

Notes on 3 Triptychs

Lamia Joreige

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3 Triptychs (2009) is an interactive video installation in which sensors are placed across nine different rooms and through which a specific path is mapped. The sensors - which are triggered when individual visitors enter and navigate the space - activate a set of cameras, video projections, lights and sounds in real time creating a visual and sensorial experience. Upon entering, one sees one's own image from the back projected onto a screen facing them.¹

The video installation was freely inspired by Jalal Toufic's concept of the 'overturn', Andrei Tarkovsky's *Solaris* (1972), Jean Cocteau's *Orpheus* (1949) and David Lynch's television series *Twin Peaks* (1990-92).² Within these disparate, melancholic works, there runs a common thread of notions of rupture of time and loss of the self, which inevitably lead us to reflect on death.³

In order to toy with the idea of reminiscence and memory available in these works, images and sounds appear and disappear throughout the installation. They resonate as dreams or fragments of memories, appealing to our unconscious, our past experiences and losses. The video images are taken from my personal archive and from my previous video works, as well as from *Orpheus* and *Solaris*. They are constructed in a non-linear manner: a travelling shot of a war-torn landscape of ruins in south Lebanon dissolves into an image of myself (a vanishing face, a torso); a hypnotic image of the ocean in *Solaris* is projected on the ground in the sixth room of the installation, triggering a different perception of our own body in space as we walk through and over it.

That image of the reverberating ocean in movement is what remains for me of *Solaris*, twelve years after first having watched it. An ocean, like a perceiving organ, yet one that also reveals our unconscious and incarnates even our most hidden desires. This ocean is a living body, which evolves and interacts by virtue of the beings around it, therefore it is infinite and in perpetual change. The ocean, in this context, not only embodies the depths of our being, but also stands for ultimate knowledge.

Watching it again very recently, I took note of a strange moment, which I had forgotten. It is one in which we see the protagonist, Kelvin, from the back. He first appears in a frontal shot and, with the help of a dissolve, appears almost simultaneously from the back. In so doing, he thereby turns his back on Hari,

the woman he loves, as though he is no longer able to see her, as though he can no longer hear her calling him. In this instant, it is as if a frontier separating their dual realities has been created.

A frontier between the conscious and the unconscious: between life and death.

The shot produces something akin to Jalal Toufic's over-turn, about which I had read sometime between my two viewings of Tarkovsky's film. Toufic writes, 'In certain conditions (death, psychosis ...), when called (by oneself [for example, in front of the mirror] or by someone else), one is perceived by the caller as not responding, not turning to face the caller. The one who was called either turned to answer but his or her turn was countered by a 180° over-turn so that he or she "ended up" still facing in the same direction, away from the caller, or else, mistaking his or her name, disregarded the call, and thus actually did not turn, since, as far as he or she was concerned, the call must have been addressed to someone else.'⁴ In both cases, one is then seen from the back continuing to look in the same direction as before. I understand this as an instance of the rupture of time and loss of the self.

In *Solaris*, the hero finds himself in an extra-terrestrial zone. We as spectators, however, do not doubt the existence of this other planet, but question Kelvin's visions and perception. In fact, he himself is doubtful of his visions. We are thus transported through him to an experience of fear and awe, and one in which a radical transformation of perception takes place.

Throughout the film two opposing realities occur: one is of a man who, through his visions, falls prey to the materialisation of his unconscious desires, and the other is of scientists attempting to rationally battle against invasive hallucinations.⁵ Snaut and Sartorius, the two scientists who have been on the station for a while, understand Kelvin's sensorial and perceptual experiences, yet firmly hold on to their points of reference. While Kelvin drowns in his visions, they protect themselves by rejecting them. Soon enough, the difference between what he experiences, and what he observes with distance as a scientist, dissolves. Even his return to earth during the last sequence of the film appears to be a hallucination created by the ocean's emanations and their interactions with his mind. Here, the mere idea of reality no longer exists. As his mind is fully absorbed by these visions, he becomes entirely immersed in another space-time and the loss of the self here becomes total.

As the viewer enters a long, narrow space in the last (ninth) room of *3 Triptychs*, he or she sees an image of him- or herself from the back once again. In an attempt to reflect the idea of the loss of the self and even represent it, his or her image disintegrates and disappears on a white screen as he or she walks towards the exit. This final disappearance is a *mise en abyme* of the work itself, a metaphor.

In the last episode of the series *Twin Peaks*, although agent Dale Cooper's perceptions are put into question, he nonetheless finds himself in a non-place in which a rupture of time operates. Here too the idea of a given reality cannot

be said to exist. This non-place - which is not visible or accessible to all humans and which is situated in a gap in space-time - is called in the series the Black Lodge. Inside this place, the past, present and future coexist. There is no chronology and no law or logic to physical space. It enacts a labyrinth where things repeat themselves without actually being repeated. At the end of the series, Dale loses his soul: when he looks in the mirror he no longer sees Dale Cooper, but sees the demonic being that has overtaken his soul and replaced him.

In Cocteau's film, Orpheus and death - embodied by the character of the Princess - have fallen in love with each other. He traverses the mirror in order to meet death on the other side, where time no longer exists, as is indicated by the clock which does not tell the time and by the words of the Princess who awaits Orpheus's arrival into the world of the non-living. The Princess: 'It is perhaps the first time I almost have a notion of time. It must be terrible for humans to wait.' Cegeste: 'I no longer remember.' The Princess: 'Are you bored?' Cegeste: 'What does that mean?' The Princess: 'Forgive me. I was talking to myself'.⁶

Death is at the centre of Jalal Toufic's thought - he describes himself as 'a mortal to death'.⁷ In death, as well as in the death before dying that is psychosis, one is likely to undergo over-turns. In *(Vampires): An Uneasy Essay on the Undead in Film* (1993), Toufic writes: 'What if we are undead, hence have no face, either because we have no image in the mirror or because the image we see there always has its back turned on us? Even in that case we cannot identify with one "whose face is always hidden from us" but only because we *are* him and he cannot identify with himself.'⁸

Solaris thus becomes the dream of a place where death no longer exists; a place where contradictory and changing realities merge into one another, if we learn to accept them. Hari dies and is resurrected because she is but an incarnation. Her suffering, however, renders her all the more human. Kelvin gently moves from a desire to see her disappear to a total refusal of seeing her dead. He prefers to live with Hari's incarnation, rather than lose her and accept her death. A profound melancholy impedes him from mourning her loss. Love is both what leads Eurydice and Orpheus to their death, as well as what brings them back from the world of the deceased to life. In *Twin Peaks* the characters also do not die. We see Laura Palmer in the Lodge again after her death, and the 'demon' continues to exist through Dale Cooper. In these works, love becomes humanity's *raison d'être*. 'Until today, humanity, the world had no way to reach love. Do you understand what I am saying, Snaut, there are so few of us, a few billion at most, a handful, but perhaps the reason we are here, is to understand, for the first time, human beings as a reason to love.'⁹

Translated from the French to the English by Ghalya Saadawi.

Footnotes

1. *3 Triptychs* was created on the occasion of the last Sharjah Biennial in 2009, and consisted of nine rooms. Visitors were asked to enter the space individually. The rooms resemble and allude to the space-time of a labyrinth, yet are not a labyrinth per se; it is as though visitors were metaphorically entering an after-death space-time. The 'scripted', fictive path is determined in advance, but the duration of the experience is undetermined and open to each visitor's desire to wander around and interact with the space. This particular structure stems in part from a desire to reflect on the consumption of art as a form of experience, on issues of duration, as well as on the spectator's gaze in artistically imposed experiences.
2. The concept of the over-turn was introduced in 'Over-Turns', (Vampires): An Uneasy Essay on the Undead in Film, revised and expanded edition (Sausalito, CA: Post-Apollo Press, 2003, pp.188-200), and further elaborated in 'On Names: Letter to Lyn Hejinian', Forthcoming (Berkeley, CA: Atelos, 2000, pp.179-194).
3. The idea of the rupture of time is also at the center of my video installation *Replay* (2000). The following is an excerpt from the textual part of the installation: 'A street, for long an inaccessible "territory", a stage that I find essential to appropriate. As I revisit this place, I encounter nothing but rupture: A rupture of time, a rupture within time. I think of things that did happen; things that might have happened in this place during the war - For, I only knew it during the war. I imagine that He, who was photographed while dying, might have died here; that She who was running escaping something terrible, might have ran in the parking lot around the corner [...] Violence as a rupture with the ever present possibility of loss. Violence projected unto any act, at that singular instant when the real and the non-real are indiscernible. Violence endlessly re-enacted, always recognized. Is there a trace that is not already withdrawn in relation to itself?'
4. Correspondence between Jalal Toufic and the author, 10 February 2010.
5. Dialogue taken from *Solaris*: 'Kris Kelvin: She was a woman who died ten years ago.' 'Snaut: You've just seen the materialisation of the person you think you knew.' 'Kris Kelvin: Her name was Hari.'
6. The dialogue is taken from a scene in *Orpheus* (1949) in which the Princess talks to Jacques Cegeste (a young poet who dies at the beginning of the film), while she awaits Orpheus's arrival through the mirror/portal.
7. From the author's note on the jacket of his book *Two or Three Things I'm Dying to Tell You* (Sausalito, CA: The Post-Apollo Press, 2005), as well as in his bio in several of his books, for example *Graziella: The Corrected Edition* (Beirut: Forthcoming Books, 2009). He also titled a special issue he edited of the journal *Discourse*, vol. 24, no. 1, Winter 2002: 'Mortals to Death'.

8. See 'Over-Turns', in (*Vampires*), *op. cit.*, p.191.
Dialogue in *Solaris* between Kris Kelvin and Snaut.