

The Missing Darkness

Thomas Micchelli

In the opening moments of Hanne Nielsen and Birgit Johnsen's *The Missing Darkness*, a set of three signal lamps flash repeatedly, blindingly, in a Morse code sequence that reads, "light absorbs darkness." It is a statement of fact, a lament, and a warning. Light defines civilization; artificial light defines modernity. The signal lamps, in a supple paradox, announce the inescapability of light even in a film about darkness.

The encroachment of light upon the darkest corners of the planet is yet another symptom of the exhaustion of the natural wilderness: there is nothing, anywhere, untouched by humans. The signal lamps, which return twice more, in the middle and at the end, conclude the film with the epitaph, "loss of darkness is loss of heritage."

The *Missing Darkness* is divided into 15 sections, with six sandwiched between the first and second sets of flashing lights, and six between the second and third. (The coded message of the middle set reads: "artificial light becomes a star to follow.") Each of these 12 sections represents a constriction or an inversion of the timeless order of things, an anomaly induced by the self-imposed prison we've constructed against the realm of night.

Our Vergil in this sunless world is the Danish astronomer Per Thyberg Aldrich, who wrote the script with Nielsen and Johnsen. In a low-key baritone tinged with melancholy, he rues the dwindling number of places in the world where one can experience total darkness. Two-thirds of the people residing in the United States, he tells us, can no longer see the Milky Way. The same is true for fifty percent of Europeans and a fifth of the world's population. Astronomers have begun to demand "darkness reserves" around their large telescopes. Even in places like Lille Vildmose, a large nature preserve in the north of Denmark where *The Missing Darkness* was shot, there are still traces of "light smog" from nearby towns.

Artificial lights have eclipsed the moon, the North Star and the constellations as beacons, so much so that baby sea turtles, hatching in the sand along the shoreline, are endangered by brightly illuminated beach resorts, heading inland rather than following the full moon, which would safely lead them to the water.

The prevalence of artificial light also has deleterious effects on the internal compasses of night migrating birds and on the mating behavior of songbirds and fireflies, not to mention human health, with potential links to breast cancer and myopia. The correlation to myopia, which may be caused by sleeping with a light on, is a fitting condition for the world we have created, a place where, as we hear in Aldrich's concluding remarks, "The starry sky has become stranger to us than ever before."

A work such as *The Missing Darkness* may seem a departure for Nielsen and Johnsen, with its glimmering, nearly abstract cinematography, crisply realized graphics, windswept landscapes and minimal on-screen human presence. As with much of what these artists do, the video is principally concerned with self-imposed restrictions. While previous works touched on the often absurd

obstacles that life scatters in our path, the encumbrances in *The Missing Darkness* — for astronomers or for night migrating birds — stem from civilization's alleged progress.

An early video like *Beyond Reach* (1996) is a single take composed of pans across the interior of a room from the point of view of the artist holding the camcorder, whose bare feet are firmly planted on the floor. The lion's share of the film is taken up with her attempts to twist all the way around to catch a glimpse of what's behind her, straining at the boundaries imposed by her own spine.

In *Constructions in Space* (also 1996), a naked man lies on a table outdoors. A model airplane is attached by a cable to his penis, tethering it as it flies ceaselessly overhead (the video is on a continuous, Sisyphean loop). A take-off of Leonardo's Vitruvian Man, the work is an exercise in symmetry, with the circling airplane centered precisely within the edges of the frame. Confined within the loop, the model plane will never fly unfettered and the man will never be released. They aren't free, but neither will they drift away, stumble, sputter or crash.

We enclose ourselves in walls of light in the hope that the invisible terrors outside will remain invisible and, presumably, powerless. The uncertainty at the core of *Beyond Reach* — if there is something behind the artist's back, we will never know it for sure — can engender intolerable anxieties, but the model airplane's predictable path in *Constructions in Space* (as torturous as it may be for the male member anchoring it) leads to stability and security.

The assurance that there is nothing hiding under our beds can result in a closing-in of the visual world, a metaphor of willful blindness in which our own circumscribed walls are no longer clearly seen. (In an intriguing correlation, Aldrich's voice-over explaining the myopia connection in *The Missing Darkness* is accompanied by the image of an electric light bulb swinging against a black backdrop along the same trajectory as the model plane.)

In the later videos, such as *I Am So Fucking Happy* (2002-ongoing), *Blind Walk* (2004) and *A Matter of Strategy* (2007), the restrictions are subtler but more pervasive. In the first work, one woman after another recites the title phrase — for the most part unconvincingly — into the camera. Denmark is consistently ranked among the top five happiest countries on Earth, which supplies a context for the women's forced, ironic delivery. With such high expectations, any inner discord becomes a stone in a wall rising between you and society. Emotional authenticity turns into a form of solitary confinement.

In *Blind Walk*, the artists have attached camcorders to the bodies of a blind woman and her guide dog, so that we witness what the woman cannot, as well as what the dog can see but not comprehend beyond the delimited functions it performs. The two-channel video showing each perspective simultaneously is exceptionally poignant, capturing the exterior of a world sealed off from the blind woman by her physical handicap and from her helper by its cognitive limitations. *Blind Walk* provides the obverse of *The Missing Darkness*, an enclosure of darkness rather than an enclosure of light.

A Matter of Strategy, the most curious of the three, depicts five paratroopers landing in a field, but instead of embarking on maneuvers, they engage in a synchronized dance routine in the center of

a well-lit patch of field against a backdrop of pitch blackness. By keeping inside what they can see, they decline the beckoning of darkness — an offer that artificial lights are rapidly denying the rest of us — until the very end, when they turn and walk toward the edge of the lighted terrain. The final fade-to black occurs before the soldiers step across that boundary, leaving it an open question whether they chose stasis over expansion, leaving the territory invaded but uncaptured.

In “Choruses from the Rock” (1934), T.S. Eliot writes, “In our rhythm of earthly life we tire of light. We are glad when the day ends, when the play ends; and ecstasy is too much pain.” In the 80 years that have passed since this poem’s publication, we are no longer thankful “that darkness reminds us of light,” preferring to substitute the former with the latter — and, in the process, flattening out levels of perception and valorizing the literal and the obvious.

The missing darkness is the loss of heritage, but also the loss of imagination, which slips into the shadows. Light quells anxiety; the information it conveys leads not to wisdom but to certainty, a checklist in hand rather than a leap into the void. Light may determine “our rhythm of earthly life,” but without darkness there is no escape.

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