

FROM PAINTING TO CINEMATOGRAPHY

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*The painter says:
The more artillery that is produced
The longer peace will last.
So that must mean:
The more grains that are planted
The less wheat will grow.
The more cattle that are slaughtered
The less meat there will be.
The more snow that melts on the mountains
The shallower the streams will be.*

Bertolt Brecht, *German War Primer*, 1936¹

The dichotomy between a single image in the form of a painting or drawing and twenty-four frames per second in film is one that has persisted throughout David Krippendorff's work from its inception. Iconic American films such as *Gone with the Wind* (1939) by Victor Fleming, *Gilda* (1946) by Charles Vidor, *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) by Nicholas Ray, and Douglas Sirk's *Imitation of Life* (1959) served as inspiration and as thematic resources for the artist. Early on in his career, Krippendorff created works based on motifs from *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), also by Victor Fleming, which he altered and transferred into painting. This first and most successful American color film production, shot in the then extremely expensive Technicolor, was made a UNESCO World Cultural Heritage object in 2007, not because of the costly production process, but because of its fairy-tale-like call to embrace otherness—or diversity, as we say today.² The film musical came to American movie theaters in August of 1939, shortly before Hitler attacked Poland on September 1, unleashing World War II. Dorothy's struggle with the Wicked Witch on the eve of the war took on an additional layer of meaning as a battle against barbarism. The girl was played by Judy Garland, who was actually too old for the role and had to have her breasts bound; when she steps out of everyday reality, filmed in black and white and sepia, and enters a world of dreams, Technicolor takes over and immerses the scenes in lavish color. David Krippendorff carried the dreamworld landscape and its oversized

plants and flowers, which were created entirely in the film studio, into painting in negative form and added bright horizontal lines that suggest television broadcasting. The film ran for the first time on American TV in 1956 and has remained a part of standard German television programming for many years, aired mainly during the Christmas season with its predilection for fairy tales. In his paintings, Krippendorff seems to critically question the extravagant tale; he clearly refrains from retelling it and adds an element of skepticism without denying the famous film musical's broad cultural influence. The added visual element of the bright TV stripes can be understood as an autobiographical reference to the 1967-born German-American artist's formative experiences with movies broadcast on TV.

The meaning of the film is complex. Oppressed and forced to hide their sexual identity, many gay people embraced Judy Garland as their very own icon, one that stood for accepting different sexual identities. Only a few minutes into the film, in her interpretation of the song "Over the Rainbow," Dorothy longs for a faraway place where dreams really do come true. Surrounded by family and friends at the end, after she's survived the tornado and the rest of her dream adventures and regains consciousness, Dorothy suddenly exclaims in a moment of enlightenment: "There's no place like home." The fact that David Krippendorff has created a video loop combining this statement with the spinning farmhouse swept up in a tornado indicates a concept of home that's virtual or fluid and not necessarily linked to a geographical location. In an article, Georg Seeßlen pointed out the sentence's ambivalence:

"That's why we don't really know whether the sentence Dorothy exclaims in *The Wizard of Oz*—"There's no place like home"—which she's forced to repeat over and over until she's finally able to leave the magical realm and return to her real home, is a beautiful or a terrible sentence. It all depends on the intonation."³

The African American blues and jazz poet Gil Scott-Heron used a clearly negative definition of home in his song of 1971:

Negative Painting No. 1 • 2000
Oil and glitter on canvas
190 × 263 cm



“Home is where the hatred is
Home is filled with pain and it
Might not be such a bad idea if I never, never went
Home again.”⁴

From the perspective of an African American, this is not very surprising given the racism that continues to rage to this day and the exclusion of various minority populations, including Indigenous people. One thing Native Americans and the descendants of former Black slaves have in common is their oppression at the hands of whites. James Baldwin described recognizing this commonality in persuasive terms:

“It comes as a great shock around the age of five, or six, or seven to discover that Gary Cooper killing off the Indians when you were rooting for Gary Cooper, that the Indians were you. It comes as a great shock to discover the country which is your birthplace and to which you owe your life and your identity has not in its whole system of reality evolved any place for you.”⁵

At the time *The Wizard of Oz* was released, racism was rife in the United States, particularly in the south, where the Ku Klux Klan terrorized and often murdered African Americans.⁶ Even institutional and political organizations were heavily infested with racism. In 1939, the internationally renowned first major African American opera singer Marian Anderson (1897–1993) was scheduled to perform in Washington, DC’s Constitution Hall, but was prevented from doing so by the Daughters of the American Revolution, the white conservative women’s association that owned the concert hall.⁷ The building’s senior manager told concert promoter and Anderson’s manager Sol Hurok:

“No Negro will ever appear in this hall as long as I’m manager.”⁸

When Eleanor Roosevelt, wife of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and herself a member of the Daughters of the American Revolution, learned of this, she, like many others,

resigned from the organization and arranged for an open-air concert with Marian Anderson to take place on April 9, 1939, in front of the Lincoln Memorial. The concert was seen by 75,000 people and is documented in evocative photographs and film footage. Anderson, by no means a political activist, had to overcome her initial hesitation before agreeing to her planned appearance at an anti-racist demonstration, realizing that it was about far more than “just” her, because, as she said, “I had become, whether I like it or not, a symbol, representing my people.”

In *Look at Me*,⁹ his latest video work, David Krippendorff recalls this act of institutional racism. The camera focuses on a huge chandelier hanging from the ceiling of an opulent theater hall, pans down, and slowly moves across the empty rows of seats toward the stage, where a brightly lit box can be seen that, a short time later, now from a bird’s-eye view, turns out to be a record player. Two hands pull a vinyl record out of a sleeve and place it on the turntable. In a close-up, the tonearm is shown with the needle running in the record’s grooves. At first, crackling can be heard before the orchestra settles down to play Johann Sebastian Bach’s “Erbarme dich” (Have Mercy) from the St. Matthew Passion. Over the course of several cuts, the perspective changes as the camera moves from the stage to the chandelier and the empty rows of seats in the hall and then pans back to the stage with the record player. The curtain starts to close just as Anderson’s voice begins singing the deeply moving aria. Anderson’s exclusion becomes a visual one that embodies the intention to keep the great singer away from her audience. To accompany this impressive homage to Marian Anderson and the memory of a concert prevented by racial prejudice, Krippendorff had a vinyl LP produced featuring five famous songs and arias from Anderson’s repertoire on one side and a blank, ungrooved reverse side bearing the title “Live at Constitution Hall, April 9, 1939.”

With regard to Krippendorff’s video loop for *There Is No Place Like Home* discussed above, Marian Anderson’s oppressive experience can be linked to Ernst Bloch’s definition of “home” not as a place of birth or a country, but something that has yet to be created, a condition society must fight for to provide equal respect and rights to all:



Stills from
Altered States • 2008
 2 min. 18 sec. • color • stereo

“Once he [the human being] has grasped himself and established what is his, without expropriation and alienation, in real democracy, there arises in the world something which shines into the childhood of all and in which no one has yet been: homeland.”¹⁰

Xenophobia and racism as forms of oppression and exploitation also appear in other works by Krippendorff using various video formats that, in more complex exhibitions, are occasionally supplemented with drawings and paintings of individual scenes.

In *Altered States* of 2008, a Palestinian man and a Jewish Israeli woman utter two sentences, a phrase of love and a phrase of hate, both borrowed from the lyrics of *West Side Story*. Written by Arthur Laurents and set to music by Leonard Bernstein, the musical is a modern adaptation of William Shakespeare’s tragedy *Romeo and Juliet*, set in the Bronx in New York City. In Krippendorff’s video, in which the actors appear in front of a black background, the voices of the man and woman are combined, so that both voices accompany each face. The ambiguous title could be understood to mean a changed political state as well as a change in one’s conditions or circumstances. Thus, the title can be applied to the political situation in Israel, in which the Palestinians have been denied their own state to this day. Likewise, the title refers to the change that occurs after a love between two people has turned into hate. It bears mentioning that at the time the film was being made, the two people embodying the man and woman were a couple and had moved to Berlin as a result of their intercultural and transnational love. The blending of the two voices also underscores the irrelevance of gender in this conflict, emphasizing each one’s vulnerability to hatred, humiliation, and violence.

A Small Fee from 2009 also references *West Side Story*. In a rapid sequence of images, stereotypical racist slogans against “others” who have been declared enemies are literally “fired” into the viewer’s face in a manner akin to ads featuring brightly colored typography against a starkly contrasting background. Projected in a dark room, the work has a strong psychedelic effect and shows in an extreme way how

the constant repetition of propaganda can permeate the brain and manipulate people. In an endless catalogue of potential features and “different” characteristics, anything can be used as a reason for exclusion. Whether it’s ethnic or religious affiliation, sexual orientation, skin color, dialect and language skills, too much or too little assimilation—everything is conducive to hostility. The true reasons are often located in economic reality, in the competition for social advancement, and in class difference. Günther Anders summed it up thus:

“If you want a faithful slave, give him a sub-slave.”¹¹

The insults, threats, and hate speech aim at undermining dignity and integrity. Ultimately, they lead to violence.

Highlights of David Krippendorff’s film work to date include the three high-budget, beautifully elaborate productions *Nothing Escapes My Eyes* (2015), *Kali* (2017), and *Appropriation* (2023), which together build the trilogy entitled *Lament*. All films were made in collaboration with the Palestinian actress Hiam Abbass. The second film, *Kali*, deserves particular mention in the context discussed here. In Hinduism, Kali is the goddess of death, destruction, and renewal. The anger attributed to her is unleashed against demons and injustice, among other things. For David Krippendorff, Kali’s fight against the forces of inequity seems to have played a crucial role in naming his film after the goddess. Calling upon a deity to whom only religious faith ascribes power could be an expression of skepticism regarding our ability to fight for and enforce justice in reality. Hiam Abbass plays a cleaning lady; she recites the lines spoken by Pirate Jenny in Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill’s *The Threepenny Opera*, which has been reconfigured into a monologue. It was Nina Simone’s interpretation of Pirate Jenny,¹² however, that served as a model: in her version, Brecht’s prostitute is a cleaning lady.¹³ Krippendorff’s reference to Simone is another deliberate nod to a great Black singer, for whom the Brecht/Weill piece was a vehicle to sing to society’s underdogs and turn it into a song of rebellion against racism. Simone, who supported Malcolm X’s radical Black empowerment movement, performed the song at Carnegie Hall in New York City in April and May of 1964, at

Stills from
A Small Fee • 2009
8 min. 51 sec. • color



a time when activist members of the civil rights movement were being murdered by racist mobs. The fact that Abbass recites the monologue in standard Arabic (with English subtitles) also speaks to the conflict residing in the West's arrogant racist view of the Arab world. The film begins in darkness; footsteps can be heard shuffling from the off. A pair of shoes is put on, a cigarette is lit, embers glow. Abbass then switches on a lamp and we see her in character. Flipping the light switch is what makes her visible to us. The act has the effect of self-empowerment: metaphorically and symbolically, she emerges from the invisibility of the underdog forced to serve others and becomes an autonomous person. In a second act of self-empowerment, she finds her own voice, by means of which she presents herself as a thinking subject. Kali lights another cigarette, sits down on a stool, and begins to smoke, inhaling deeply. Her heavy breathing and careworn look evoke a high level of emotionality, which she expresses in her monologue in the form of anger and grief. All throughout, she keeps an eye on the surveillance camera, put there by the company she works for or by a higher ruling exploitative power. The aesthetics of the images are diametrically opposed to one another. On the one hand, there's the perfect lighting with a very sharp focus that captures every feeling that flits across Abbass's face in close proximity and makes her agitated emotional state palpable as she performs on a stage in front of which viewers sit as spectators. At the same time, however, we also see other images bathed in greenish light, reminiscent of the ghostly footage of night-vision cameras. David Krippendorff forces the viewer to adopt both perspectives simultaneously. While we experience Abbass's monologue as empathetic viewers, we also discover the synchronized surveillance recordings. Thus, Krippendorff catapults us also into the control room and puts our inner convictions to the test.

The previous film starring Hiam Abbass, the lavish *Nothing Escapes My Eyes* (2015), begins with a slow tracking shot of a scene that is initially blurry; gradually, a mirrored table with lightbulbs emerges, like in an artist's theater dressing room. To the sounds of the aria from Verdi's *Aida*, with the line "Padre, a costoro schiava non sono" (Father! I am not a slave to them), the actress Hiam Abbass, in tears, remains in character as she wipes off her makeup. As she sheds her historical stage garb and reverts to a person of the present day, Abbass's face conveys the entire Verdi

drama of love, betrayal, exile, belonging, violence, and foreign rule. She performs the role using economic yet powerful facial expressions and gestures. The intensity of her gaze reveals sadness and despair, and while the camera slowly draws back into a long shot that reveals the surrounding architecture, the supposed theater turns out to be a parking garage in the middle of Cairo, the exact site where the opera house burned down in 1971 and where, a hundred years earlier, Verdi's *Aida* had premiered. Doing without commentary from the off, Krippendorff weaves together various dimensions through the visual power of his images and a camera work that takes on different perspectives to create meaning. He expands his range of topics to include a contemporary commentary on migration and displacement due to war and poverty. Racism and questions of identity and loyalty to a state are as relevant today as they were in antiquity.

From the very beginning, David Krippendorff's art has revolved around various shades of emotion, around closeness, love, separation, and the way love can turn into hatred. The relationship between the individual and the nation, society and community, paired with the question of identity and belonging—all of which go to make up the human condition—play an important role in his work. The ultimate form of lived enmity and collective hatred is embodied by war.

In conclusion, in view of the current world situation with multiple armed conflicts and a global strategic battle being waged in Ukraine between Russia and Europe, the United States and NATO in a state of escalation that risks the deployment of nuclear weapons, I'd like to mention David Krippendorff's black-and-white video *Sleeping Beauty* of 2003. The projected image is a triptych. Bombs are falling from the sky to the left and right; in the middle, a woman lies nearly motionless on a bed. There's a hint that her body is turning slightly; now and then there's a hesitant movement of the leg while, from the off, dull drumbeats and acoustic guitar riffs in loop mode add rhythm to the images' repetition. The character is played by Rita Hayworth and the image is from Charles Vidor's 1946 film *Gilda*. Hayworth's performance, particularly the burlesque dance scene with the famous glove striptease, earned her a reputation as a "bombshell" and a "sex goddess." In the song's lyrics,

which Hayworth sings in an incredibly provocative manner, the seductive power of female eroticism is ironically stylized into a force of nature so strong that it can trigger the great San Francisco earthquake. The impact on the male sector of society, all the way to the United States military, was so drastic that the atomic bomb the US detonated on June 30, 1946, on the Bikini Atoll was “adorned” with a photo of Hayworth and bore the name Gilda.¹⁴

In his video triptych, David Krippendorff combines the eroticism of the female body with the alleged and symbolic power attributed to it, said to match the destructive potential of the atomic bomb, in order to break down the symbolism to the point of absurdity. While Hayworth remains almost motionless on the bed, deadly bombs fall from the sky to her right and left. The male-dominated sexist image of a woman’s seductive and destructive power is not only thwarted here by a particular emphasis on passivity; it is also unmasked.

It remains to be seen whether Krippendorff will continue to develop artistically toward scriptwriting and film direction, and, eventually, like the British photo and installation artist Steve McQueen, abandon visual art in exhibition formats altogether in favor of cinema and film.

NOTES

- 1 Bertolt Brecht, “Poems of Hitler and His War,” *Red Banner Magazine*, November 2006, <https://redbannermagazine.wordpress.com/tag/bertolt-brecht/> (accessed July 24, 2023).
- 2 “The Wizard of Oz (Victor Fleming 1939), Produced by Metro-Goldwyn-Meyer,” UNESCO Memory of the World, n.d., <https://web.archive.unesco.org/web/20220331184640/http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/memory-of-the-world/register/full-list-of-registered-heritage/registered-heritage-page-8/the-wizard-of-oz-victor-fleming-1939-produced-by-metro-goldwyn-meyer#%20abgerufen%20am%2026.4.2023> [accessed April 26, 2023].
- 3 Georg Seeßlen, “‘There is no place like home.’ Imaginäre Reise nach Hollywood: Elisabeth Bronfen beschreibt die Suche nach der Heimat im Kino,” *Der Freitag*, January 14, 2000, <https://www.freitag.de/autoren/georg-seesslen/there-is-no-place-like-home> (accessed April 11, 2023).

- 4 Gil Scott-Heron, “Home Is Where the Hatred Is,” on *Pieces of a Man*, LP, Flying Dutchman Productions Ltd., 1971.
- 5 Raoul Peck and James Baldwin, *I Am Not Your Negro: A Companion Edition to the Documentary Film Directed by Raoul Peck* (New York: Vintage International, 2017), p. 23.
- 6 In 1939, at the end of a concert at the Café Society in Greenwich Village, New York City, Billie Holiday sang for the first time the song “Strange Fruit,” written and composed by Lewis Allen (Abel Meerpool) in 1937. World-famous today, it was probably the bitterest musical protest against the lynchings perpetrated on the African American population. Refer to *Strange Fruit—Song gegen Lynchmord und Rassismus*, a podcast by Michael Zametzer, <https://www.podcast.de/episode/607027567/strange-fruit-song-gegen-lynchmord-und-rassismus> (accessed May 1, 2023).
- 7 See “Marian Anderson ‘A Dream, A Life, A Legacy,’” National Marian Anderson Museum, <https://marianandersonhistoricalsociety.weebly.com/biography.html> (accessed April 26, 2023).
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, vol. 3 (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), p. 1376.
- 11 In this sentence from an interview with Mathias Greffrath in 1979, Günther Anders refers to his novel *Die molussische Katakombe*. From Elke Schubert, ed., *Günther Anders antwortet: Interviews & Erklärungen* (Berlin: Edition Tiamat, 1987), p. 19.
- 12 Released on *Nina Simone in Concert*, Philips PHM 600–135 (USA), 1964; live recording from the concerts in Carnegie Hall, NYC, April and May 1964.
- 13 “Why Brecht Now? Vol. II: Nina Simone sings ‘Pirate Jenny,’” *Dusted Magazine*, March 22, 2019, <https://dustedmagazine.tumblr.com/post/183632765267/why-brecht-now-vol-ii-nina-simone-sings-pirate> (accessed April 18, 2023).
- 14 Bernd Stöver, *Der Kalte Krieg 1947–1991: Geschichte eines radikalen Zeitalters* (Munich: Beck Verlag, 2007), p. 208.