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black star

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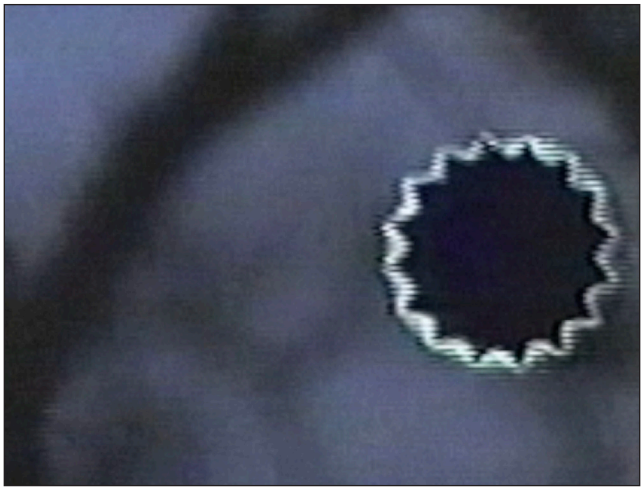
How can one find "spaces of agency" (bell hooks) in a racist film? How can unseen, unacknowledged labor be rendered visible videographically? And why is a VHS tape of *Gone with the Wind* preferable to all remasterings?



Creator's Statement

When we claim to have seen a certain movie, we're rarely asked in what format we saw it. Just as we assume that the text of a novel remains the same whether we read it as a hardcover book, paperback, or on our tablet, so too we tend to assume that a film remains the same although its formatting changes. However, as film historian Barbara Klinger has argued, the different ways a film is consumed changes not only our experience of it, but the film itself. Rather than being stable objects, films are reshaped and adapted for changing screening conditions, so that—according to Klinger—we should actually speak of them not even as versions of the same film, but rather as different adaptations.[1] Whether digital cinema package or analog 35 mm print, VHS cassette, television transmission, DVD, Blu-ray, or YouTube stream: they all do not simply show the same film each time, but rather each a new, often strikingly different, adaptation.

Because of that, even formats now considered obsolete can be reassessed as an independent adaptation and therefore as potentially indispensable for a critical reading of a film. Accordingly, the VHS format, considered unsatisfactory by today's viewing standards, will become precious precisely when newer, and supposedly better, formats have replaced it.[2] Understood as an independent adaptation, the VHS cassette preserves what is otherwise lost to memory and rendered invisible by that very restoration process that was supposed to save a film.

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[1] Barbara Klinger, "Cinema and Immortality: Hollywood Classics in an Intermediated World," in *SPELL: Swiss Papers in English Language and Literature* 29 (2013): 17–29.

[2] In a similar way, Cormac Donnelly proposes in his video essay "Pan Scan Venkman" the VHS version of *Ghostbusters* as basis for an alternative reading of the film and one of its main characters. Cormac Donnelly, "Pan Scan Venkman," *[in] Transition: Journal of Videographic Film & Moving Image Studies* 6.3, 2019.

Thus, on a recently rediscovered VHS tape of *Gone with the Wind*, I found again that moment which I could remember to have noticed as a teenager when I first saw this film on TV, but which today one looks for in vain on all the high-resolution restorations of the film. It is a scene midway through the four-hour long film when the protagonist, Scarlett O'Hara, returns to her plantation, Tara, destroyed by the Civil War. It is nighttime when Scarlett jumps from the wagon whose horse has just collapsed dead and joyfully exclaims to be home again. Scarlett's face on screen is just a smudge, like the cloud in the sky behind which the moon hides. Then the cloud passes, the moon becomes visible, and in its glow Scarlett's face now also lights up brightly.

No wonder this moment is memorable, since it is designed to impress: the moonlit face of actress Vivien Leigh gets one of those close-ups that declares her as star.[3]

But there is also something else to be seen in that scene. Wasn't there something else lit up next to the star's face? Indeed, there was a little many-pointed object, seen only very briefly, in the upper right corner of the film image. Next to the movie star's face there was this other, literal, star.

"Cue mark" is the name given to those markings that were used in analog cinema to indicate to the operator in the projection booth when a film reel was coming to an end, so that the next reel could be switched to, ensuring a seamless changeover. These marks—triangles, circles, rings or, like in this case, asterisks—were punched out on the film negative, printed in, or even painted on to the film print. As such, they were not addressed to the ordinary audience, but exclusively to the technical staff. Nevertheless, an attentive viewer would of course notice them and be fascinated, stimulated by these mysterious symbols. It was in the change from analog to digital projection that these cue marks became obsolete and thus disappeared from the movie theatre screens. In films that are played from hard disks instead of reels, you no longer need to scratch in end marks. If the dissolve sign still appears here and there, it is thus only in ironic form, perhaps most famously in David Fincher's *Fight Club* (1999), where at one point the main character points to the cue mark in the upper right corner with his finger—another self-reflexive meta-commentary on how Fincher's film plays with intra- and extradiegetic storytelling. Or, the cue mark finds a new function, as in the found footage works of British artist Dave Griffiths, who collects film clips with cue marks and strings them together to form grandiose film collages such as his 2006 *Ozymandias*.[4]

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[3] On this generative power of the close-up see Jean Epstein, "Magnification and Other Writings," in *October* 3 (Spring 1977): 9–25 and Mary Ann Doane, *Bigger Than Life: The Close-up and Scale in the Cinema*. Duke University Press, 2021.

[4] See http://www.davegriffiths.info/blog/portfolio/ozymandias/.

In film restoration, however, these marking are far less welcome. Since they were added not for aesthetic or conceptual, but solely for operational reasons, they are considered disfigurements that must be eliminated.[5] And so too the cue marks in the physical copies of *Gone with the Wind* have disappeared from the film in the course of its remastering for the cinephile audience.

In my old, blurry VHS copy, however, which today no one would care to purchase, they have been accidentally preserved: as flashing stars. And they make the film far more interesting than what its megalomaniac producer David O. Selznick had intended. The cue mark flashes into the night scene in such an astonishingly meaningful way: inevitably, the whole scene with its cross-cutting between cloud, moon, and female face with eyes wide open seems eerily reminiscent of the probably most famous avant-garde sequence in film history from Luis Buñuel's and Salvador Dalí's *Un Chien Andalou* (1929) where a moon covered by clouds is cut together with a woman's face threatened and then cut by a razor. But what in Buñuel's and Dalí's film is the cut of the razor through the eye, in *Gone with the Wind* is a mark on the film material itself, the film strip hit by the cue mark. Buñuel's and Dalí's attack on the eye was meant to strike the audience as a moment of shock, but their attack nonetheless remained on the level of diegesis. In comparison, the puncture of *Gone with the Wind* is both more subtle and more radical, because here it is the film's materiality itself which is attacked. Something that does not belong to the cinematic narrative, but was merely applied to the film's carrier material afterwards, becomes visible within the film image and thus enters into dialogue with all the other elements. And it does so without being controlled by the supposed directors or producers of the film.

Instead, the cue mark addresses those people that are commonly overlooked, although they are so essential for any dissemination of film: those anonymous workers, like the person in the projection booth, that remain forgotten, unmentioned. The cue mark is the badge, the signal of this labor that usually remains hidden behind the glossy surface of a movie.[6]

And we cannot help but to notice the disturbing reverberations such an appearance of unacknowledged labor in this very scene of this very film evoke. Contemplating the labor that went into this film but which audiences are supposed to overlook could make us think even more about an incomparably more horrific history of exploitation and abuse—a history that also should be central in this film and in this very scene but which the film's

[5] On the potentials of a media theoretical re-reading of the cue mark see Wendy Haslem, *From Méliès to New Media: Spectral Projections*. Intellect Ltd., 2019: 3–31 and Matthias Wittman, "Überblendzeichen," in *Wörterbuch kinematografischer Objekte*. August Verlag, 2014: 163–164.

[6] On the unseen labor that is both concealed by, but actually the basis for film in its materiality and its implications with discourses of race, see Genevieve Hue, *Girl Head: Feminism and Film Materiality*. Fordham University Press, 2021.

narrative tries to hide and render invisible: the plantation of Tara that Scarlett O'Hara calls her own was of course never built by herself but by those enslaved people that in this film are visible only at the margins (if at all) and whose suffering and exploitation is never acknowledged. The cue mark then, could be seen as scratching this glossy, false, and racist tale. The melodrama's insufferable idealization and whitewashing of the Antebellum South becomes interrupted and disturbed, albeit only briefly and not sufficiently. Still, the cue mark, as it seems to puncture of the film material, could also let us begin to think about all that which is "holey" about this film's falsification of history.

Video essays offer not only the re-vision and re-evaluation of a film but also of its different media formats. By drawing the viewers' attention to the cue mark, by coming back to it, repeatedly, and by moving it from the margins of the frame into the center, my video tries to engage in what bell hooks famously called "The Oppositional Gaze"—an emancipatory viewing method that opens up within a film "a site of resistance" from which a film's hurtful ideology can not only be properly seen but also deconstructed.[7] This particular cue mark—just one among innumerous others—was of course never consciously placed there as a critical intervention. On the contrary, it was meant to secure undisturbed consumption. However, by focusing on this marginal technical object we are able turn it into an entry point for resistance. The reading of the cue mark becomes a performative act of resistance, one that does not ask to be sanctioned by this film and its makers, but one that we as critical viewers must attempt ourselves and against a film's intended narrative: an act that is never just successfully finished but that must be begun again and again.

In this attempt to a resistant reading of this film I see my video essay in direct conversation with and building upon similar videographic examples of resistant anti-racist re-readings of toxic Hollywood cinema such as Cydnii Wilde Harris's "Cotton – The Fabric of Genocide"[8] or, more recently, Liz Greene's "Spencer Bell, Nobody Knows My Name."[9] I try to use my ongoing research on overlooked details and the marginal in a film as allowing critical viewing practices.[10] Picking up on Racquel J. Gates and Michael Boyce Gillespie's call for an anti-racist film and media studies that must also be "attentive to issues of film form as opposed to focusing on content alone"[11] the video essays wants to foreground film materiality as a potential area where to

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[7] bell hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze," in *From Reel to Real: Race, Class, and Sex at the Movies*. Routledge, 1996: 253–274.

[8] Cydnii Wilde Harris, "Cotton – The Fabric of Genocide."

[9] Liz Greene, "Spencer Bell, Nobody Knows My Name," *Open Screens* 5.1 (2022).

[10] Johannes Binotto, "In Lag of Knowledge. The Video Essay as Parapraxis," in Bernd Herzogenrath (ed.), *Practical Aesthetics*. Bloomsbury, 2021: 83–94. See also the video essay series "Practices of Viewing."

[11] Racquel J. Gates and Michael Boyce Gillespie, "Reclaiming Black Film and Media Studies," in *Film Quarterly* 72.3 (2019): 13–15.

productively question and destabilize those very power relations, class hierarchies, and racist stereotypes that a film like *Gone with the Wind* perpetuates.

Instead of explicitly explaining all the many implications outlined above the video essay uses a deliberately condensed, focused, and "simple" form. It does so to indicate that it offers not an exhaustive analysis but rather a suggestion, a puncture, a possibility of how to read differently. Finally, by giving central authority to the marginal cue mark I also hope to put traditional notions of authorship into question. I want to make a plea for investigating film materiality as a critical practice—a practice that can not only highlight a film's toxicity but could also open up spaces of agency and resistance within a film.

But then, months later, I am reading Susan Harewood's response to my video and feel punctured by her critical gaze with which she saw so piercingly clear this video's blind spot: that by moving the marginal to the center this video essay inadvertently marginalized someone else even more. It should make us wonder if every shift of attention, as emancipatory and inclusive we might wish it to be, inevitably also means a taking away of attention where attention is desperately needed. Does every move towards the margin necessarily entail that another margin is even more left outside? Trying to watch oppositionally does not relieve me of, but leads me back to, this pressing question: what do I still not see?

Biography

Johannes Binotto is professor for film and media studies at the Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts, senior lecturer at the University of Zurich, and experimental filmmaker. His prize-winning video essays are screened regularly at international film festivals, and he has written books on the psychoanalytic uncanny in arts, literature, and film, or on cinema as perception disorder and edited a volume on the intersections of film and architecture. His current research projects are a study on the unconscious of film technology and two projects on video essays in academic research and teaching funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF). Personal website: transferences.org.

Review by Susan Harewood, University of Washington Bothell

Johannes Binotto is a scholar whose work focuses on detail and the marginal elements of film—Binotto examines and illuminates tracks and traces in and on film and proposes ways in which these details can illuminate and extend our understanding of film as art/cultural/social artifact. This is precisely the task he sets for himself in his video essay "black star." "black star" is a creative interrogation of the political work the projectionist's cue mark might perform for the contemporary critical audience. It is also a meditation on what is retained and what is erased as film technologies

change. "black star" examines *Gone with the Wind* through bell hooks' intellectual-political commitment to critically examine heterosexist white supremacist representation. Indeed, hooks's decision to leave her name uncapitalized is echoed in Binotto's stylization of "black star," plus a quotation from hooks interrupts the three-way split horizontal screen of *Gone with the Wind*'s title card.

"black star" is most successful in how the sound works to focus the viewers' attention. For example, as Binotto "rewinds" and repositions the projectionists' cue over and over until it goes from unnoticed in the margins to dominating the center, he transforms the soundtrack of *Gone With The Wind*. It goes from sweeping orchestration into a single insistent chord. The original orchestration seems designed to make *Gone with the Wind* a romantic tale of southern resilience rather than the deeply racist reimagining and repurposing of slave plantation history that it is. So, Binotto's choices unsettle the original soundtrack, thereby opening up the projectionist cue to his new meanings.

Binotto chooses to see the cue mark as a black star. This is an important creative and analytical choice and/or a matter of perception. He sees it as a "literal star"; I think the cue might not necessarily resemble how we represent stars . . . maybe our big star—the sun. Still, by seeing it as a star and inviting his audience to see it as a star, Binotto seeks to invest the cue mark with enough star power to eclipse Vivian Leigh as Scarlett O'Hara. This draws the viewer›s attention to the cue, black star, as a code that, by its address to projectionists, directs the viewer to contemplate the labor involved in producing the film. "black star," therefore, is multi-focused. It simultaneously draws the viewers' attention to the politics of representation, the histories of technology, and the cultures of production.

However, calling this videographic essay "black star" illuminates how the videographic essay stumbles somewhat around the issues of race, particularly the promise of a bell hooksian lens. Yes, Binotto calls out the racism of this film. And he proposes that the cue mark not only draws attention to the projectionists and other film workers' labor, but also the labor of the enslaved people who are dehumanized by *Gone with the Wind*'s romanticization of the period of enslavement and Civil War. Nevertheless, in the scene selected (and the film as a whole and, I presume, the almost inevitably segregated film crew) there is another Black star at the margins—Butterfly McQueen as Prissy. She appears briefly in "black star" in near silhouette. Yet the videographic essay seems to inadvertently fix her even more firmly as marginal because although the black star cue eclipses Scarlett O'Hara's moonlit face, the editing to center the black star cue also erases Prissy altogether. If we take up bell hooks' commitment to loving Black people as a revolutionary act, then the erasure of Butterfly McQueen as Prissy becomes difficult to justify. To put it differently, the substitution of

McQueen's Black stardom for the black star cue mark swaps McQueen's Black feminine humanity (which always guided hooks' work) for a technological mark. It brings us to the question in Binotto' s abstract:

> "How can one find 'spaces of agency' (bell hooks) in a racist film?"
>
> Rewind and reposition: "Can one find 'spaces of agency' in a racist film?"
>
> Rewind and reposition: "Can one find 'spaces of agency' in this racist film?"

"black star" does useful work in illuminating how videographic practice, focused as it frequently is on editing and reediting of representations, can make film labor visible. And I'm mindful that it was on *Gone with the Wind* that the creator first noticed the projectionist cue mark. And I'm perpetually galvanized by Black and other marginalized people's ability to carve out spaces of agency. Still, this film, which has remained in the public consciousness for so long as an untouchable text, seems to be one of the few that is very, very hard to puncture.

Review by Wendy Haslem, University of Melbourne

This significant short video essay, "black star" (Binotto, 2023), and the accompanying written statement take inspiration from the prominent research by the cultural theorist bell hooks to build an argument that offer a powerful and insightful consideration of how details that seem to be incidental not only provoke spectators to see differently, but also signify a broader history that prioritizes that which might otherwise be invisible. The words and the images that underpin "black star" call attention to a new, political gaze, one that has an intense, relentless focus, a distinctly insightful view of a detail that reveals its celluloid base, its cinematic specificity.

The incident that led to bell hooks' research took place in 1959 at a screening of Douglas Sirk's melodrama, *Imitation of Life*. hooks acknowledges the marginalization of African American characters on the screen and criticizes Hollywood for promoting a fantasy that was both inaccurate and inappropriate. Initially adopting a position of resistance, hooks writes about refusing to subject herself to demeaning images of her own history and cultural background reflected on the screen. In choosing to boycott cinema entirely, hooks was effectively refusing to support the infrastructure that sustains and replenishes images that she saw as derisive. hooks writes: "that some of us chose to stop looking was a gesture of resistance; turning away was one way to protest, to reject negation" (121).

"black star" focuses on the high profile, big budget film, *Gone with the Wind* (Fleming, 1940) and proposes an alternative mode of perception, one that centralizes the

importance of looking, of recognizing the power of an almost subliminal, symbolic language. The images, text, and even sounds of the video essay "black star" draw attention to the power of looking at, and in, detail.

The video essay repeats a stretched clip from a video version of *Gone with the Wind*, identifying the impression of a star shape punched out of the original celluloid reel. This is a cue mark, a symbol that functions as a coded message for the projectionist that the end of the reel is immanent. Here, the black star is a symbol of time; it anticipates the reel change, but it is also an indexical image or stamp that stands in for a larger idea. The video essay and statement make it clear that this almost subliminal and lost symbol is one that reveals both the marginalization, oppression, and eradication of African American culture in the film itself and in the history that its narrative represents.

Read in this context, "black star" resonates with hooks' inciteful work on the control and manipulation of processes of looking and the potential for looking to become critical, political, even subversive. Discussing the importance of the look in defining power relations, hooks ackowledges the ambiguity of looking, recalling the irony of being scolded as a child for staring, but also being asked to look at her parents when they were punishing her (123). hooks writes that often her innocent childhood looks were interpreted as defiant, challenging, confrontational, and full of resistance. hooks describes the paradox of being "afraid to look, but fascinated by the gaze" (115). Extending this discussion to a broader historical context, hooks notes how white owners tried to exert control over the gaze as they punished slaves for looking. hooks writes: "the politics of slavery, of radicalized power relations were such that slaves were denied their right to gaze" (115).

"black star" also reveals how visual details are intertwined with power and coded languages, some that are designed to be barely noticed. The video and the statement also identify how some of these symbols can be lost as the film transitions across various forms of media. I've noted how the cue marks in *Detour* (Ulmer, 1945) make their way onto the digital screen with the telecine, but in this example, the cue mark is lost in all versions but the video (Haslem, 5–11). Drawing attention to the invisible at the periphery of the image, and identifying how it is otherwise erased as the film transports across media, provides a new way into a micro-history, one that is significant in the way that it not only sees clearly, but recognizes the whole image. It also helps to illuminate lesser known, usually unacknowledged histories of uncredited workers, invisible forces working in print labs, or in projection booths, responsible for the film experience. This important video project reveals the complexities of contemporary media history as films like *Gone with the Wind* not only transform across media, but are removed from streaming services, relegated from their previous prestigious place within the history of the cinema.

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