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A Filmic Allegory

A Material-Semiotic Analysis of Sunstone by
Filipa César and Louis Henderson

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A Filmic Allegory: A Material-Semiotic Analysis of *Sunstone* by Filipa César and Louis Henderson

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Abstract: This paper proposes a material-semiotic analysis of the figure of the heliotrope through an allegorical reading of the short film “Sunstone,” 2017, by artists Filipa César and Louis Henderson, presented internationally beside a number of exhibitiv projects and forums of discussion. This paper reads this film as emblematic of a new understanding of the photology that has traditionally characterized Western culture in a way that marks a turn toward ethical, social, and situated practices. The material-semiotic analysis of this film focuses on the role of operational images, the notion of texture of light, and the strategic functions applied by the work, which is relevant to a new reading of allegorical methods of representation. Through an analysis of this film, this paper proposes a way of thinking of allegory as a mode of speaking of difference and “the Other” between the representational and what remains in the opacity of what is not—or cannot—be represented, yet.

Keywords: Allegory, Texture, Light-based Practices

A Detour

This paper proposes a material-semiotic analysis of the short film *Sunstone*, 2017, by artists Filipa César and Louis Handerson—co-commissioned by Gasworks, London and Contour Biennale 8, Mechelen—and revisits the photology of the heliotrope in traditional Western discourses by rethinking the speculative representation of the rays of light through the image of the “texture” (Vasseleu 1998). This paper suggests that *Sunstone* is emblematic of a new ethos of light that rejects metaphysical models of representation to articulate the nexus between photology, materiality, and contexts of emplacement. The premises of this discourse can be drawn from Catherine Malabou’s considerations on the metaphoric use of this trope in contemporary philosophy, as she discusses in *Counterpath*, 2004, in a conversation with Jacques Derrida. Drawing upon Derrida’s critique on the use of metaphoric language in metaphysics, Malabou discusses how, in particular, the heliotrope, or the metaphorical meaning of the sun that has traditionally governed the photology of western philosophy, has arrived to the exhaustion of its own meaning in modernity. According to Malabou, a contemporary reader can assist with the migration of this metaphorical and symbolic figure through a movement that is no longer a transcendental trajectory toward the good of metaphysical knowledge—but, she argues that a new photology arose by taking into account the turning movement of the sun itself (Malabou and Derrida 2004, 214). In this paper, I extend Malabou’s proposition to a semantic and material displacement that repositions the photology of the heliotrope in relation to situated practices of light acting as a catalyst for social change.

Sunstone consists of an array of 16 mm filmic, documentary, and archival material assembled through the use of stills drawn from YouTube and mobile apps to configure, as the artists state, “an archaeology of the filmic apparatus” (César and Handerson 2017).² Their use filmic apparatuses and materials are developed through a soft-montage of “operational images” that are not representational per se (Farocki 2001), but function as detecting devices that document, record, register, and configure movement by revisiting the history of Western systems of navigation to the use of modern technologies such as satellitar and submarine cartographic

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² This title is taken from the homonymous exhibition that accompanied the presentation of the film at Gaswork, London, 2017.

mapping, here reconfigured through the use of filmic, digital, and animations technologies. Whilst articulating a scalable process that moves between the polarities of global and local point of view, it is important to note that the film develops its narrative from a strategic position that the artists locate in the Portuguese city of Cabo de Roca, the western mainland of Continental Europe, where a lighthouse safeguards the maritime coast of the Mediterranean sea. The multi-layered narrative of the film is given to Mr. Roque Pinas, a military officer based at this lighthouse who, in the film, traces the history of lighthouses in Western cultures by interrogating their role at the present time when modern technologies have substituted their operative function. Crucial to the artists' investigation is the purpose of shifting the domain of colonial perspectives through a situated practice.

According to the artists' statement:

We imagine the lighthouse lens as a departing point to unfold a critique of Western epistemologies informed by optical technologies as military and colonial design. The projection of light and its Enlightenments are embedded in the processes and violent imperial gestures of discovering, shedding light, grasping, comprehending, framing, revealing and possessing. As counter-gesture, our research seeks lines of flight towards the shadows through an upholding of a politics of opacity. (César and Handerson 2017)

Drawing on the artists' statement, this paper shall examine the material and semiotic implications of a situated practice that functions as a catalyst of social change. As a frame within a frame, a lens pointing lens, the film creates a circuit that is calibrated in relation to the viewer's experience of the work. Through this operation, the film suggests the imagery of a texture of light that re-inscribes photology in relation to difference and "the Other," interweaving the inherent qualities of this material within a system that articulates an interplay between propagation and opacity.

A Filmic Allegory

This paper dwells on the artistic implications of *Sunstone* and its cultural, social resonance. In particular, I read how the film is capable of creating an assembly around the work by combining the use of filmic images with the presentation of archival material and objects of artistic investigation (Figure 1). By soliciting an experience of self-reflection and embodied vision, *Sunstone* is presented to the audience through a format that variously articulates the communicability of light as a system of differences and heterogeneous formations that is constructed as a form of situated knowledge. This resonates with the argument discussed by Donna Haraway in *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective*, 1997, which states: "The only way to find a larger vision is to be somewhere in particular" (Haraway 1997, 590). Due to a reinvention of the filmic practice in relation to localized, strategic, situated practices, it could be argued that *Sunstone* is an allegory that communicates a photology of the heliotrope in a way that is relation to "the Other."

In so doing, the film marks a displacement of this trope to re-inscribe it within a system of multiple relations that is a mode to speak to the assembly according to Bruno Latour's (2005) proposition, as discussed in *Reassembling the Social*, where the author questions the agent role that modern techno-sciences can have in contemporary society. If a reader revisits the etymology of the term allegory—*allos* (other-different) and *agoreo* (to speak in the assembly), traditionally intended to signify something other than the real, he/she is allowed here to extend its meaning by superseding the logic of identity of images to address an inquiry upon difference, multiplicity, and alterity. In this sense, it is possible to read *Sunstone* as a filmic allegory that aims at communicating an encounter with "the Other." Thus, here, allegory means the crafting of a communicative, ethical discourse that interweaves the visible and the invisible, the represented and the opaque, or what is not represented yet. Allegory makes the materiality of this discourse,

emerging as a semiotic field of artistic investigation that enters contemporary discourses by speaking to the assembly to solicit ethical action and social responsibility.



Figure 1: An Archaeology of Optics. Refracted Spaces, Filipa César and Louis Henderson, 2017.
Archival images, oceanic charts, lighthouse blueprints, light, and fragments of Fresnel lenses, dimensions variable.
Source: Courtesy of the artists; Photo, Andy Keate 2017

Whilst it might be significant to recall here of one of the most emblematic allegorical image in philosophical discourses, such as Plato's Allegory of the Cave and its educational content as posited by Plato in the *Republic* (2013), I suggest that *Sunstone* is an allegory that rethinks the photology of light by turning the "universal" in the particular of a site-specific practice and reconfiguring this trope not merely in regard to its rhetorical content but as the fiction of a *tableau* that conceals with different frames of references and modes of inscriptions. In this sense, the allegorical content of *Sunstone* communicates an ethos of light that is concerned with difference, alterity, and the Other. *Sunstone* is an allegory in the filmic sense, as it crafts a method of synthetic images that depicts a veiled, opaque language of continuity and transformation. In this regard, the sociologist John Law (2004) discusses allegory in *After Method*, as a method of communicating difference. According to Law (2004), allegory reflects a mode of discovery so long as a reader understands this method in a world of enactment that is crafted and manifested within realities that are non-coherent. The strength of an allegorical attitude is drawn from a method of assemblage that carries alternative politics with it (Law 2004). Allegory, he states: "softens and plays with the boundaries between what is Othered and what is made manifest. That it discovers—and enacts—new and only partially connected realities" (93). Law's reading of allegory as a material-semiotic, sociological method of analysis contributes here to extend the potency of the filmic image as it provides an insight into the ways

of constructing images as an assemblage between what is represented and what exists beyond the surface of the visual to resonate with the play of difference.

Aligned with this position, in the artistic context, in *Allegorical Impulse*, the art critic Craig Owens (1980) discusses allegory from the poststructuralist reading of Paul De Man, as discussed in *Allegories of Reading*, 1979. Owens conveys De Man's analysis of figural language into the visual register to examine the labyrinth of signs and argues that allegory underpins the literal, visual, rhetorical, and metaphorical aspects of an image. According to Owens, allegory functions as a link of connections that hinges on the readability of inscriptions to articulate as an affective mode of apprehension which appeals to the social in an ethical and aesthetic manner. Plato, Law, De Man, and Owe read allegory as a method of crafting inscription, and this is relevant here to the method employed by César and Handerson, which frames a new photology that refuses transcendental movements and metaphysical content to articulate a mode of dealing with the practice of light that is indissolubly bonded to the assembling and the interweaving of difference, multiplicity, and alterity. Allegorical methods imply an ethical concern that moves across historical and cultural productions to articulate a counter-narrative. In this sense, the film crafts the allegory of an archeology of light and technologies that situates a new narrative in a specific place and substitutes the domain of absolute reasoning with a chiasmus between the material and the semiotic within a chain of relations.

Drawing on these arguments, I read how *Sunstone* draws a filmic allegory as a mode of assembling different contexts and realities by providing a chiasmus between the regime of control and the realities of investigation that resonate in the background of the filmic images in regards to their visual existence and opacity of representation. The allegorical content of the film displaces the imagery of the heliotrope within concrete, operational images by tracing a genealogy of systems of navigation—cartographic and satellite mapping that refuse colonial, optical, and speculative perspectives to function as dispositifs of heterogeneous contexts. By reinscribing the photology of the sun through the play of differences, *Sunstone* becomes an allegory for the migration of the heliotropic metaphor in a way that communicates to the assembly by crafting a texture of philological, materialist, and concrete images between manifestation and opacity. *Sunstone* communicates a new imagery of the heliotrope through the play of incoherent, different realities that focus on the fabrics of things rather than the object of speculative reasoning. In this sense, *Sunstone* is an allegory as it rewrites history through the crafting of a material, semiotic, situated practice that aims at soliciting a mode of self-reflection, enactment, and social change within the horizon of experience.

Material-Semiotic Analysis

A material-semiotic analysis of *Sunstone* rethinks the photology of the heliotrope as a texture of light. In so doing, it reclaims an ethos of social responsibility through the use of operational and concrete images that are projected through the filters of propagation and opacity. I read how from the framing of a specific context, in the film, the texture of light supersedes the modes of indexicality to articulate a semiotic field that is marked by the play of the apparatus, its modes of inscriptions and differences. Before examining the material and semiotic aspects of the work, it might be relevant here to elucidate the artists' philological investigation of an inventory of optical apparatuses and their strategic operativity that aims at investigating the agent role that modern techno-sciences have in the configuring of images in the contemporary context.

Operational Images and Diffracted Strategies

Sunstone uses a soft montage of operational images that assembles filmic, documentary, cartographic, and digital images as strategic apparatuses. This is in line with the theorization of the practice that the filmmaker Harun Farocki discusses in the film *Eye Machine I*, 2001, when addressing a visual regime consisting of detected images and calculated trajectories that aim at

registering the movement of living organisms whether these are human or non-human, as further theorized by Trevor Paglen (2014) in a homonymous essay. Elaborating an allegorical assembling of operational images, César and Handerson rethink the heliotrope as an artificial image that propagates far from the limit of colonial perspective and optical geometry to explore new fields of action whilst maintaining the opacity of these horizons. Through an archaeology of optics and cartographic systems of navigation, the film gathers together a set of non-coherent realities to suggest a displacement of the photology of the heliotrope through the play of concrete images that are sensitive to light, movement, appearance, and opacity. By addressing, here, a philological analysis of the artists' use of the filmic apparatus, I read how the title *Sunstone* evokes a situated practice of light as it depicts the framing of the sun in relation to the site-specific location of the city of Cabo de Roca. In particular, the allegorical content of the film reenacts a poetic citation that is drawn on a stone monument that the reader can find in this location, which repeats the verse of the sixteenth-century poet Luís de Camões: "Here... / Where the Earth ends / And the sea begins." Simultaneously, the title, *Sunstone*, serves as a legend for a new photology of the heliotrope because it revisits the literary fortune that sunstones had in medieval texts in the Viking Age (Száz and Horváth 2018). According to these sources, the sunstone (Icelandic: *sólarsteinn*) consisted of crystal minerals and functioned as a navigational tool due to its polarizing attributes that were particularly useful to detect cardinal and sundial directions in states of magnetic turbulence (2018). Thus, drawing upon these citations, it could be said that César and Handerson conceive of a filmic image of the heliotrope that serves to orientate the gaze of the modern spectator between historical, local, and global cartographies.

Crucial to the artists' practice is an investigation on the use of Fresnel lenses in lighthouses, which illuminate at great distance, and explore the propagation of light through phenomena of refraction. Invented by the French physicist Augustin-Jean Fresnel and employed in lighthouses since 1823, as attested by the *Smithsonian* magazine (Watson 1999, 30), this optical apparatus is characterized by a short focal length and a large aperture, which, by reducing mass and volume, allows for a diffractive, scalable operation. Compared to conventional lenses, Fresnel lenses reduce the thickness of the lens into a set of concentric annular sections, to suggest a curvature that is in analogy with the Earth's surface and its geodesy. As the artists articulate, Fresnel lenses challenge the representation of geometrical optics through a circular movement of refraction that accounts for light passing from one medium to another by being redirected toward the center to enable a process of refraction that simultaneously amplifies vision toward the horizon. By challenging the focus of optical geometry in relation to the observer, the artists propose a way to rethink the photology of the heliotrope as a self-reflexive experience and an embodied vision. This can be evinced from the exhibit format that accompanies the video, in particular from the cabinets that display array of systems, mapping, and objects from the history of navigation and that invites the viewer to rewrite history and cartographies as sustainable methods of investigation. On the other hand, I read how Fresnel lenses enable a diffractive practice of light because they render as a scalable, differential, movement to articulate a vision at distance that recounts for the re-inscription of differences. Opposed to the regime of vision, Fresnel lenses mark a series of circular movements and diffractive patterns which do not intend to map where differences appear but rather where the effects of differences propagate in between manifestation and opacity. In *Sunstone*, Fresnel lenses draw a different photology of light that expand the visible horizon and trace the beam of light through the marking of differential patterns in a way that is anchored to a situated, specific localization.

The artists' interest in an archaeology of the filmic apparatus develops through a number of artistic citations, such as stills from the film *Sans Soleil*, 1983, by Chris Marker and film footage of op and kinetic films by Santiago Alvarez, and this evolves with images of the infosphere through YouTube, GoPro, and Architecture of Radio apps by combining technologies of fiber-optic cables, glass rods, and filmic and animation techniques. Through this philological investigation of the filmic apparatus, *Sunstone* communicates a photology that is linked to ethical

concerns for the crafting of images of light that are interpreted in relation to difference, the Other, and sustainability. Functioning as a legend for a new photology of the heliotrope in the contemporary context, *Sunstone* reconfigures light as a material-semiotic practice that intends to function here as a catalyst of cultural and social awareness. It rewrites the modes of inscription of light through the stylistic references of the curve and the opaque, communicating through an allegorical, veiled language that focuses on propagation by pointing to a system of heterogeneity.

Images as Texture

Focusing on the use of allegorical content and operational images, this paper discusses the crafting of images as texture of light. A reading of this notion can be traced back to Merleau-Ponty's discussion, as proposed in *The Eye and the Mind*, 1964, wherein texture describes a concrete image that reflects the imagery of a real operativity, or a mode of reframing and revealing light in relation to the concrete wherein the eye is never detached from the hand, the body, the material, and the site. Texture, as Merleau-Ponty (1993, 128) argues, functions as an actor's mimicry of an image that is near to things and gives vision to that which clothes it in a way that pertains not to representation but to "a visual existence" of things. In his argument, texture does not question the nature of things, but reclaims the affirmative aspects of a concrete experience in reason of the *dynamis*, the movement, and the agency of the material. Merleau-Ponty (138) discusses how this proximity is a way of living light, not as a visual phenomenon, but as a state of dwelling or immersion wherein light is no longer metaphorical, but "is found once more to be action at a distance." To summarize Merleau-Ponty's (127) proposition: "the eye lives in this texture as a man in his house." It becomes evident from this proposition that by questioning the history of lighthouses, *Sunstone* communicates the allegory of a photology of the heliotrope that draws forms of attachment to the concrete of material and situated practices that is at the basis of an ethical approach to light that demands for communication, enactment, agency, artifactuality (Figure 2). Away from the system of Cartesian dioptrics, the texture of light pertains to an imagery that is not representational or mimetic, but is concerned with an ethos of the concrete and its operativity, describing a proximity with the imminent visibility of the sun and its artificiality. Visual existence, concrete images, distance, action, and the material are relevant to a new imagery for the photology of the heliotrope that operates through the re-inscription of difference whilst preserving the opacity of the unknown.

With reference to Merleau-Ponty's propositions, Cathryn Vasseleu discusses the photology of the texture of light in a homonymous essay, wherein she extends the inquiry on the concrete and operational images to a material, situated practice, elaborating on a new nexus that links together light, materiality, and embodied experience. According to Vasseleu (1998, 11–12):

Texture is at once the cloth, threads, knots, weave, detailed surface, material, matrix, and frame. Regarded in this way, light is not a transparent medium that links sight to visibility. It is not appropriate to think of light perspectively as a thing, or a medium which is separable from things. In its texture light is a fabrication, a surface of a depth that spills over and passes through the interstices of the fabric. The dichotomy between the visible and the invisible is itself a framing of a photology that gives light its texture. As a texture, the naturalness of light cannot be divorced from its historical and embodied circumstances. It is neither visible or invisible, neither metaphoric or metaphysical. It is both the language and the material of visual practices, or the invisible interweaving of differences which forms the fabrics of the visible.

Vasseleu suggests a way of rethinking light as a sensory, agential, material practice. She discusses this image as the surface or the fabrication of a material, concrete experience, which she understands in ethical terms through the notions of care and hospitality. My reading of *Sunstone* extends these propositions through the crafting of a situated practice of light that

extends the horizon of the visible to a photology of concrete experiences. Her propositions are relevant to mark a displacement of light in relation to material, situated practices by articulating the chiasmus that gathers together phenomena and their constituent essence. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty and Vasseleu's arguments, this paper illustrates how *Sunstone* carried out a materialist approach to the filmic apparatus that is drawn from the crafting of patterns of differentials between the visible and the invisible of the reality of things. Through this approach, the fabric of filmic images are able to implement new figures and new contexts that emerge from the action of light at distance. The texture of light is simultaneously an artificial and situated practice that intertwines a chiasmus between the material and the semiotic, the represented and what is left in the opacity of representation (Figure 2).



Figure 2: An Archeology of Optics—*Sunstone*. Filipa César and Louis Henderson, *Sunstone*, 2017.

Single-channel video, color with sound, 34:43 min.

Source: Courtesy of the artists; Photo Andy Keate 2017

Sunstone shows how the texture of light is strictly connected to the nervous system of the living, superseding binary categories to frame a field of communication, propagation, and enactment. As opposed to the regime of pure visibility, the texture of light deploys a new photology for the figure of the heliotrope that consists of fabrications, agency, and the writing of differentials, resulting from an operativity that balances the visual and the opaque systems of representation. By focusing on the semiotic aspects of light and concrete images, the texture of light, as the artists suggest, is capable of reclaiming the right to opacity for these fields at a distance that reverberates with the affirmative aspects of their own being and their visual existence. In this sense, the texture of light is complementarily a poetics of opacity that is aligned with the proposition of the French-Caribbean writer Édouard Glissant, as discussed in *Poetics of Relation*, 1990. In his text, the reader can find the premises of a discussion on the indissoluble bond between texture and opacity, as Glissant (1990, 190) proposes:

Opacities can coexist and converge, weaving fabrics. To understand these truly one must focus on the texture of the weave and not on the nature of its components. For the time being, perhaps, give up this old obsession with discovering what lies at the bottom of natures....Thought of self and thought of other here become obsolete in their duality. This-here is the weave, and it weaves no boundaries. The right to opacity would not establish autism; it would be the real foundation of Relation, in freedoms.

With reference to Glissant's poetics, César and Henderson proposes a system of configuration of filmic images that is dual in its content. Through the crafting of allegorical, operational, material, and semiotic images, *Sunstone* reveals a way of thinking and representing light that is not limited to the manifestation of the visible, but is drawn from the inextricable nexus between the manifestation and the wave of light which articulates as traces of differentials in a way that is operational to the assembling of social contexts.

Conclusions

This material-semiotic analysis of *Sunstone* leads to a discussion on the ways of rethinking allegorical methods of artistic investigation in relation to the visual configuration of the texture of light in a way that is founded on a chiasmus between the traditional register of visual representation and the emerging register of visual existence of the real. An analysis of this film has examined the ways through which artists Filipa César and Louis Henderson have articulated this nexus through the play of difference, patterns, and alterity to suggest a mode of rethinking "the Other" through a politics of opacity. By disrupting the logic of binary categories, *Sunstone* is emblematic of a new mode of rethinking the photology of the heliotrope away from its metaphysical and phenomenological contents, which traditionally informed the domain of colonial perspectives, but as a material, semiotic, and situated practice that draws onto the specificity of operational images and strategic localization. From an investigation of the material and ethical connotations of *Sunstone*, this investigation proposes a way of making the artistic experience an agent and a catalyst of social change.

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