

# INFINITE ROTATIONS IN A FINITE FRAME A TACITA DEAN TRIPTYCH<sup>1</sup>

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In his reflections on expanded cinema, cinema beyond the screen in a movie theater, Nicky Hamlyn claims that Tacita Dean's films "construct an entirely conventional cinema space within the white cube."<sup>2</sup> Even though they are shown in art gallery installation, they are "more akin to straightforward cinema films, since the specificities of the space or the sculptural implications of the projection process are not explicitly addressed."<sup>3</sup> Hamlyn compares Dean's films to those of, for example, Anthony McCall (*Line Describing a Cone*, 1976), Neil Henderson's *Black & Light Movie* (2001) even Stan Douglas' *Der Sandmann* (1999) in which the spectator/gallery visitor assumes an entirely novel physical and conceptual relationship to the work. In turn, for Hamlyn, the innovation of works that encourage viewers to engage with the sculptural dimensions of the projection process as well as the projected image re-articulate the parameters of cinema. Cinema becomes something other than a spectral image projected on a screen before an immobile audience. It is true that Tacita Dean's films are of a different, more conventional genre from the other candidates in Hamlyn's chapter on "Installation and Its Audience." Dean's films may be looped, but they are still projected as images on a single, two-dimensional screen. Nevertheless, this does not mean that they create an "an entirely conventional cinema space within the white cube."<sup>4</sup>

In this article, I argue that when three of Dean's films – *Disappearance at Sea* (1996), *Fernsehturm* (2001), and *Disappearance at Sea II* (1997) – were displayed at the Tate Britain in 2001 as a triptych, they issued a challenge to the conventional parameters of cinema, if only by virtue of their exhibition as a triptych in an art museum. The three films, both individually and as a triptych, explore the line that both demarcates cinema from painting specifically, and that between moving and still images more generally. In addition, the placement of these films in an art museum challenges their audience to interrogate viewing practices of both static and moving images, in art museums and movie theaters. These conflicts and provocations begin with Dean's characteristic exploration of edges, margins – the edge of the world, horizon lines seen from vantage points of obscurity, spaces and places that are themselves abandoned, forgotten, yet for Dean, replete with relevance to and meanings for our historical present. And the marginal space that is her primary concern: the edges of the film images produced by the anamorphic lenses attached to her camera.

All of these confrontations at the margins fuel the films' central engagement with discourses on the parameters of vision at the end of the 20th century, a vision constrained by the technologies that were once thought to enable it. By examining edges and dividing lines between different media, between different spaces and different temporal dimensions, Dean's films encourage reflection on our conventional viewing habits in

and out of the movie theater, in and out of the art gallery. The vision explored by Tacita Dean is a complicated phenomenon: it is human vision colored by cinematic vision, institutionalized vision, and that produced by the art gallery. Thus, the films may not "expand" cinema according to Hamlyn's notion of the genre, but they do expand our existing conceptions of the medium.

*Disappearance at Sea* (1996) charts the fall of night as it is refracted in the Fresnel lenses of the St Abb's Head Lighthouse in Berwickshire. The film alternates between the camera's tight close up, I want to say "loving," vision of the light bulbs in orbit, and the view out to sea, that is, what is seen by the bulbs. This view out to sea also includes the bulbs in the left hand corner of the anamorphically shot frame. The film comprises seven static long takes: three of the light bulbs and three corresponding visions out to sea, each one step further into the sun's progressive setting, each one step closer to nightfall than the previous shot. In the seventh and final static image of *Disappearance at Sea*, Dean's camera watches the beam of the lighthouse sweep dramatically across the darkened ocean. The image is almost black and the search of the light creates an abstract pattern on the wiles of the night sea. As the movements of camera, lights, and the disappearing sun mark the shift from day into night, we begin to recognize *Disappearance at Sea* as a film about light and darkness, including the conflicts and harmonies of natural and technological light. The various lights – natural light, that of the lighthouse, and the camera – demarcate the interstice of the coastline and the horizon, and in addition, together they mirror the interstice of the indefinable temporal moment between day and night.

Where Dean's films discourse on the shift from the diurnal to the nocturnal, there is always the implication of another elision: an elision between the temporality of technology and the temporality of nature. In the case of *Disappearance at Sea*, the technology of the lighthouse rotates in apparent motion toward infinity. However, unlike the cycles of nature, the lighthouse apparatus will be switched off, at the arrival of the next day, and finally, when a new technological invention replaces it. At the intersection of the temporal interstice between day and night and that between technology and nature, Dean's camera inscribes its reflections on the vision (and blindness) that these lights enable and delimit. Lastly, the interrogation of the limen of day turning into night, of the friction between technology and nature are underlined and further probed by the soundtrack. As night falls, the hawking of gulls on the soundtrack becomes louder, contrary to our expectations.

The other side panel of Dean's triptych as it was exhibited by the Tate Britain, *Disappearance at Sea II* does not watch the light of the lighthouse, it becomes synonymous with it. Rather than the seven still frames of *Disappearance at Sea*, *Disappearance at Sea II* is one continuous take. The camera itself remains static, and it depends on the rotations of the lighthouse apparatus for its motion. It thereby offers the same panoramic view of the infinite blue sea in rotation that is seen by the light. This film is shot in daylight at the Longstone Lighthouse in the Farne Islands, Northumberland. In *Disappearance at Sea II* the interface between nature and technology is not matched by the transition from day to night, from sunlight to searchlight, but rather, by the intensity of the sun's reflection on the glass that separates the light bulbs from the sun. As the sun slowly sets, the reflection of the technological lights on the glass intensifies. In addition, the light of the film *mise-en-scène* intensifies and diminishes in keeping with the camera's position in relation to the sun. The blue of the sky and the sea becomes

dull when the sun is behind the light house apparatus and the camera in their rotation. Thus, we are reminded of the synchronization of technology and nature in Dean's film: each compensating the other's fluctuations as they appear in the frame. But we are also reminded of the asynchronization of technology and nature in Dean's film: the relationship is one of unease in which the rhythmical patterns of film and lighthouse technology cannot be equated with the unpredictability and organic motions of nature.

*Fernsehturm* is the centerpiece of the gallery installation and, as such, adds an historical dimension to the side panels. Without *Fernsehturm*, the two *Disappearance at Sea* films might be understood as ventures into the imagination of the romantic wanderer. Dean explains that *Disappearance at Sea* captures the dreams and ambitions, the human fallibility and insanity of Donald Crowhurst, a British explorer who set sail in a race to circumnavigate the world in 1968.<sup>5</sup> Crowhurst feigned success through spurious radio reports, when in reality, his boat never made it into the Atlantic. *Disappearance at Sea II* was apparently inspired by an extract from the 12th century, *Tristan and Isolde*.<sup>6</sup> Having been wounded in a duel, Tristan also surrenders himself to the providence of the sea. He hopes to find a cure from the Queen of Ireland. Unlike Crowhurst, his journey is not bound to technology and it is successful. Tristan's is a journey of healing, rescue and redemption as the heavens guide him to his destiny. To incorporate Tristan's surrender to the sea and its contingencies, *Disappearance at Sea II* is subtitled *Voyage de Guérison* (journey of healing). The subtitle refers to an ancient Celtic belief which holds that surrender to the forces of the sea will guide one to a magical island where supernatural forces will heal all misfortune.<sup>7</sup> Without Dean's explanation, the two *Disappearance at Sea* films are about the sun, the moon, the sea, the sky and their dynamic interaction with the film camera, mechanized light. Even though Crowhurst's journey on the "Teignmouth Electron" is imbricated with all manner of technological inventions, including his own, his ship has disappeared from the beam of the light house seen in the image and the short wave radio heard on the soundtrack of *Disappearance at Sea* and *Disappearance at Sea II*.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, the anguish of Crowhurst's story is balanced by the liberation of the Celtic journey. Thus, both sides of Dean's representation remain steeped within the Romantic. The invitation to identify as the Romantic wanderer alone at sea on a voyage of self-discovery that might ultimately enhance human understanding is simply passed on to us as the viewer of Dean's films.

Another possible interpretation of *Disappearance at Sea* and *Disappearance at Sea II* comes from their juxtaposition with *Fernsehturm*: as philosophical reflections on the nature of vision at the intersection of technology and nature. *Fernsehturm* potentially anchors the contemplation of these natural and technological phenomena in the historical world. Anchor is perhaps the wrong word. The films balance precariously on an historical and geographical edge. The *Fernsehturm* of the title is at the edge of the world. It is a structure that belongs to a world that still treads the line between Cold War no man's land, or refuge, and political center of one of 21st century Europe's most powerful member states. Unlike the lighthouses that haunt the margins of time and space, the radio tower is in the world: it sits on Alexanderplatz, at the center of Berlin, like Dean's representation of it sits at the center of the triptych. The lighthouses of *Disappearance at Sea* and *Disappearance at Sea II* are at the center of nowhere, appropriately relegated to edges. The *Fernsehturm*, a one-time icon of technology and progress in Socialist Germany is now a tourist curiosity with a revolving restaurant at

the top. As a tourist attraction it is once again a central feature of the post-war Berlin cityscape. The lighthouses stand like specters of another world that few even know about, let alone venture to see.

As the centerpiece of the triptych, *Fernsehturm* also draws out its similarities to that which it binds. These similarities point up the historically ground dimensions of *Disappearance at Sea* and *Disappearance at Sea II*. Once the measure of the all-seeing, surveillant eye of power, the *Fernsehturm* was and continues to be, like the light house, a guiding light, a tower on the horizon that orients those in its midst. Like the radio tower, the light tower becomes an anachronism: an icon of technological progress, freedom, mobility, the dream of omniscience. But, it is only a dream. Like the horizon watched by the *Fernsehturm*, the lighthouse simultaneously offers a routinized, finite, and intransigent illumination, an illumination dependent on the fixity of the rotations. Like the *Fernsehturm*, the lighthouses chosen by Dean sit at the edge of the world, in a no man's land, a relic of times long gone, a world that no longer matters.<sup>9</sup> And yet, while the world illuminated by the searchlight may not be pivotal to the political and historical identity of unified Germany and Europe, it is still crucial to the ships it guides in the night. It is absolutely central to the lives it protects. Through their intimate relations with *Fernsehturm* as triptych centerpiece, the *Disappearance at Sea* films are both abstract philosophical meditations as well as material gestures or representations of an otherwise forgotten world that has an impact on our own time and place. Similarly, typical of Dean's interest in technologies of different eras, the lighthouses draw attention to the *Fernsehturm* as a technology of the past: it is, like them, historically displaced. All three were once seen as ahead-of-the-times inventions that are now eyesores of the past.<sup>10</sup> Seen in this light, the triptych encapsulates both the possibilities and (past) hopes enabled by technologies designed to fortify and expand our experience, and particularly, our visual experience of the world. Through this journey to the edge of the world, and back again, away from and toward the lighthouse, as we experience the triptych in installation, we are also reminded of the restrictions imposed by these same technologies in their interaction with nature, their engagement with different temporalities. And the restrictions of the paths they illuminate, the visual trajectories they enable. First, however, a description of *Fernsehturm*.

*Fernsehturm* is the longest of the three films, and like the others, takes place in an interstitial temporal moment, a transition marked by the sun's mutations from yellow to orange to red to purple to deep blue and finally black as it is seen through the window panes of the revolving restaurant. Like the measured movements of the camera in the *Disappearance at Sea* films, the rotations of *Fernsehturm* are in complete concert with the slow revolve of the restaurant. The longer time frame of the film is determined by the concrete measurement of the length of time taken by the diners in the restaurant. The film opens as they arrive and ends once they depart for the night. At 44 minutes however, the film also undoes this equation by revealing a discrepancy between the time taken to perform the pro filmic events and that of their filmic representation. In addition, despite the apparent synchrony between the movement of the restaurant, what the camera sees and the setting of the sun, through its placement in a triptych which continually challenges order and harmony, the restaurant may follow a structured path of revolution, but, it simultaneously rotates towards its obsolescence. This one time bastion of socialist potency that boasted the most sought after dining experience in East Berlin is now no more than a tourist novelty.<sup>11</sup> Spatially, *Fernsehturm* also



follows a similar logic to that of the two side panels. Once again, the camera remains static with all movement taking place within the frame – here the diners drifting in and out, and staff preparing orders, and waiting tables. Likewise, the camera shifts between a number of positions: from the galley at the pivotal core of the rotating restaurant looking out at the diners and the sky beyond; to somewhere on the perimeter looking in at the staff as they prepare to deliver food and drink.<sup>12</sup>

*Fernsehturm* both mirrors and is mirrored by the cycles of nature in their interface with technology seen in the two side panels. As well as seeing in the round, the three films look inwards (at the power of technological light) and outwards (to the horizon line of nature) and vice versa when they “document” the shift from day into night, blindness and insight, the internal and the external experience of being human in a world observed, framed, followed, guided and routinized by technological light, technological time, technological images. We watch the diners – and by extension ourselves – mesmerized by the view outside the window as well as the view of the brilliant yellow, orange, and red sun on the window. We see them look at as well as into the image before them: they watch the reflections of color on the windows as well as what lies on the other side, presumably the city beyond. Like the diners as audience, we watch the surface of Dean’s films as they engage reflexively with their own status as image, and simultaneously are fascinated by what lies before these images, on their other side. Thus, the vision of the diners is returned to the mechanical eye of the camera (what we see) which, in turn, creates a perceptual experience that is duplicated by the human eye (our act of seeing as film viewers). In this way, *Fernsehturm* eloquently, even figurally, represents our viewing process as it is explored in the triptych. *Disappearance at Sea* and *Disappearance at Sea II* draw attention to the process of looking at and through both the glass of the light house and the filmic image via the negotiation of different modes of light on glass, mirror and film screen. While in *Fernsehturm* the process is literalized if we see the diners as our onscreen surrogates. The longer we look at the three works both singularly and in unison, the more complicated the discourse on vision.

## Defining Cinema

When the eye of the camera looks left and right, and when the three films look to each other for meaning and justification as a triptych, they reflect on the medium of cinema. It is a cinema defined via the meaning of painting or still images in a gallery context as well as by the technologies that define its aesthetic. The trafficking between margin and center, the exploration of times and spaces on the edge and at the core of the cultural and social world in all three pieces, is reflected back in Dean’s examination of the limits of cinema, the limits demarcated by the frame, the limits of the form of the medium. Always in her work Dean interrogates the role of technology in its interface with the natural cycles of the sun, the earth, the moon as they rotate around one another. And, by default, this interrogation is enmeshed with the parallel but always discrepant temporalities identifiable in Dean’s films: the time of nature, technology, art and socio-historical time are in constant play. These discourses of time and space merge to reflect on the implications of the co-existence of technology and nature. Where technology has no limits, for example, in the infinite rotation of the lighthouse, or the revolution of the restaurant at the top of the *Fernsehturm*, nature imposes its limits: the

finitude of a day, marked by the fall of night. And this relationship between technology and nature is reversible: the three films have a beginning and end, the camera can only see so far, technological light is bound by the power of its beam. The finitude of the cinema – the medium that supposedly garners its power from the ability to transcend time and space, to disregard the confines of the static image – is thus underlined when confronted by the infinite expanse of the sea, the inestimable and inimitable light of the sun. Accordingly, through the cycles of nature, we begin to see the limits and limitlessness of the cinema. We notice its edges.

The constraints of a medium commonly celebrated in avant garde circles for its potential to liberate human vision from the limitations imposed by gravity, history and corporeality are further explored in these three films through the nurturing of a tension between motion and stillness.<sup>13</sup> Where we expect motion – the moving image – Dean gives us stasis, and where we commonly anticipate stillness, Dean finds objects in motion: the pivot of the lighthouse beam, the revolving restaurant. And of course, the static film camera is then set in motion when it is attached to these objects in rotation. Here, the technology of the cinema – itself an anachronism in a world of digital and cyber images – comes face to face with technologies that were also once at the cutting edge when they were invented. The cinema as technology mirrors the nostalgic promise of now obsolete technologies. As Clarrie Wallis notes, Dean chooses technologies that evoke loss, unrealized optimism and disillusionment. As Wallis says, the lighthouse comes from a time when science and technology were believed to have the potential to conquer all. The lighthouse is one of those remarkable inventions bound to freedom, exploration, discovery and domination that was to be the result of sailing the oceans. The *Fernsehturm* is not so different: it remains the symbol for a post-War optimism and social fortitude. The imbrication of cinema with these curiously outdated, yet ahead-of-their-time machines, invites us to reflect further on the parameters of film – potentially ossified in the art museum. How is the cinema “reminiscent” of a promise of utopia that was never realized? A belief nowhere held so strongly as in the avant-garde on which Dean draws for inspiration.

## Cinema and Painting

Side by side with the confrontation between technology and nature in Dean's films, is the tussle between cinema and painting. This relationship exposes a different set of limits of the cinema aesthetic. In the filmic triptych, there is both an intimacy, a binding together at the edges of cinema and painting, and a mutual challenge to each other's identity. Like that set in motion between technology and nature, the struggle between cinema and painting is at the heart of Dean's reflection on how we see in *Disappearance at Sea*, *Disappearance at Sea II* and *Fernsehturm*. The reflexive use of cinema as an object in installation, cinema in its relation to painting opens up a new level of understanding, not only of cinematic perception, but also of human perception. The affinity between Dean's seascapes and those experienced by the Romantic wanderer in Caspar David Friedrich's visions at the edge of the world, in an interstitial moment as day turns into night, such as the *Monk by the Sea* (1809) has been remarked upon by others.<sup>14</sup> The most profound coincidence comes, I would argue, in the affinity between Friedrich's wanderer and Dean's viewer. This coincidence is both the evidence of a viewer at odds

with the conventional cinema viewer and of the triptych's exploration of modes of vision produced at the interface of technology and nature. Like the monk by the edge of the sea engulfed by the transparent light of daybreak, the viewer of Dean's films is invited to explore her own film viewing practices away from the clamor of every day life, away from the popcorn, the exit signs, the other distractions of the movie theater. We are invited to contemplate. And we contemplate a vision, a vision that is deeper and more penetrating than any we would experience in the cinema: the reach of this vision is given us by the boundless elements that mesmerize us – the sea, the sun, the infinite turning of the restaurant, the light mechanisms, the repetitive beat of the camera apparatus as it turns on the pivot to which it is attached.

We are also connected to the viewer of Friedrich's wanderer as well as to the monk himself, when we are thrown back on the limits of our vision. The viewer of *The Monk by the Sea* is confronted by the flatness of the painted surface. It is a foreshortened perspective of the horizon in which a luminescent sky, sea and sand coexist in the foreground of the image, on the surface of the painting. When this tendency of drawing attention to the surface of the image is transposed to *Disappearance at Sea II* and *Fernsehturm*, Dean's static camera in close up foregrounds not the translucence of paint as light, but technology in abstraction: mirrors, bulbs, glass, steel frames and girders. These obstructions to our sightlines throw our eye back onto the surface of the image, they cloud our vision, reminding us of its limitations. It is as two dimensional as the other works by which it is surrounded in the Tate Britain.

The drawing attention to the apparatus of cinema and the sibling technologies which enable it in Dean's films also connects the triptych to the history of cinema. Again, examination of this relationship points up a challenge to the conventions of film viewing. Dean's films are most notably kindred to the structural films of Michael Snow. Again, this connection is so obvious that other critics have pointed it out.<sup>15</sup> But the significance of the connections is complex and not yet fully explored. Like Snow's films, Dean's interrogate both the mechanized nature of cinematic vision and our physical and conceptual experience of this vision. Like *La Région centrale* (1971), *Wavelength* (1967), *Back and Forth* (1969), Dean's films are about the cinema's ontology stripped bare: they demonstrate and interrogate the parameters of camera movement. And the movement is always given richness and profundity through changes in light, color, texture, perspective, focal length, and *mise-en-scene*: that is, through attributes that belong to the image itself, the four sides of which are the object of our vision. With little to no regard for human figures, or for cinematic conventions of continuous time, space and motion, *Disappearance at Sea* and *Disappearance at Sea II*, *Fernsehturm* regard the limitations and possibilities of technological modernity, technological vision, and our vision as it is inflected by these technologies. The movements of these cameras in concert with apparatuses to which they are otherwise unrelated encourages our eye to meditate on the image of the sea, the beauty of nature. Then, as the pieces progress, our eye is increasingly focused on the movement of the camera. This shift which takes place somewhere across the course of each film, but is never tied to a single identifiable moment, articulates that our vision is simultaneously stymied by the limitations of the technologies on which it depends. Our vision is bound to the infinite rotations of the lighthouse apparatus, the radio tower and the camera, and is thus, slave to the unrelenting repetitions and routines of mechanization. This is also the difference between Snow's films and those of Tacita Dean made thirty years later.

The relationship to Snow's cinema is instructive for its distinction as well as its connection. Unlike the arbitrary motions of Snow's camera in *La Région centrale*, an arbitrariness derived at the intersection of the camera and the Snow-made device on which it rotates, the revolutions in Dean's films are calculated, fixed, without any possibility of aleatory incursions. Thus, although mesmerizing, the camera doesn't allow us to fully indulge in the dreams of either Crowhurst or Tristan, or the monk at the edge of the sea. And neither do the regimented rotations that result from attaching the camera to the necessarily predictable mechanics of a lighthouse light or the core of a rotating restaurant allow for the riveting three and a half hour meditative journey into the possibilities of cinema as does *La Région centrale*.

Dean's triptych of films as art works in installation opens out onto a world in which vision – both that of the human and the cinematic eye – are endless and constrained, generative and stultifying. However, even though the films enable a sensuous vision that has clear limitations, *Disappearance at Sea*, *Disappearance at Sea II*, *Fernschturm* do not constrain the viewer in the ideological sense that a narrative cinema narrows or manipulates our focus on conservative moral values. The defined parameters of cinematic vision appear to remain within the sensuous realm. Critical to this distinction is the fact that Dean's films do not create times and spaces that proffer an illusory cohesion. They may invite us to contemplate and to dream, but never to be believed in their own plenitude. We are saved this indulgence through the constant clatter of the apparatus in motion, the blinding light of the sun or the light bulbs as they are left to shine directly into Dean's camera lens as they do before the camera. Dean's work reflects on the possibilities of the cinema and the vision it enables – not the visions it imagines – as an art form. And it achieves through simultaneously drawing attention to its aesthetic two dimensionality and the parameters of its motion. It sits, in effect, at the interface of painting and cinema. Like Friedrich's monk, Snow's camera in *La Région centrale* and the cinema in installation, the triptych sits on the edge of two worlds, centered and balanced by displacement to the margins.

## The Sea in Painting and Cinema

Although the sea has figured in film throughout the 20th century – most notably in early and experimental films that explore the synergy of nature and technology in motion, it has not been the recurring motif, some might say, the persistent preoccupation that it has in painting and photography.<sup>16</sup> Because the representation of the sea is usually linked to notions of contemplation of a world through a static frame. As such the sea has been invoked in discourses on the boundlessness of being human in a finite world and vice versa. These are issues that have not traditionally been of primary concern to the cinema. They are, however, consistently taken up in painting from the Enlightenment onwards. In particular, the sea as a representational figure becomes central to the work of modernist painters who are interested in the confrontation between stasis and movement, figure and ground, and the challenge to the creation of a diminishing point perspective in modernity. Dean's work engages with these discourses on the circumscription of the sea by the static frame. She convinces us that the modernist issues of composition, the finitude of vision, the possibility of gaining a God-like view of the world, are indeed, the province of the cinema: the sea is a space, a phenomenon where cinema, art and human vision intersect.

Like the challenge to the certitude of representation in modernist versions of the sea, the rotations of the light house, the revolving restaurant and Dean's camera share the departure from the privileged linear perspective seen in Renaissance painting. However, unlike modernist painters such as Mondrian, Cézanne, and so on, rather than focusing on surface flatness of the painted image, Dean's camera, the light of the light-house, the rotating mechanism of the restaurant all see in the round. This different way of seeing through the foregrounding of technology – literally – discovers the sea as a figure through which to explore human vision anew. Dean's discovery echoes those modes of vision explored in the late 19th, early 20th century through modernist painting and other technologies (including cinema).<sup>17</sup> But first, to the relationship between the triptych and its art historical antecedents.

Beyond the obvious connection to romantic wanderers and the conceptual concerns of painted representation, the figure of the sea binds Deans work to the long tradition of art that explores the organization of perception through depictions of nature. We are reminded of Mondrian's navigation of the relationship between painting and nature in works such as *The Sea* (1912), *Sea, Pier and Ocean* (1914). Here, like Dean after him, Mondrian interrogates the surface and depth, horizontality and verticality, of his canvas through expression of the endless interplay of the stasis of the horizon with the dynamic swelling of waves. He pits the finitude of his frame, of line, the crudity of his palette and compositions together with the infinity, the purity, the sublimeness of the sea. For painters such as Mondrian, the representational challenge posed by the sea came in its mystical and harmonious significance in a technological world in which the planar and surface were of primary importance. Like Dean in his wake, Mondrian is interested in representing the changes to vision as a result of the social and cultural changes outside its frame. And his foremost concern is to negotiate the influence of these changes on representation. However, as I have interpreted it, for Dean, the changes brought about by new technologies of seeing are inscribed in the representational practice itself when the production of the image visibly depends on the rotating light of the light house and the revolve of the *Fernsehturm*.

The concerns of Lyonel Feininger perhaps come closer to the fractured, stilted nature of human vision explored in Dean's films. Again, in works such as the two *Clouds above the Sea* (1923), *Calm at Sea, I, II, III* (1929), *The Baltic: V-Cloud* (1946/47) we see Feininger turn to nature, particularly the sea, the sun, the sky and the horizon line as primers for an architecture of space on canvas. And like, but unlike Dean's triptych, the created spaces and pictorial compositions are dictated by the power of light as Feininger finds it in nature. He again is interested in the dwarfed human, indistinguishable or absent against the monumental laws of nature in its midst. But the angularity of the compositions, the flatness of Feininger's surface lays bare the primacy he also gives to the pictorial invention or recreation of light, air and water. Feininger's representations of the sea enable us to see nature in a different way, just as nature enables a new way of seeing the fragmented architectonics of the world around us. And there is no mistaking that for Feininger, these breaks with representational convention are the result of technological rationalization. Dean takes up similar concerns, only in a different medium as I have described above.

The line of Tacita Dean's ancestry goes on, and I could continue – Rothko's "iconography of color" views of the world from the edge of the sea looking out to the horizon. Beyond the connections created by the sea, as Friedrich Meschede notes, Dean's images

resonate with the lonely, landscapes and cityscapes in the canvases of Edward Hopper (*Solitary Figure in a Theater*, 1902-04; *Lighthouse Hill*, 1927; *Two Lights Village*, 1927), canvases which again depict places and spaces on the edge, forgotten, or determined to be inconsequential.<sup>18</sup> The cold, emptiness of the canvas, the traces of human characters who inhabit lives on the edge, at odd times of day bear a remarkable resemblance to Dean's lonely, repetitive, and sometimes chillingly nostalgic depictions of worlds that have been forgotten, or were perhaps never acknowledged. And for Dean, these times and places that appear beyond the pale of everyday life, are in fact, central to the definition of being human. In these times and places we are confronted with limits that, in turn, bring us face to face with our own sphere of possibility, particularly as it is bolstered by our engagement with technology, and our participation in technological vision.

The Enlightenment celebrated the looking outwards, from on high, from the lighthouse out over the sea. Such representations marked a transition to the centrality of the individual as being bestowed with god-like vision, from above and beyond. For Tacita Dean and early 20th century modern artists concerned with the changing modes of perception enabled by technological modernity, the sea is in dynamic struggle with technology. The plenitude and harmony of the natural world have taken on a different meaning once they are viewed through the eyes of 20th century modernity. For Mondrian, Feininger, and Rothko, the play of light on the surface, the movement of the waves on the breakwater offer the opportunity to explore the struggle between the horizontal and the vertical, the geography of the picture plane. Through this reduction of the great expanse of the sea to its most essential pictorial form, modernist artists appropriate it as a figure in their historical explorations. This reminds us of the limitations to our assumed omniscience in a technologically inflected environment.

However, Dean's work also eschews both the Romantic and the modernist intimacy with the sea, especially as they are concerned to explore the sublime and the profundity of human emotion. Dean's concern coincides more with the shared interest in the physicality of the sea – its infinite horizon line as the measure of the finitude of human vision. And when the sea and the horizon line are coupled with the technologies through which they are seen – the light, the camera, the radio tower – Dean's work fully embraces the physicality of this experience. The three films underline the difficulty of orienting ourselves without help in the face of the vastness of nature. The human eye can only see so far. And when we turn for help, to technology, the promise is unfulfilled: the technology does not – unlike the lighthouse – enable us to establish a precise location, to calculate the course we are on, to guide us around the signposts of civilization. It does not light our way.

Our view of the *Fernsehturm*, that is, of the diners' view from on high, reminds us that, despite its promise, technology does not offer omniscience. To reiterate, we are left looking at a reflection of ourselves as the world passes by on the other side of the mirror. The inclusion of *Fernsehturm* enables this discourse on blindness and insight, the finitude and infinity of human vision – bolstered by the machine – to be lifted to a political or historical level, at times one colored by confusion and contradiction. We see beacons of surveillance, metaphors of loss, uncertain destinations, and unrealizable futures in the humdrum existence of a world that no longer exists. But this forgotten universe is nevertheless a source of fascination for those who look with nostalgia to a world they never experienced. Like all the viewer of



*Disappearance at Sea*, *Disappearance at Sea II*, and *Fernsehturm* is thrown into exile, transported to a place at the edge of the world where he/she is invited to dream, but only for so long. Before long, we are left with nothing more than the surface of the image and the patterns thereon created as the camera turns on its prosthetic pivots, as the sun sets and as the world outside becomes slowly divorced from that on the inside. Ultimately, thus, the historical lessons are overwhelmed by the immediacy of the technological apparatuses.

My point is made, Dean takes up the horizon, structures at the edge of the world, indefinable, ineffable times, and empties them of all human actors before infusing them with the play of color and light, surface and depth, the stasis of composition in struggle with the dynamism of nature, and turns all of these relationships inside out in order to reflect on the same qualities in the historical world. In particular, the triptych reflects on cinematic vision, on our vision. Both the technological and the human versions of vision carved out by our experience of these films become symbolic of the loneliness, the haunted promises, the emptiness of how and what we see in the present. And this eventual significance of Dean's films is realized through their complex interaction with painting, their placement next to each other and, in turn, their situation in the art museum. As we reflect on the similarities and differences within the art historical trajectory invoked by the triptych, the struggle between the static and the moving image, what the films do, and what they strive for, then we begin to realize that the three films are given new meaning as a triptych in the Tate Britain.

## The Panorama

Dean's films belong to pictorial traditions other than those mapped out by the art museum. However, when placed in these contexts, we are led back to the same concerns with the simultaneous liberation and entrapment of the technologies that fuel our orientation. Typical of their occupation of different fields of possibility, the films' status as 360 degree images creates an intertext with the 18th- and 19th-century panorama. As has been well-documented, the panorama as a form of bourgeois entertainment was another invention of modernity and an important contribution to the business of pleasure that developed hand in hand with the rationalization of time, space, work and play.<sup>19</sup> The panorama, sibling to the diorama and other forms of modern entertainment was also a form of education, where school children were taken to learn – as they are taken to the Tate Britain. And it was a place that gentrified people could go on Sundays, again, like the cinema at the turn of the 20th century and, moreover, like the Tate Britain at the turn of the 21st century. Thus, Dean's contemporary versions of the 18th- and 19th-century panorama resonate with ongoing discourses on film and other visual cultures, not just painting. In turn, the dynamic exchange between Dean's films, the art gallery and the panorama as a form of popular culture open up further interstitial times and spaces, illuminate still more coincidences, conjunctions and connections within the triptych.

In his comprehensive study of the panorama, Stephen Oettermann reminds us that the panorama had and continues to have a dual function: it liberates and imprisons human vision.<sup>20</sup> These compelling vistas-in-the-round of fictional scenes – especially historical battles, crucifixions, cities, and like Dean's panoramic views, landscapes, and voyages at sea – enable the viewer to stand, god-like at the center of the rotunda and sur-

vey the 360 degree scene from above. The visitor to the panorama saw from a position of omniscience, through an eye that was not limited by the vanishing point perspective afforded by a static two-dimensional image. The panoramic images are static and, through the motion of narrative, they are also dynamic. Just like the images in the cinema. Indeed, Dean's films have much in common with the grand sweep of panoramic representation. Like the filmed image whose seams are exposed via the window frames of *Fernsehturm*, any film is a collection of discrete still images, and a series of flat images that unfold before an immobile spectator to give the impression of motion, and the delusion of omniscience. And again, like the panorama, Dean's images paint expansive scenes – a struggle (between natural and technological light) played out on the waves of the sea, and the vast cityscape of Berlin as day turns into night.

Another coincidence between the different forms of the panorama and the cinematic visions of *Disappearance at Sea*, *Disappearance at Sea II* and *Fernsehturm* is the "omnivoyant" gaze embracing an expansive subject matter that is offered by all of them. Following this logic, Dean's camera substitutes for the static spectator at the center of the panoramic apparatus. As Ottermann notes, the perspective of omnipotence and omniscience is double-edged. Because it is an apparatus that also encloses one's view,<sup>21</sup> the panorama might give the impression of mastery over the world, but is, in fact, in the business of immobilizing the viewer. The viewer is placed as a pivot, in a position of servitude, even slavery to the tyranny of power: we may think that we have complete, unlimited mastery over the vision before us. However, this is the deception which places us as the instrument of power and authority. For Ottermann, the panorama is, to use Marx's phrase, "pregnant with its contrary", the panopticon.

As I have begun to argue, like the panorama, Dean's images are also intent upon exposing the illusion of the all-seeing eye, an exposure created at the interface of static and moving images. In *Disappearance at Sea* and *Disappearance at Sea II* our vision of the sea is limited, limited by the light – we only see what the sun allows us to see. When night falls, the narrative is given us by the movement of the beam of the lighthouse. Similarly, we only see what the construction of the machine wants us to see. Although Dean places her camera in a position of omniscience, there is no pretense that this vantage point offers a god-like view. Our perspective is limited – the abstraction of the machinery blocks our view as do the four sides of the image to which we are beholden. Yes, we are invited to contemplate the view, but we can only contemplate for so long. Our attention is drawn to the limits of the frame, the brilliance of the light, the workings of the apparatus.

Dean's films also foreground the illusion through their content: for the visitor to the panorama, the distortion of one's place in the circular space was created by the painted circularity and the overwhelming envelopment of the spectator's physical existence. Similarly, the images were painted such that the space between surface and spectator was dissolved, giving the effect of a *trompe-l'oeil*. For Dean's spectator, the disorientation is introduced through the absence of establishing shots. Quite simply, we are set to find our way on the same ocean of possibility and false expectation as Donald Crowhurst and Tristan. The difference being that while their journeys must navigate the interface of human limitations and the sea, Dean's spectator navigates the interface between nature and technology, particularly, the technology of the cinema. Thus, while Crowhurst and Tristan can engage in a mythmaking journey toward enlightenment, we set adrift to wander, but we are also curtailed by the constraints of our historical

viewing experience. These constraints are provided by the apparatus of film when wedded to those of the light house.

When ground in the historical world of Berlin 2001 from the top of the *Fernsehturm*, we are also reminded that any position of omniscience is only ever an illusion, that we are always watched. In Cold War Berlin, the radio tower could be seen from all over the city, but it also symbolized the impossibility of escape from the all-seeing eye of political surveillance. While surveillance was usually carried out by best friends, wives, co-workers and neighbors acting as invisible informants, the image of the *Fernsehturm* was a symbol of these otherwise invisible sightlines. These references to other perspectives in the round, together with the films' attention to the parameters of their surface aesthetic, underline the limitations of a vision dependent on technological invention. Similarly, once we recall that Dean's representations capture places and spaces of the past, the Janus-face of vision enabled by technological apparatuses becomes even clearer. The places and objects of Dean's films are outdated, perhaps even irrelevant to our contemporary historical knowledge. So we are left with the question: over what are we and the camera omniscient? All we can know is that we too are limited by our historical frame. Thus, our relationship to the three films is complicated, paradoxical even. We are spatially and temporally, conceptually and physically free to explore, and yet, we are also trapped, our dreams stymied – simultaneously.

For all the sensuous mobility given us by the camera and objects in motion, our physical relationship to the films is closer to that of the experience of art works in a gallery than it is to either the cinema in the movie theater or the visitor to a turn of the century panorama. We stand like the panorama viewer, but we also move around. We are not the passive, immobile subject of Metz and Baudry's cinema, and neither are we Hugo Münsterberg's 19th-century train travelers. We are not "a mobile eye in an immobile body."<sup>22</sup> Our physical experience of Dean's images at the Tate Britain, is more akin to the experience of a triptych. And so again, we are led back to a place of meeting between the static and moving image.

Hand in hand with the films' invitation to explore the interstice – between different kinds of images, temporal rhythms, historical moments and spatial parameters – as viewers our experience is woven into their unpredictability and aleatory elements. Dean embraces chance and coincidence within the frame, much like Snow's *Wavelength*, when the sun sets, when a gull flies across the distant horizon, when a waiter's legs accidentally obscure our view of the restaurant floor. This unpredictability that we have already seen in the oblique associations between the triptych and other images, and other forms of visual representation, then becomes echoed in our viewing practice. Most notably, the three films may not be seen from beginning to end as the structure prescribed by the art museum as less fixed than that of the movie theater. And the order in which we see them, and therefore, the narrative we construct around them is always open to chance and circumstance. This is the legacy of cinema in installation.

The exhibition of *Disappearance at Sea*, *Disappearance at Sea II*, and *Fernsehturm* in the form of a triptych – whether it be Dean's design or that of the Tate Britain – invests the works with qualities such as inestimable value, sacredness, and immobility. If it has any connection to its Renaissance counterparts, this triptych also seeks adoration and reverence from its viewer. It invokes uses of the image to spatially demarcate, it belongs to a history of narratives in which religion, art and history come together to reflect the

contemporary world. These are qualities associated with the polyptych, a form that reached its most exciting moment in the Renaissance altarpiece. This form is taken up again in the 20th century by painters such as Max Beckmann and Francis Bacon. While Beckmann and Bacon use the form for their Expressionist explorations of the internal emotions and workings of the mind, Dean uses it to fuel her interest in the fractured nature of our perception within the historical world. As I have demonstrated, the historical world at stake in *Disappearance at Sea*, *Disappearance at Sea II*, and *Fernsehturm* is marked by an attachment to certain modern technologies for their utopian promise. They are revered for their infinite possibility, but as Dean's work demonstrates, the promises are yet-to-be realized, on a horizon-line, out of reach of our perceptual capacities. Characteristic of her tendency to invert and complicate the forms and aesthetics which also give her inspiration, like those of Beckmann and Bacon, Dean's films do not sit comfortably beside the Renaissance altarpiece.

## Conclusion

There has been much interest in the re-situation of the birth of cinema as other than the 1895 Grand Café screening.<sup>23</sup> This constant renegotiation of its beginnings is the most common place for critics to renegotiate what the cinema is. Though we know better than to subject the ontological status of cinema to scrutiny, the impetus to keep alive the debate about what constitutes the cinema is done through an historical lens every time we propose another predecessor or relative of the cinema, whether it be from the 18th century, the 19th century or even earlier. However, as long as the debate stays focused at that end of the history of cinema, that is, its birth, we will ignore the more pressing conversation about whether and how the cinema continues into the 21st century. We will continue to leave open the possibility that cinema be relegated to the historical past of the 20th century, that it, like the lighthouse and the *Fernsehturm*, will become obsolescent despite its one time celebrated radical aspirations.

I want to propose that we need to look elsewhere, outside of the movie theater, and find works that continue to challenge and extend the cinema into the 21st century. Tacita Dean makes such works. Her films in installation renegotiate the cinema through examining its cross pollination, its shared coastlines with other media: photography, painting, 19th-century spectacles, religious iconography. When she places her films in the art gallery, Dean takes them into times and spaces that reanimate cinema, they give it new meanings, challenge its parameters, and place it, yet again, on the edge. In these three films, the cinema is precariously balanced on the edge of our critical and visual understanding.

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2 N. Hamlyn, "Installation and Its Audience," in *Film Art Phenomena* (London: BFI, 2003), pp. 43-44.

- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 C. Wallis, "Introduction," in *Tacita Dean: Recent Films and Other Works* (London: Tate Gallery Publishing, 2001), pp. 9-15. For a compelling account of Crowhurst's failed journey, and a portrait of him as driven, but always doomed, see N. Tomlin, R. Hall, *The Strange Last Journey of Donald Crowhurst* (London: International Marine/Ragged Mountain Press, 2003).
- 6 C. Wallis, *op. cit.*, pp. 9-15.
- 7 Cf. M. Newman, "Salvage," in *Essays* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2003), pages unnumbered.
- 8 Further elisions are created through the addition of the soundtrack. Not only is a space opened up between image and sound, but the constructed nature of the sound further emphasizes the web of deceit of technology. In *Disappearance at Sea II*, for example, the sound we assume to be that of the light in rotation is, in fact, produced by the ventilator shaft of a chip shop in Wolverhampton. Thanks to Alison Butler for this observation.
- 9 The connections that Dean explores between the past and the present, through abandoned and forgotten objects, places and technologies runs through her oeuvre. See T. Dean, *Selected Writings* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2003). See also, J. Garimorth, "Tacita Dean: Time Frames", in *Essays*, *op. cit.*
- 10 On Dean's fascination with machines and technologies that are obsolescent – but still not dead – see her response to the *October* artist questionnaire on obsolescence a site of resistance. "Tacita Dean," *October*, no. 100 (Spring 2000), pp. 26-27.
- 11 Dean explains that in the German Democratic Republic dinner had to be completed in the time frame of sixty minutes, the length of time for a complete revolution. In 1989, a single revolution was doubled to last thirty minutes to keep up with "the progress of reunification." See T. Dean, "Fernsehturm (backwards into the future)," in *Tacita Dean. Berlin Works* (St. Ives: Tate Gallery, 2005), p. 30.
- 12 We do not see them perform these tasks, but rather, assume it as the camera is level with their lower legs.
- 13 The euphoria around the cinema is particularly pronounced among the French and Soviet pre-World War II film theorists. See, for example, Dziga Vertov's writings collected in A. Michaelson (ed.), *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov* (Berkeley-Los Angeles-London: University of California Press, 1984); S. Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960); J. Epstein, "For a New Avant-Garde," in R. Abel (ed.), *French Film Theory and Criticism. Volume 1, 1907-1929* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), pp. 349-352; R. Clair, "Rhythm," *ibid.*, pp. 368-369; R. Taylor (ed.), *S.M. Eisenstein: Selected Works* (London: BFI, 1988-1996).
- 14 See, for example, F. Meschede, *Tacita Dean: Recent Films and Other Works* (London: Tate Gallery, 2001).
- 15 See, for example, M. Newman, *op. cit.*, pages unnumbered.
- 16 John Grierson's experimental documentaries such as, *Drifters* (1929) come immediately to mind. For earlier examples, see also, Birt Acres *Rough Sea at Dover* (1895), and *Rough Sea* (1900), D.W. Griffiths' poetic vision of the sea in *Lines of White on a Sullen Sea* (1909).
- 17 Indeed, Dean brings the history of the "cinema's mobile and eminently variable eye" into the art gallery of the 21st century. See Jacques Aumont's discussion of the variable eye, that is, an eye that has the potential to move, in J. Aumont, "The Variable Eye," in D. Andrew (ed.), *The Image in Dispute: Art and Cinema in the Age of Photography* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997), pp. 231-258.
- 18 F. Meschede, *op. cit.*

- 19 Cf. S. Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880-1918* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976).
- 20 S. Gettemann, *The Panorama: History of a Mass Medium*, (New York: Zone Books, 1997).
- 21 Gettemann founds his observations on the contradictory nature of the panorama on its origins in the *Panoptique trompe l'oeil*. However, today we are most familiar with the double edge of the panorama from the inventions of Jeremy Bentham.
- 22 J. Anagnost, *op. cit.*, p. 236.
- 23 D. Andrew (ed), *op. cit.* See in particular the essays collected in section three, "Vision and Interpretation after Photography", pp. 227-327.