and in cases of instant death. He made studies of inmates in hospitals and institutions for the criminally insane, where he himself spent time as a patient. Bryson claimed that if the historic purpose of the portrait genre is to record a precise social position, a particular instance of status in the hierarchy of power, then Géricault's portraits of insane people, from the first moment, exhibited a contradiction. For Bryson the portrait of the insane is, therefore, an impossible object, a categorical scandal, since the insane are those who have been displaced from any social hierarchy, who cannot be located on a social map, and whose portraits consequently cannot be painted. Bryson concluded that Géricault fused the categories of privilege and social void, society and asylum, and physical presence and juridical absence.<sup>9</sup>

Martin Charcot's photographs of the hysterical patients taken at Salpêtrière hospital (1877-80) had the same purpose.<sup>10</sup> Because the underlying pathology of hysteria is invisible, Charcot doubted that hysteria was a disease at all. In contrast to Pierre Janet, one of the early explorers of hysteria who believed that paralysis occurred in the hysteric because he was unable to form an image of his limbs and therefore was unable to move them, Charcot thought that hysterics were unable to obliterate the pre-existing images of paralysis. For both, hysteria was a problem of representation – the incongruence of image and thought, a disease occasioned by a problem of representation. To anchor this mobile disease Charcot enlisted the aid of photography. With photographs of the hysterics Charcot attempted to make visible this disease that could not be acknowledged except through behaviour or representations.<sup>11</sup> Just like Charcot's photographs, Géricault's previous studies functioned »as the institution of the subject, in this case of the insane persons, within the visible«.<sup>12</sup>

This institution of the subject within the visible was done according to a precisely chosen representational mode of the epoch – photography – therefore using modes and techniques that overdetermined visibility in a more general way within the period discussed. The categories of absence and presence are therefore in a dual relation to the institution of the subject within the visible. Joan Copjec points out that hysteria, an illness of the imagination,

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze*, Yale University Press, London and New Haven 1983, p. 143.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Jo Anna Issak, »Mapping the Imaginary«, in *The Event Horizon*, p. 137. In this first section of my essay I am following and reconsidering Issak's thesis about hysteria and representation from her essay »Mapping the Imaginary«.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 137-138.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 139.



Jean Martin Charcot, «Attitudes Passionelles: Menace» from *Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière, 1877-80*.

threatened knowledge, and in confusing categories of real and unreal illnesses, true perception and false images, made the physician a potential victim of trickery and deception, casting doubt on his senses that were the foundation of his knowledge.<sup>13</sup> The issue therefore was not only to discover the relation between representations and hysteria, but to use the most appropriate regime of representation for this kind of instauration.

Charcot who was an adherent of Géricault's theories, learned from his works, such as the *Insane Woman, Envy* (1822-23), »not how malicious mischief or envy would manifest itself on the human face, but what the photographs taken at Salpêtrière hospital 50 years after Géricault should look like«.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Joan Copjec, »Flavet et Dissipati Sunt«, *October* 18 (Autumn 1981), p. 23.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Isaak, *op. cit.*, p. 142.

When looking at Géricault's *Envy* series, the art historian Gardner argued that Géricault's *Insane Women* had a peculiar hypnotic power as well as an astonishing authenticity in the presentation of the psychic facts. For Gardner *The Insane Women* are another example of the increasingly realistic core of Romantic painting. The closer the Romantic involved himself with nature, sane or insane, the more clarity he gained, thus moving closer to the »truth«. Increasingly, this would mean for painting the optical truth, as well as truth with regard to »the way things are«. <sup>15</sup> What Charcot learned from Géricault was not the »authenticity in presentation of psychic fact«, but the Renaissance notion of the artist who is instituting the visible within a rationalized system of perceptual codes. <sup>16</sup> Photography, then being theorized as both the outcome and in the service of positivism – objective, unmediated, actually imprinted by the light rays of the original form – was the ideal representational mode to be used in bringing the disease into a discursive construction. <sup>17</sup>

In summarizing Charcot's and Géricault's methodologies, I would conclude first that a physical presence was not a question of authenticity in the presentation of psychic facts, but was, in the 19th century, a process of instituting the visible within a rationalized system of perceptual codes. In the case of Charcot this was a Renaissance notion; of the artist as a *quantifier* within the medium of photography, the latter being theorized as both the product of and subordinate to positivism. If the reference to hysteria is understood to be a blind spot in the positivist genealogy of illnesses, then we can theorize Charcot's attempt through the way he tried to bring something, which previously had not been subject to the rules of visibility, into the system of »presence« and representation. Jo Anna Isaak argues that Charcot was doing this through his reference to Renaissance paintings, utilizing Renaissance perceptual codes, such as linear perspective. Linear perspective was used to facilitate impersonal objective statements producing identical meanings within all viewers, referring to the cumulative and repeatable effects. <sup>18</sup> It is unnecessary to go into detail concerning the Renaissance perspective system. However, I would like to add, as Isaak implies, that perspective was extremely useful to Europeans who needed to develop a visual language of and for the property of newly discovered territories.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Louise Gardner, *Art Through the Ages*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York 1980, p. 737.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Isaak, *op. cit.*, p. 142.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 139.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Samuel Edgerton, »The Renaissance Artist as Quantifier«, in Margaret A. Hagen (Ed.), *The Perception of Pictures*, Vol. I., Academic Press, New York 1980, p. 182.

But this was happening in the 19th century, so what are these processes like today? I will make a parallel between the categories of absence/presence and different systems of representation with regard to AIDS, the disease *par excellence* of our time, attempting in this way to chart the process of the institution of the subject within the visible. AIDS also presents the problem of homogenous representation and depiction – the incongruence of both the image and the gaze. In the case of AIDS, in opposition to hysteria, the underlying pathology of the disease is horribly visible, and the whole process of representation and visibility therefore operates differently, trying to erase and/or conceal the conspicuous nature of the disease. The »identification« of the spectator with a sick person or with the AIDS disease is transferred to a metonymy, whose purpose is to hide the presence of the »real« sick body. Those persons who are afflicted with AIDS are, in general, listened to rather than looked at.

An artistic articulation of the above thesis is the feature film *Blue* directed by Derek Jarman in 1993. 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>19</sup> But my interest here 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>20</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. If we make a parallel between this regime and the one depicting hysteria, we can state that AIDS is represented with the physical absence of an actually sick

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<sup>19</sup> The text in the film is about AIDS, about dying from AIDS and the inner feelings of a sick person knowing 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 societal system (medical, social, legal) which is unfavourable to persons affected by AIDS. On the other hand, Jarman meticulously describes the whole personal drama of a sick person, especially the loss of vision, 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*.

<sup>20</sup> 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*.



body, yet with a strong request through the text in the film for the juridical (judicial) presence and for the legal rights in different sections of society which are crossing or bordering the sick body. Another such example is a mainstream film about AIDS – *Philadelphia* (directed by Jonathan Demme in 1994). In it Tom Hanks portrays a character who is a pale image of a real AIDS patient. In spite of having on the level of presentation the absence of an »authentically sick body«, we nevertheless see, on the other hand, in this particular film a clear fight for a juridical presence and for the rights pertaining to juridical proceedings of the persons inflicted with AIDS, especially homosexuals.<sup>21</sup>

The binary terms of presence-absence in relation to the representation of the body and its social counterpart in the juridical system culminate in two ways simultaneously: through technological interventions and discursive practices. It is possible though, to conceive the relation of a social area in which the collision of bodies and reproduction technology (photography, film) takes place within the politics of power as it functions through the juridical system. Such a relation is also that between the invention/discovery of photography and the logic of the photograph's regime of representation and hysteria, on the one side, and the invention of new technologies and media and its regimes of representation and AIDS, on the other. What I am proposing here is not to recuperate some notion of pure investment of the category of absence and its counterpart – presence, but to outline the discursive-visual terrain in

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<sup>21</sup> Andrew Beckett (Tom Hanks) is a young lawyer with a splendid career in front of him, who is suddenly found incompetent by the law firm for which he works. Beckett knows that the real reason is him being gay and having AIDS. Beckett decides to fight and to defend his professional reputation and through this the rights of other gay people with AIDS. Joe Miller (Denzel Washington), a black lawyer of high reputation, at first decides not to take the case because of his personal prejudices against people who are gay and HIV positive, but finally accepts the case. One of the most striking conclusions of the trial is, resulting from Miller's way of conducting the affair in court, that gay people AIDS are submitted to a double process of injustice and that the fight for juridical rights in the case of gay people AIDS is, more generally speaking, also a fight for gay rights against society's strong prejudices.

Joe Miller: »The people with AIDS are submitted to social death which precedes the physical death ... What is it all about? ...About our fears of homosexuals.« The judge: »Mr. Miller, justice is blind regarding race and sex in this courtroom!« Miller: »But your Honor, we are not living in this courtroom.« – Citation from the film *Philadelphia*.

This specific situation recalls that modernity as a cultural and social project brought about the distinction between law and morality. It makes sense to measure the legal and political acts of the state against the criteria of morality, but it is not possible to conflate them into one sphere.

which such issues have functioned, both in the past and in the present. In both cases the camera, photography and film, produce representations – iconic signs – translating the actual into the representational with the categories of absence/presence. The meanings ascribed to the categories of absence and presence, sometimes inconsistent, amorphous and epistemologically vague, are constantly in flux, repositioned and reoriented and involve larger discourses which engender them. The photographs of incarcerated hysterics commissioned by Dr. Charcot, »prove and demonstrate the speculative nature and morphology of hysteria«.<sup>22</sup> The success of photography as a technology for and of image-making in anchoring the disease had to do precisely with its confirmatory aspects. The latter enabled photography to succeed in the rapid expansion and assimilation within the discourses of knowledge and power. This structural congruence of different viewpoints (the eye of the photographer, the eye of the camera, and the spectator's eye) in photography covers the quality of pure, but delusory presence.<sup>23</sup> Gardner spoke of Géricault's increasingly realistic core of representation, that is, of the obsessionally intentional and representational methods of acquiring the optical truth, the truth of the way things »were«. When Abigail Solomon-Godeau is analyzing the mechanisms internal to the media apparatus in question – photography – she claims that the most important is the »reality effect« and that »a further structuring instance lies in the perspective system of representation built into camera optics in photography's infancy«.<sup>24</sup> Modelled on the classical system of the single point monocular perspective invented in the Renaissance, camera optics were designed to yield an analogous pictorial structure. As Abigail Solomon-Godeau argued, natural vision and perception have no vanishing point, are binocular, without boundaries, in constant motion and marked by the loss of clarity in the periphery. The camera image, like much of Renaissance paintings, offers a static, uniform field in which orthogonals converge at a single vanishing point.<sup>25</sup> »The world is no longer an 'open and unbound horizon'. Limited by the framing, lined up, put at the proper distance, the world offers itself up as an object endowed with meaning, an intentional object, implied by and implying the action of the 'subject' which sights it.«<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. Solomon-Godeau, *op. cit.*, p. 201.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 208-209.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 209.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Jean-Louis Baudry, »Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus«, in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha (Ed.), *Apparatus*, Tanam Press, New York 1980, p. 26.

Furthermore, if we consider the act of looking at a photograph with respect to gender or the operations of the psyche – the complex acts of projection, voyeurism, fantasy and desires that inform our seeing, we cannot, as Salomon-Godeau argued, abandon the earlier, innocent belief that the camera presents us with visual facts that are simply »out there« and which we now disinterestedly observe and register. We have to accept that there are ideological effects inherent to the photographic apparatus, and that these effects influence relations, scopic commands, and the confirmation or displacement of subject positions.

In conclusion to the first established connection between representation, photography and hysteria, we can state that the fusion of physical presence and juridical absence in the photographs of the hysterics also offers a counter-reading. On the one hand, this specific institution of the subject within the visible was possible or was the result of the specific ideological mechanisms of the optical truth intrinsic to the photographic apparatus. On the other hand, this same apparatus reinforced the position of juridical absence of the insane person. As Pierre Bourdieu commented, discussing the social uses of photography: »In stamping photography with the patent of realism, society does nothing but confirm itself in the tautological certainty that an image of reality that conforms to its own representation of objectivity is truly objective.«<sup>27</sup>

## *II. AIDS: Physical Absence and Juridical Presence*

I have presented, referring to Jo Anna Issak and Abigail Solomon-Godeau, the relationships between the invention and discovery of photography, hysteria and the notions of absence/presence as those of physical presence and juridical absence. I shall proceed to the relationships between the logic of representation of new technologies and media and the representation of AIDS.

The persons 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 his personal blindness, the consequences of him dying of AIDS, depicting this with the blue canvas; the zero degree of representation. Jarman moved from the disintegration of film structure to that of the viewer's sight. The institution

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<sup>27</sup> Cited in Rosalind Krauss, »A note on Photography and the Simulacra«, in *October* 31 (Winter 1984), p. 57.

of the subject ill 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>28</sup> In the film *Blue* this is carried out less by the aid of the medium used – the film, than with the strategically incorporated logic of the visualization of new media and of the regime of visibility carried out by new media technologies.

In the film *Blue*, 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. With 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 visuality produced by the 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>29</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 postmodern sense of truth.<sup>30</sup> Lyotard emphasizes repeatedly the increase of scientific knowledge through its mediation with technology. The whole process of seeing through lies in its mediation through technology.<sup>31</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 'can'.«<sup>32</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

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<sup>28</sup> 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.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Paetzold, »Lyotard's Definitions of the Postmodern Status of Knowledge«, in Paetzold, *op. cit.*, pp. 14-21.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1984, pp. 42-52.

<sup>32</sup> Paul Virilio, *Vision Machine*, British Film Institute and Indiana University Press, London and Bloomington, Indiana 1994, p. 7.

next. But, following Virilio<sup>33</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 though the possibility of achieving sightless vision, whereby the 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 with his/her body along with the systematic »production« of blindness, and of the absence of certainty (of the naked human eye) 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 the 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>34</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 the 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

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<sup>33</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, Chapters 1 and 2.

<sup>34</sup> Paetzold, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

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>35</sup>

Main features which are currently produced by new media technology (blindness of the natural human eye, hyper-realism in legal and police procedures and the 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, which I posed in the beginning of this essay, i.e., »how to put bodies back into the picture«?<sup>36</sup> – 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 postmodern condition of persons suffering from HIV, a clear demand for the juridical presence and the rights of those afflicted with AIDS within the structures of power in contemporary society is made. 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

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<sup>35</sup> Cf. Virilio, *op. cit.*, pp. 43-44.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Hayles, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

'concrete presence' in the world, but of a 'discrete telepresence' whose enigma remains forever intact.«<sup>37</sup>

### III. *The Experiential Reception of the Image*

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>38</sup> For Druckrey the discursive operations of the late 20th century informational systems 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>39</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>40</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>41</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 *Blue*'s blue canvas, we can argue that it is framed as a film screen, but due to its insistent and suspended

<sup>37</sup> Paul Virilio, »The Third Interval: A Critical Transition«, in Verena Andermatt Conley (Ed.), *Rethinking Technologies*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1993, p. 4.

<sup>38</sup> 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, »Introduction«, in *Immersed in Technology: Art and Virtual Environments*, p. XVIII.

<sup>39</sup> I am referring here to Helen Cadwallder's report and evaluation of the presentation of Timothy Druckrey's paper »Crash, Crisis, Containment and Cyberia«, at the *5th International Conference on Cyberspace*, Cyberconf, Madrid, June 1996, in Helen Cadwallder, »5th International Conference on Cyberspace«, in *Mute*, No. 6, London 1996, p. 4.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

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, in 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 and we can therefore ask how this specific practice of text/image relates 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>42</sup>

Implications of this shift to the experiential from the perceptual reception of the image can be drawn from Gianni Vattimo's juxtaposing 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 postmodern 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« (blow). »Shock« and »Stoss« mirror the urbanite 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>43</sup> This is just what we are witnessing in the film *Blue*, Jarman's dismantling of the image, resulting in its 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, of an alternative wilderness or terrain.

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<sup>42</sup> Cf. Paetzold, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Gianni Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, Oxford University Press, Cambridge and Oxford 1992, p. 58.



IV. *The Semiotic Square*

In this final section I am using the semiotic square to re-examine the implications inherent in binary pairs by making explicit the hidden terms that help to stabilize meaning and generate significance, and I am, to a large extent, relying on a similar application of A. J. Greimas's semiotic square developed by N. Katherine Hayles.<sup>44</sup> The semiotic square is a technique of discursive analysis which begins with the choice of a binary pair. Presence and absence can form a pair and the primary duality of such a square. The duality of presence and absence in the semiotic square signifies concepts in dynamic interplay with each other rather than as independently existing terms. The purpose of choosing the second duality is to detect the implications contained in the first pair. Since my interest lies in representations of the body in relation to presence-absence within the juridical terrain, I will choose hysteria (its physical presence, juridical absence) as the third term. The fourth term is generated by taking the negative of hysteria: AIDS (its physical absence, juridical presence).

Since the interplay between presence and absence generates a specific material inscription in the social-political context (through the juridical system and other apparatuses connected with law), the axis connecting these terms should be a juridical (material) inscription:

juridical (material) inscription  
 Presence  $\longleftrightarrow$  Absence

The interplay between hysteria and AIDS generates different representational inscriptions, with the axis connecting these terms forming representational regimes:

representational regimes  
 AIDS  $\longleftrightarrow$  Hysteria

Now that both sets of duality are in place, the semiotic square can be used to investigate the implications of the shift from the real effect of photography to the impact of the virtuality of new media and technology to different systems of representation, moreover, onto different ways of inscribing the body within the visible and the political context.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. N. Katherine Hayles, »Embodied Virtuality: Or How to Put Bodies Back into the Picture«, pp. 7-10.



generated by absence of the positive first term – presence. The fourth term, AIDS, is produced by the negative of the third term, hysteria, which is already marked by negativity. »Thus the fourth term represents a negation of negation. Because of this double negation, it is the least explicitly specified of all the four terms and therefore the most productive of new complications and insights.«<sup>48</sup> It is from the double (elusive) negativity of the fourth term that the »new« is likely to emerge, for the fourth term carries within it the most open and critical potentiality.<sup>49</sup>

The same semiotic square was used by Donna Haraway to travel to Virtual Space: »To get through the artifactual to elsewhere, it would help to have a little travel machine that also functions as a map«:<sup>50</sup> A. J. Greimas's »infamous« (Haraway's term) semiotic square. The semiotic square, so subtle in the hands of Frederic Jameson, was used in a more rigid and literal way in her essay just to keep four spaces in differential and relational separation, while she explored how certain local/global struggles for meanings and embodiments of nature occur within them. The four regions through which Haraway moved were: (A) Real Space or Earth; (B) Outer Space or the Extra-terrestrial; (not-B) Inner Space or the Body; and finally, (not –A) Virtual Space or the SF world.<sup>51</sup> Virtual Space takes the same position as AIDS in my semiotic square.

What can we learn from such an application of the semiotic square? It schematically shows possible relations that can emerge when the juridical realm and representation influence each other, thus providing a theoretical framework in which such apparently diverse ideas can be understood as different manifestations of the same underlying phenomena. The devastating effects this interplay between AIDS and presence within the realm of representation can have on traditional concepts of identity appears in different modes, one of them being that the physical durability of the body is just an illusion. On the one hand, the specific institution of the subject within the visible established in hysteria was possible or at least was the result of a specific ideological mechanism of the optical »truth« which is intrinsic to the photographic apparatus. On the other hand, this same apparatus reinforced the position of juridical absence of the insane person. The disruption of the

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Donna Haraway, »The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others«, in Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson and Paula A. Treichler (Eds.), *Cultural Studies*, Routledge, New York and London 1992, p. 304.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Haraway, *op. cit.*, p. 305. See also Fredric Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1972.

visibility of hysteria by AIDS is therefore as inevitable as the linkage of AIDS with death.

No person in the film *Blue*, including the narrator, is seen on screen. As viewers we are eavesdroppers on a one-sided conversation from a place and person totally outside the depicted fictitious space of the film, a space both familiar and alien to that occupied by the audience. The viewer's initial *jouissance* or sense of wholeness is disrupted when it becomes evident that the camera, not the viewer, controls the gaze. In the film *Blue*, this is happening from the first moment. Throughout the film we are waiting for the point of subversion, for the unmasking by the camera – but only the colour blue remains there. Thus the highlighting of the information which the camera controls causes intense displeasure for the viewer. The narrative authority, often signified by the soundtrack of a voice-over, is displaced from its naturalized associations to the Other by a radical dispersion of narrative space. This radical decentralization of the narrative space is produced by the absence of a visible physical presence. In a traditional narrative form the speaker would most likely be shown. The film *Blue* forces the viewer to ask »who is speaking« and dismantles traditional hegemonic narrative structures. The speaker, of whom the film is about, does not emerge as a subject, but is referred to indirectly, and is therefore present by his absence, existing as a void in the text. Maybe this alternating identification is what Jarman was implying with *Blue's* extreme immersion into discursivity, which allows people afflicted with AIDS not only to be represented, but also to be the ones who will participate in the production and articulation and of new meanings concerning their own condition.