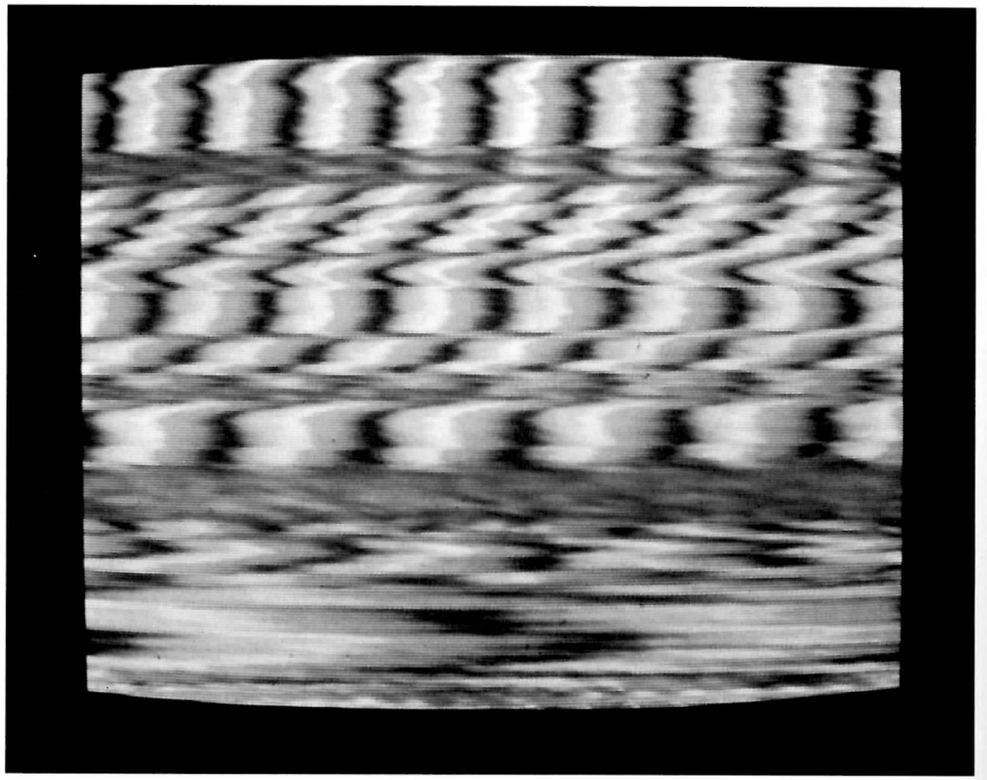


Bill Viola, *Information*, 1973.

Video Black—The Mortality of the Image

BILL VIOLA

Somewhere there is a video camera that has not been shut off for the last twenty years. Its rigid, unblinking eye has tirelessly been scanning a parking lot someplace, silent witness to all the comings and goings of the past two decades. It has seen the same man get out of his car each morning, his body gradually sagging, less resistant to gravity, as his gait imperceptibly slows over the intervening time. It has seen the unbroken procession of days and nights, the cyclic changes in the sun and moon, the growth of trees, and the perpetual variations of weather with the accumulation of its harsh marks. It has seen the parade of fashion in car design and clothing, and witnessed the evidences of human intentions and impulses in the sudden material alterations of the physical landscape.

However, this perpetual observer has no stories to tell, no store of wisdom, no knowledge of the grand patterns. Locked within a great immutable Now, it has no sense of past or future. Without a memory to give it a life, events flicker across its image surface with only a split second to linger as afterimages, disappearing forever without a trace. Today it will be shut off, the world abruptly ending in an arbitrary cutoff point as all endings are, and a new model camera installed. In another society, this camera, with its accumulated existence, would be graduated to an object of power to be venerated and reciprocated. In the least, the tubes of old cameras such as this should be installed in a shrine with the hope that someday some future technology could coax from their surface the subtle residue of a lifetime's experience. Today's event will pass with barely a notice.

The Eternal Image

It is difficult to imagine how the human mind could function without the conviction that there is something irreducibly *real* in the world; and it is impossible to imagine how consciousness could appear without a *meaning* on man's impulses and experiences. Consciousness of a real and meaningful world is intimately connected with the discovery of the sacred....

In short, the "sacred" is an element in the structure of consciousness and not a stage in the history of consciousness.[1]

—Mircea Eliade

The concept that objects can acquire power, that a human being's inner thoughts and impulses can have a residual effect on the outer physical world, is of archaic origin. Reflecting a time when the material elements of nature were effused with Mind or spirit, this timeless world view is confined today to vague subjective sensations, often described as emotional, of empathy and the awareness of a "larger-than-me" order that often mark encounters with the remnants of the natural landscape. The evolution in cultural memory (history) of the assumed location of the artificial image describes a progressive emergence from within the heart and mind of the individual outward to its current residence as a depiction of the external world.

Sacred art in the Western tradition evokes images of the gold-leafed painted panels of the Middle Ages, a time when Asian and European art shared a common ground. One of the most striking things about medieval religious art is that the landscape (for us the *materia prima;* the physical, hard, "real" stuff of the world) appears as an insignificant element, a backdrop subordinate to the religious vision or epiphany. Space is a radiant gold and is substantially less real than the spiritual reality (scene or events) depicted. From our point of view, the inner and outer worlds have reversed their roles.

The Indian, or Far Eastern icon, carved or painted is neither a memory image nor an idealization, but a visual symbolism, ideal in the mathematical sense. . . . Where European art naturally depicts a moment of time, an arrested action, or an effect of light, Oriental art represents a continuous condition. In traditional European terms we should express this by saying that modern European art endeavors to represent things as they are in themselves, Asiatic and Christian art to represent things more nearly as they are in God, or nearer their source.[2]

—A. K. Coomaraswamy

Paramount to the notion of the image as sacred object is the icon, a form found in both oriental and occidental traditions. The term *icon* (ancient Greek for "image") as it is usually understood refers more to a process or a condition rather than to any physical characteristics of an object. An icon can be any image that has acquired power through its use as an object of worship. In fact, the status of icon was the goal and even the measure of success of the majority of visual artworks created in the great religious traditions of ancient Christianity, Buddhism, and Hinduism. The presence of art critics was not required since devotees knew immediately at first glance whether the work in question qualified. The artists created their works for God, not for the art world, and therefore the work had to be exceptional and as close to perfect as possible, their personal devotion and insight being the main criterion and primary evidence of quality in the finished work.

Icons are timeless images, and in the West even though they often do depict a temporal event (the Annunciation, the Flight Out of Egypt, etc.) the mythic/religious existence of those events (i.e., their present tense) is far more important. Icons maintain their currency by being continually updated to the present, by sustaining a constant relevance to Now. They are necessarily functional objects, their function fulfilling a most basic primary and private need within the individual.

Images become icons either through content alone, i.e., images that were commissioned to perform such roles or, more importantly, through the cumulative power of use, itself a reaffirmation of an image's intrinsic power. It is as if the continuous act of worship/veneration leaves a residue that builds up over the years. This aspect of the Christian icon is an echo of the animistic world view of older tribal, "pagan" societies. No wonder such a strong backlash was unleashed in the home of the classical Christian icon, the Eastern church of the Byzantine empire. There in the eighth century, the so-called iconoclasts declared such practices pagan, initiating a conflict lasting more than a hundred years. Icon worship was finally restored by imperial decree.

Unlike the consumption-oriented mass media images of contemporary culture, icons maintain their relevance by remaining the same for centuries. Giving form to eternal realities, their affinity is toward the eternal themselves.

The Temporal Image

As the eye, so the object.

—William Blake

One day in 1425, Filippo Brunelleschi walked out onto the Piazza del Duomo in Florence, and standing at the main doors to the cathedral, facing the baptistry across the piazza, he set up a small wooden box on a stand. He had invited various influential friends and *cognoscenti* to witness his experiment. One by one they stepped up to this curious device and closed one eye to stare through a small hole in one side.

To a twentieth-century observer, the only interpretation of this scene could be that of a photographer demonstrating a new camera, and by expanding the definition of photography perhaps more than is acceptable, Brunelleschi's box could be considered a crude camera. For a citizen of fifteenth-century Florence, the effects of looking into this device were as mind-boggling and astounding as if seeing an actual camera for the first time. Peering into the small hole, they first saw the direct monocular view of the baptistry across

the way. Then, by the flip of a lever, a mirror was moved into position and a small painting of the baptistry appeared, exactly in line and proportional to the direct view. In fact, in regards to geometry and form, the two were barely distinguishable. Brunelleschi had made a sharp right hand-turn out of the Middle Ages.

That Brunelleschi's demonstration seems so obvious to us today is a measure of its intellectual achievement—the more a revolutionary discovery shifts or even shatters the world view, the more commonplace it seems to observers of subsequent ages. What he accomplished that day must have seemed to the others of his time to be at the very limits of knowledge, as incredible, for example, as some of the quantum physicists' descriptions of our world. Prior to 1424, no one had ever painted an image that way. Historians describe this event as Brunelleschi's public pronouncement of the laws of linear perspective, which he is credited with discovering, and there is no doubt that his new system, along with its formalization and publication by his friend Leon Alberti twelve years later, irrevocably altered the history of painting and accelerated the development of techniques of artificial image making.

However, describing Brunelleschi's breakthrough as simply the discovery of the vanishing point places an inordinate emphasis on the picture itself as the locale of this revolutionary change. What Brunelleschi achieved was the personification of the image, the creation of a "point of view" and its identification with a place in real space. In doing so, he elevated the position of the individual viewer to an intregal part of the picture by encoding this presence as the inverse, *in absentia,* source of the converging perspectival lines. The picture became an opaque mirror for the viewer, and the viewer, in turn, became the embodiment of the painter, "completing the picture" as art historians like to say, with the two points of view merging in a single physical spot. The painter now says when he or she paints, "See things as I see them. . . . Stand in my shoes. . . ." Consequently, the picture plane and the retina became the same surface. Of course, Whose retina? was the key question as the manipulation of the viewer, an early form of behaviorism, was added to the list of artistic techniques.

In the dialogue between viewer and image, there were now three entities created, where formerly there were two, or possibly even one. Since previously most images were diagrammatic and/or emblematic representations (i.e., thoroughly two-dimensional), their use as a sacred vehicle was to achieve a sense of union between the viewer and the divinity. The image was to be taken to heart within the individual, with the concurrent loss of self-identity, so common to religious experience, forming the single image of "self/deity." It was an evocation rather than a description (the picture evoked the god or goddess within, not described him or her without).

With the new identification of the viewer with the painter rather than the sacred object, however, came the placement of both of them relative to a third entity, the nearby physical object(s), or subject of the painting, and along with it possibly the inauguration of the process of encroachment of the individual ego (i.e., the artists's) onto the image in the visual arts.

In the Brunelleschian world, the mechanism is perception, the image retinal. When the emphasis is on the act of seeing at a physical place, then time enters the picture as well ("if it's here, it's not there—if it's now, it's not then"). Images become "frozen moments." They become artifacts of the past. In securing a place on earth, they have accepted their own mortality.

The Temporary Image

**For the memories themselves are not important.
Only when they have changed into our very blood,
into glance and gesture, and are nameless, no
longer to be distinguished from ourselves—only
then can it happen that in some very rare hour
the first word of a poem arises in their midst and
goes forth from them.[3]**

—Rainer Maria Rilke

More than 400 years after "the Fall" of the image, it was no coincidence that, just when the original powerful realization of the optical image was transforming itself into the physical form of the photographic picture machine, the painters were advancing their discoveries of light and image as palpable substances independent of the object. The physical act of rendering the visual world as-the-eye-sees-it was being taken out of their hands, while for their part, the image had once again diverged to begin a slow return to dematerialization and internalization.

The inevitable mechanization of the image made possible two things that led to its liberation from the prison of frozen time: machine nature introduced automated sequential repeatability, and advances in the material sciences made possible the fixing of light impressions on a durable surface, both necessary for the advent of the first moving pictures. It is important to note that the invention of photography was not the invention of the camera, but that of the process of fixing an image onto a plate. Real-time viewing boxes, similar to today's view cameras without the film, were available since the late eighteenth century, the projections of magic lanterns were known in the seventeenth century, and the camera obscura had been around for millennia, probably arising in ancient China. (It is most likely that Brunelleschi was aware of the camera obscura, but regardless he was certainly influenced by new concepts in all fields, including optics, then being imported from the Arabic and Persian cul-

tures of the East through the translation of the ancient manuscripts of the Greeks and more recent texts by great Arabic thinkers such as Alhazen (Ibn al-Haytham).

In this sense, moving images had been around for a long time. Technically, however, the first imparting of movement to artificial images (in this case drawings) occurred in 1832 with the simultaneous inventions of Joseph A. F. Plateau's Phenakistiscope and Simon R. von Stampfer's Stroboscope, soon followed by others, and leading up to the eventual integration of the photographic image into the process at the Edison laboratory during 1888–89 and the birth of true cinema. The emphasis of the term *moving image* is somewhat misleading, since the images themselves aren't really moving and the art of cinema lies more in the combination of image sequences in time (montage) than it does in making the images move.

Still, the question remains, exactly what is this movement in the moving image? Clearly it is more than the frenetic animation of bodies. Hollis Frampton, the great American avant-garde filmmaker, described it as "the mimesis, incarnation, and bodying forth of the movement of human consciousness itself." The root of the cinematic process remained the still picture, but images now had behavior, and the entire phenomenon began to resemble less the material objects depicted and more the process of the mind that was moving them.

A thought is a function of time, a pattern of growth, and not the "thing" that the lens of the printed word seems to objectify. It is more like a cloud than a rock, although its effects can be just as long lasting as a block of stone, and its aging subject to the similar processes of destructive erosion and constructive edification. Duration is the medium that makes thought possible, therefore duration is to consciousness as light is to the eye.

Time itself has become the *materia prima* of the art of the moving image. The "unsticking" of the image in time has been a gradual process, and its effects are permeating art and culture in the late twentieth century, moving beyond the domain of conventional cinematic form and serving to dislodge the dominant compositional model of the dramatic narrative (based on Aristotle's theories of 400 B.C.). This chapter in art history will potentially be as significant as the introduction of three-dimensional space originally was to painting. No doubt the first examples of time-based visual art in the twentieth century will be regarded by future observers as being clumsy and childlike, much in the same way that the modern eye tends to see the medieval painter's first attempts at three-dimensional representation.

If from the medieval vantage point, the post-Brunelleschi optical painting seemed not to be all here (the illusion of someplace else compared to the concrete, nondescriptive existence of the icon image), then cinema was "really" not here. The physical apparatus of the moving image necessitates its existence as a primarily mental phenomenon. The viewer sees only one image at a time in the case of film and, more extreme, only the decay trace of a single moving point of light in video. In either case, the whole does not exist (except in a dormant state coiled up in the can or tape box), and therefore can only reside in the mind of the person who has seen it, to be periodically revived through their memory. Conceptual and physical movement become equal, experience becomes a language, and an odd sort of concreteness emerges from the highly abstract, metaphysical nature of the medium. It is the concreteness of individual experience, the original impetus for the story—"I went here and this happened. . . ." Sitting in the dark room, we sense a strange familiarity—an image is born, flashes before our eyes, and dies in blackness.

Once there was a train of images sequentially unfolding in time, there was "a moving image" and with it, by necessity, a beginning and an end; mortal images, with the camera as death. As long as perpetual motion remains an unrealized dream, there will always be a last image, usually with darkness as a final punctuation. Fade to black . . .

The Last Image

I raise the mirror of my life
Up to my face: sixty years.
With a swing I smash the reflection—
The world as usual.
All in its place.[4]

After writing these lines in 1555, the Zen priest Taigen Sofu put down his brush and died. (From the Japanese tradition of *jisei*, poems written by Zen monks and Haiku poets on the verge of death.)

In many countries throughout the world, black is the color of mourning. Echoing this ineffable finality, in European culture black is considered to be outside color, the condition of the "absence of light." The focal point for black in our lives is the pupil of the eye, portal to the tiny chamber in center of the eyeball where darkness is necessary to resolve the original parent of the artificial image.

When the means of the artistic creation of images are the laws of optics and the properties of light, and the focus is the human eye, it was only a matter of time before someone thought to hold up a mirror. The ideal mirror, around since the beginning of humankind, is the black background of the pupil of the eye. There is a natural human propensity to want to stare into the eye of another or, by extension of oneself, a desire to see seeing itself, as if the

straining to see inside the little black center of the eye will reveal not only the secrets of the other, but of the totality of human vision. After all, the pupil is the boundary, and veil, to both internal and external vision.

Looking closely into the eye, the first thing to be seen, indeed the only thing to be seen, is one's own self-image. This leads to the awareness of two curious properties of pupil gazing. The first is the condition of infinite reflection, the first visual feedback. The tiny person I see on the black field of the pupil also has an eye within which is reflected the tiny image of a person . . . and so on. The second is the physical fact that the closer I get to have a better view into the eye, the larger my own image becomes thus blocking my view within. These two phenomena have each inspired ancient avenues of philosophical investigation and, in addition to the palpable ontological power of looking directly into the organs of sight, were considered proof of the uniqueness and special power of the eyes and the sense of sight.

Staring into the eye is an ancient form of autohypnosis and meditation. In the Alcibiades of Plato, Socrates describes the process of acquiring self-knowledge from the contemplation of the self in the pupil of another eye, or in the reflection of one's own.

Socrates (describing the Delphic inscription "gnothi seauton"): I will tell you what I think is the real advice this inscription offers. The only example I find to explain it has to do with seeing. . . . Suppose we spoke to our eye as if it were a man and told it: "See thyself". . . would it not mean that the eye should look at something in which it could recognize itself?

Alcibiades: Mirrors and things of that sort?

Socrates: Quite right. And is there not something of that sort in the eye we see with? . . . Haven't you noticed that when one looks someone in the eye, he sees his own face in the center of the other eye, as if in a mirror? This is why we call the center of the eye the "pupil" (puppet): because it reflects a sort of miniature image of the person looking into it. . . . So when one eye looks at another and gazes into that inmost part by virtue of which that eye sees, then it sees itself.

Alcibiades: That's true.

Socrates: And if the soul too wants to know itself, must it not look at a soul, especially at that inmost part of it where reason and wisdom dwell? . . . This part of the soul resembles God. So whoever looks at this and comes to know all that is divine—God and insight through reason—will thereby gain a deep knowledge of himself.[5]

The medieval Neoplatonists practiced meditating on the pupil of the eye, or *speculation,* a word that literally means "mirror gazing." The word *contemplation* is derived from the ancient practice of divination where a *templum* is marked off in the sky by the crook of an auger to observe the passage of crows through the square. *Medi*tation and *concen*tration both refer to the centering process of focusing on the self.

The black pupil also represents the ground of nothingness, the place before and after the image, the basis of the "void" described in all systems of spiritual training. It is what Meister Eckhart described as "the stripping away of everything, not only that which is other, but even one's own being."

In ancient Persian cosmology, black exists as a color and is considered to be "higher" than white in the universal color scheme. This idea is derived in part as well from the color of the pupil. The black disc of the pupil is the inverse of the white circle of the sun. The tiny image in "the apple of the eye" was traditionally believed to be a person's self, his or her soul, existing in complimentary relationship to the sun, the world-eye.

"There is nothing brighter than the sun, for through it all things become manifest. Yet if the sun did not go down at night, or if it were not veiled by the shade, no one would realize that there is such a thing as light on the face of the earth. . . . They have apprehended light through its opposite. . . . The difficulty in knowing God is therefore due to brightness; He is so bright that men's hearts have not the strength to perceive it. . . . He is hidden by His very brightness."[6]

—Al-Ghazzali (1058–1111)

So, black becomes a bright light on a dark day, the intense light bringing on the protective darkness of the closed eye; the black of the annihilation of the self.

Fade to black . . .

[Silence]

A voice is heard in the darkness: . . . but wait, fade to black is just one of the blacks in video—there are actually three states of video that can be black like what you're talking about.

Narrator: And what are they?

Voice: Well, there's video black, as in "fade to black." Then there's snow, when the set is on but there is no signal present—you can also see this as a blank, dark screen on video monitors. And then there's nothing, when the plug is pulled out and the set is cold. In terms of our bodies, these are like closing your eyes, sleep, and death.

Narrator: I see. So, if I understand what you're saying, as long as there is the kernel of self-consciousness, as in the first two stages and sometimes

even in the darkest depths of the intermediate zone between stages two and three, the "near-death" or "beyond-death" experiences, then there is always the possibility for renewal.

Voice: That's it. Self-consciousness is the awareness of context—you know . . . the view from above, the motivation to keep flipping the power switch back on.

Narrator. That reminds me of a recurring dream I have.

Voice: Tell me.

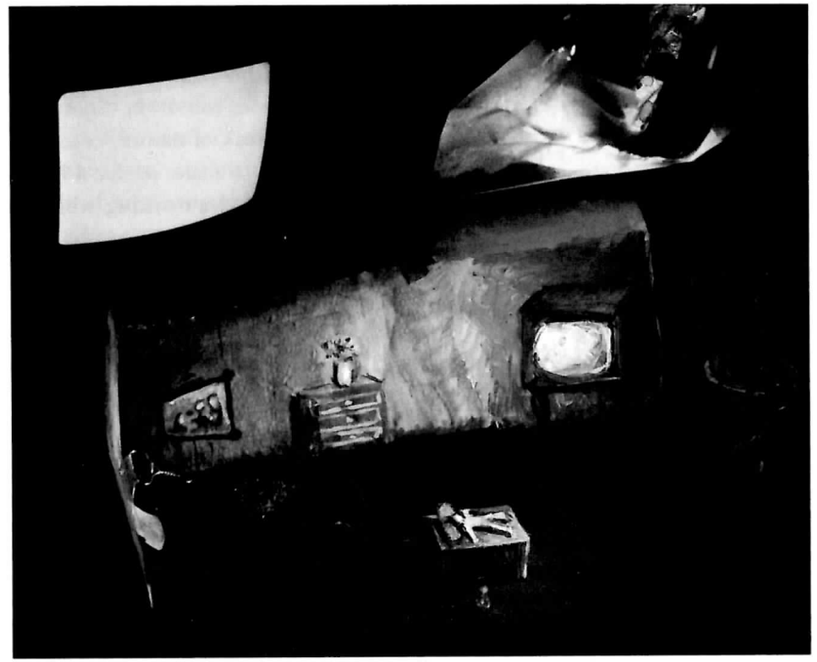
Narrator: There is nothing but black. I am awake. Lying on my back, I sense my breathing, quiet and regular. I roll over and stare upwards. I see nothing, or rather I am trying to understand what I am seeing. There is the sensation of space, palpable in the blackness, but it is depth without the reassuring content of an image. There is the sensation of my body, its extension and weight pressing downwards. And there are these questions in silent dialogue with the darkness. I bring my hand up to my face. There is nothing. I turn it over, wave it and the slight brush of the movement of air is felt against my cheek. I lie motionless. There is a slight ringing sensation in my ears, and my mouth feels dry because I haven't wanted to move, not even to swallow. Without motion, I slowly am aware of the loss of sensation in my limbs. I don't know how long I have been lying like this. I imagine the darkness as an immense soft black cloud of cotton wool, silent and weightless, gradually pressing in around my body. Everything seems to be closing down to a small opening just around my face; outside of this small area, the oblivion of nothing. Finally, like a body under water focused on breathing through a tiny straw, I let that go and feel myself submerged in the great comfort of the senseless and weightless void.

Voice: [Dumbfounded silence]

Fade to black.

In two minutes, the tape runs out and the screen is plunged into snow. The hissing sound jars the viewer from sleep. A hand slowly comes in and fumbles for the power button. There is a click, silence, and the snow on the screen abruptly collapses into a momentary point of light, which gradually fades while the glass screen quietly crackles, dissipating its static charge, and the internal circuits begin to lose their heat to the cold night.

Phototropic



Tony Oursler, *Video Dream,* from *Spheres of Influence,* 1989.

The spectrum of tragedy brings people together. Its many jagged colors, together, make a white light . . . or so they say. He takes his broken dreams to the congregation at the TV show in hopes of illuminating many homes. The contestants, suffering from a range of sexual maladies, a major problem in the modern world, volunteer to be artificially stimulated to orgasm. With the aid of the highest technology the images which run through their minds at the exact point of orgasm are presented for all to see. These visions are scrutinized and rewarded according to their entertainment value.

—Tony Oursler, *Spheres of Influence* (a video tape and installation)

Evidence of a Narrative MetaSystem: The function of the NMS can only be described by its effects upon the lives of its Hosts and by the traces left by its subsurface ebbs and flows as they emerge through psychomimetic technologies. The NMS, coupled with these technologies, acts as a construc-