

# ***BLACK PHANTASMAGORIA***

AND OTHER TRUE STORIES

*As Told By Mia Hannula*



*There is something more real in the illusion than in  
the reality behind it –Slavoj Žižek*

**T**uomas Laitinen works with images, collages inscribed on acrylic glass by drawing, painting, digital processing, or formulated with an angle grinder and a drill, until they become a modern phantasmagoria blending real and fictitious events. Light makes the image visible and alive, creating singular effects and a cyclical movement. Unlike the media and advertising, which use light to maximise visibility and the message, the event created by Laitinen in his light boxes is complex and layered. The light both condenses and stretches the moment of the image into temporalities of different modalities, and combined with the dramaturgy of space and the viewer's movements they create a narrative impulse, a potential for the formation of many stories.

The light box has a parallel in the *laterna magica* and *phantasmagoria*, precursors of the film projector in the history of moving images. These devices, where light magnifies images painted on a glass into phantasmic visions, have been used to tell stories and present fanta-

sies, but they have also served the purposes of education, science and political propaganda. Laitinen's world of modern phantasmagoria and their interpretation have a certain kinship with the performances of the early pioneer of phantasmagoria, Étienne-Gaspard Robert. The purpose of his philosophical spectacles, as Robert's performances were known, was to give viewers a first-hand contact with the "strange creations of the imagination" that control the human mind. A review of Laitinen's work could start with the very same pompous words, accompanied by a wink; Robert used to introduce his performances: "That which is about to happen before your eyes, messieurs, is not frivolous spectacle; it is made for the man who thinks."

Laitinen's art, its modalities, his devices of visual narrative and allusions, are all connected to the world of *noir*, the contexts of painting, cinema, photography, cartoons, graphic art, literature and music. Among them, one discovers small floating rudiments of stories that latch onto the stories told in the light boxes. These nascent stories lurking in the background come from outside the works and recede before the act of viewing. The pictorial structure of the works and their thicket of allusions produce an elliptical sense of narrative that contains surprising extensions and connections, but also complete ruptures and dead ends. There are many alternative routes for reading, every time the works are read they seem different. Visual materiality transcends the implicit, predetermined story, tuning up a more inclusive frequency of narrative experience.

The *noir* aesthetic is perhaps simultaneously one of the most and also one of the least subjective areas of expression and experience we have. Its experimental, captivating narrativity treads a path along

the peripheries of meaning and mind. It overturns fixed points of commonplace thinking and experience, challenging given truths and ways of knowing. The genre is characterised by a form and modality that elicit emotions and affects, as if the psyche were turned inside out by the surface of the work, opening a channel for the power of imagining.

The core of Laitinen's visual narration is the mystery story. Lingering with the works bestows upon their mysterious mood a narrative aspect which the flashing effects turn now into a thriller, now into a melodrama, now a tragi-comedy. The core motif in the triptych *There is no Drama without a Briefcase* (2007) is that classic plot device renowned in thrillers, a briefcase of unknown contents. The mystery is compounded by a raven bearing a message it refuses to divulge, and obscure meetings taking place behind closed doors and windows. The stage for the visual experience is set by forms reminiscent of comics, brought to life by the light, and by an iconography of detail and staging familiar from the *noir*. At the same time, however, the work demonstrates the shareable and incommensurate nature of the visual experience. Our perceptual reality is like a screen on which even the most private events of the mind – imaginings, the workings of the unconscious and memory – are projected. The dramatic tension in the works invites the viewer to round off the experience evoked by the work into a story.

In essence, Laitinen's works bring us face to face with an unresolvable mystery, perhaps of matter, sexuality and violence. *Grinder* series (2007) stop us in front of the material, inviting us to follow the play of the lacerating, direct light and the light that glints along the

jagged edges of a crack, the black acrylic glass glowing red in places. The smashed, fractured surface invokes mental associations of furrows and incisions, the sinking emotional state of private affects. The emotion evoked by the works can also remain unnameable, perhaps liberating, cold and empty, or of such strange diversity and variation that it refuses to settle into any given emotional register.

This darkly beautiful world can also be seen as occupying a reactive relationship to its time and its unresolvable conflicts. It can make specific cultural and social forces and human impulses visible and thereby processable. On closer examination, the beautiful view of the sky from beneath the trees in *Morning Smoke* (2007) shows an atmosphere thick with pollution. A view increasingly familiar for us to breathe. The two flashes of light in the abstracted profile of the metropolis depicted in *Untitled* (2000–2005), their slightly oppressive momentum a reminder of the ultimate threats of our time. Images of catastrophes circulated by the media and the crisis stories of toppling twin towers are triggered automatically in the mind. The effect of the associations evoked by such images is so strong that we need the year 2000 to situate the work in the moment of its making.

Faced with that which is perplexing, vaguely visualisable and understandable, inexplicable and unresolvable, at least we *know* we feel something. This emotion becomes associated with the experience of being on the border, edge, threshold. It is characterised by a sense of simultaneous internality and externality, participation and exclusion, togetherness and separateness, presence and absence. “*Soledad*” is part of this mode of thinking. It is a special place, but, for art, a kind of non-place, which opens the power of imagination and emotion with

visual-material means. It also refers to solitude, which is never pure isolation, but always in relation to something, the *self* being inevitably connected to the other and to the environment. This also involves obliteration of the boundary between the real and fiction or fantasy, or the making of that partly artificial distinction fluid.

According to Slavoj Žižek, reality and fantasy are inseparable. In the film *Matrix* (1999) there is a choice between two pills that alter consciousness in different ways. Either you choose the blue pill and wake up to your everyday life, forgetting all that is fantastic, or you swallow the red pill and wake up in Wonderland where you will be shown “how deep the rabbit hole goes”. Fiction partakes in the construction of our idea of reality. That is why Žižek wants a third pill: the kind that helps one to see reality in the very illusion itself. Žižek invites us to take visual fiction for real, something that need to be believed in, even if only conditionally, because we are all influenced by the visual stories that meet the eye. Visual culture sets the space for perceptual reality and for the experience and thinking that rest upon it; it sets its frame and its coordinates. Art has the capacity to stabilise or disrupt this space and thereby create new relations within reality.

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