

## AKROMATOPSIENS VERDENS BILLEDE

De fleste har formodentlig hørt om farveblindhed. Altså det, at man af fysiologiske årsager ikke kan skelne nogle farver fra hinanden eller ikke kan se bestemte farvespektrere. Det lyder i udgangspunktet som en ganske harmløs lidelse, og i de mildeste tilfælde opdages farveblindheden først, når den pågældende person eksempelvis skal testes til militæret eller lignende. Farveblindhed dækker dog over et langt bredere felt, end man umiddelbart skulle tro. Med de milde tilfælde i den ene ende af skalaen findes der i den anden ende langt mere graverende tilfælde af farveblindhed; tilfælde, der kraftigt reducerer mulighederne for at føre en "normal" tilværelse.

I Sofie Thorsens nyproducerede film **The Achromatic Island** (2009) skildres en af de nok mest ekstreme former for farveblindhed; det man kalder total farveblindhed eller akromatopsi. Personer med denne lidelse kan ikke se farver overhovedet, og verden ses udelukkende i grader af lys og skygge, omtrent som en sort/hvid film. Men det er ikke alt, med akromatopsi følger også ekstrem lysfølsomhed. Det vil sige, at man ser bedst, når solen er gået ned, eller hvis man befinder sig i et dunkelt rum. Paradoksalt nok ser man altså dårligere, desto lysere der er, og omvendt ser man bedre, desto mørkere der er. Synets skarphed er yderligere væsentligt forringet, med kun 1/10 i forhold til en normalt seende.<sup>1</sup> Personer med total farveblindhed klassificeres af disse årsager i mange lande som værende decideret blinde.<sup>2</sup>

I videnskaben omkring den sjældne lidelse akromatopsi springer den danske ø Fur i øjnene. Et studie foretaget i 1940 viste, at antallet af personer med total farveblindhed på Limfjordsøen var højere end normalt. Med en procentdel på 1:70 var forekomsten faktisk intet mindre end 4000 gange højere end normalen.<sup>3</sup> Det tilskriver studiets forfattere, Ejler Holm og C.V. Lodberg, den relativt isolerede tilværelse, øens indbyggere op til 1920'erne førte.<sup>4</sup> Med den gradvise åbning, som isolerede områder som netop Fur har gennemgået de sidste 100 år, er den forhøjede procentdel af tilfælde i dag dog reduceret kraftigt, og der findes kun én nulevende person med lidelsen på øen. Studiet fra Fur i 1940'erne er altså på mange måder enestående, og det regnes den dag i dag for det første og væsentligste gruppestudie af akromatopsi.<sup>5</sup>

Det er dette studie, eller rettere akromatopsi på Fur som fænomen, der ligger til grund for filmen **The Achromatic Island**. Et specifikt felt, må man vist kalde det, hvilket generelt kendetegner Sofie Thorsens arbejde. Arkitektoniske bevægelser i 1920'ernes Tokyo, statslån til boliger i 1950'enes Danmark eller navnet på en eksakt vej i Dansk Vestindien gennem tiden er andre eksempler på specifikke, afgrænsede problemstillinger; kunstneren arbejder med. Problemstillinger; der ligesom akromatopsi på øen Fur, ikke just kan betegnes som mainstream-emner, men snarere er ganske ukendte fænomener for menigmand. Med akromatopsiens gradvise forsvinden fra Fur i takt med af-isoleringen af øen er vi yderligere ude i et ærinde, der hyppigt viser sig i Sofie Thorsens arbejde, nemlig globaliseringens stigende homogenisering og som følge heraf udradering af særegenheder.

Filmens **The Achromatic Island** vises udelukkende i sort/hvid og kombinerer billeder optaget på Fur med tekststykker (hvid skrift på sort baggrund) bestående af personlige udsagn fra folk med akromatopsi. Med sin vekselvirkning mellem billede og tekst kunne filmen tænkes at mime stumfilmen, men frem for de ofte hurtige billedforløb i denne genre, dvæles der ved de enkelte billeder og tekststykker. **The Achromatic Island** karakteriseres hermed af et roligt og harmonisk forløb af billeder og tekst.

Filmens billedside rummer forskellige motiver fra nutidens Fur – færgelejet, vejen til Skive, en skov, en molergrav<sup>6</sup>, en molerfabrik, fossiler på molermuseet osv. Mod slutningen fæstnes billedet på en mark, og i stedet for tekstfragmenterne kan man nu høre en samtale mellem Sofie Thorsen og Henning Dalsgaard – Furs sidste indbygger med akromatopsi.

THE  
ACHROMATIC  
ISLAND

6

15

70=85

## COLOURLESS ISLAND THE WORLD VIEW OF AN ACHROMAT: THE COLOURLESS ISLAND

Most people have probably heard about colour-blindness: the condition in which, for physiological reasons, it is impossible to distinguish between certain colours or to see certain colour spectrums. On the surface, it sounds like quite a harmless disorder and in the mildest cases colour-blindness will not be identified until the person in question needs to pass a military exam or something similar. But the notion of colour-blindness covers a much broader field than one might immediately imagine. In contrast to the mild cases at one end of the spectrum, there are, at the other end, much more drastic examples of colour-blindness in which the possibilities of living a 'normal' life are severely restricted.

The subject of Sofie Thorsen's new film, **The Achromatic Island** (2009), features what might be one of the most extreme forms of colour-blindness: what is generally referred to as total colour-blindness or achromatopsia.

Persons with this disorder are not able to see colours at all and only see the world in various degrees of light and shadow, almost like a black and white film. But this is not the whole explanation, achromatopsia is also accompanied by an extreme sensitivity to light. This means that these persons can see the best after the sun has set, or if they are in a dimly lit room. In other words, these people's vision – paradoxically – is worse in daylight and better as it gets darker. Moreover, the sharpness of their vision is seriously reduced to only about one-tenth of that of a person with normal vision.<sup>1</sup> For these reasons, persons suffering from total colour-blindness are actually categorized in many countries as being blind.<sup>2</sup> Among the scientific studies of this rare disorder, the one done on the Danish island of Fur stands out. A study carried out in 1940 showed that, on this island in the Liim Fiord, the number of people suffering from total colour-blindness was higher than normal.

At a rate of 1:70, the incidence was actually 4,000 times higher than the norm.<sup>3</sup> The scientists behind the study, Ejler Holm and C.V. Lodberg, assigned this to the relatively isolated life lived by the inhabitants on the island up to about the 1920s.<sup>4</sup> However, with the gradual opening-up that isolated areas like Fur have been experiencing during the last century, the increased rate of occurrences has been reduced remarkably, and there is now only one living person left on the island with the disorder. The 1940s study of Fur is in many ways unparalleled, and to this day it is considered the first and most significant group study of achromatopsia.<sup>5</sup>

It is this study, or rather the phenomenon of achromatopsia on Fur, that forms the basis of the film **The Achromatic Island**. The subject matter is very specific, one can safely say, but overall that is a characteristic feature of the work of Sofie Thorsen. Architectural movements in Tokyo in the 1920s, state loans for house-building projects in Denmark in the 1950s and the evolution of the name of a certain road in the Danish West Indies through time are other examples of the specific, defined issues that the artist has chosen to address. Issues that, like achromatopsia on the island of Fur, are not exactly mainstream, but rather introduce phenomena that are quite unknown to the average citizen. By examining the gradual disappearance of achromatopsia on the island of Fur and the coincidental de-isolation of the island, Thorsen takes it one step further – which is typical of her approach – and addresses the disappearance of peculiarities due to increased homogenisation and globalisation.

The film, **The Achromatic Island**, is shot exclusively in black and white and combines scenes of Fur with text pieces (white lettering on black backgrounds) consisting of personal statements from people suffering from achromatopsia. Because of the interplay between images and texts, the film can be seen as a pastiche of silent movies, but instead of referring to the often fast-paced sequence of shots for which this genre is known, Thorsen dwells on individual images and text pieces. In this way, **The Achromatic Island** is characterized by a quiet and harmonious sequence of images and texts.

The visuals of the film includes various scenes from present-day Fur – the ferry berth, the road to the town of Skive, a forest, a moler pit<sup>6</sup>, a moler factory, fossils at the moler museum, etc. Towards the end of the film, the image freezes on a field, and instead of the text pieces we hear a dialogue between Sofie Thorsen and Henning Dalsgaard – the last inhabitant on Fur



I samtalen beskriver Henning Dalsgaard det billede, han ser, når han betragter malerens billede, og Sofie Thorsen spørger yderligere ind til detaljerne. Startende med at tale om billedets forgrund bevæger de sig langsomt længere og længere væk i billedet. Hermed får man som normalt seende mulighed for at prøve at forstå akromatopsiens billede af verden både i billeder og med ord.

Filmen afsluttes endeligt med, at kunstneren og Henning Dalsgaard diskuterer de forskellige grå nuancer, han ser, frem for egentlige farver. Han kan nemlig godt se, at den gule farve eksempelvis er lysere end den grønne, men han er ikke klar over, hvilken farve der er gul og hvilken, der er grøn. Faktisk er det helt abstrakt at nævne farvernes navne, for Henning Dalsgaard har aldrig lært dem, og filmens endegyldige udsagn bliver meget sigende spørgsmålet: "Hvorfor har de aldrig lært mig det?" Med det spørgsmål åbner filmen for en række sociale og kulturelle faktorer forbundet med akromatopsi. For tydeligvis falder man som total farveblind ved siden af normalen: man ser bedst i mørke, blændes i dagslys og er ikke i stand til at se farver overhovedet. Forskeren Knut Nordby har beskrevet sin egen opvækst med akromatopsi og deraf følgende store tilpasningsvanskeligheder inden for skolesystemet.<sup>7</sup> Disse beskrivelser er nogenlunde tidssvarende med Henning Dalsgaards formodede skolegang og er derfor værd at ofre lidt opmærksomhed her.

Nordby beskriver, hvordan hans dårlige syn, hvad angik skarphed og lysfølsomhed, var en hindring i folkeskolen. Ligesom det, at han rent faktisk kunne se, paradoksalt nok var et lige så stort problem på den blinde-skole, han blev sendt på efter nogle år i folkeskolen. Faktisk blev Nordby ekskluderet fra folkeskolen, fordi han ikke kunne se, og yderligere ekskluderet fra blindeskolen, fordi han kunne se. Forfatteren beskriver, hvordan han blev straffet på blindeskolen, idet han "snød" ved at læse Braille med øjnene i stedet for at føle bogstaverne med fingrene, som intentionen med blindskrift er.

Nordby blev ifølge eget udsagn opfattet som et problembarn på blindeskolen og blev til sidst sendt tilbage til en normal folkeskole. Her redede en forstående lærer og et forstørrelsesglas ham, og han endte med at få en universitetsgrad. Ifølge Nordby var det relativt få hjælpemidler, der hjalp ham til en uddannelse inden for det 'normale' undervisnings-system. Et system, han som barn alligevel må siges at være faldet uden for og ekskluderet fra på alle leder og kanter.

For at vende tilbage til Henning Dalsgaards spørgsmål om, hvorfor der aldrig er nogen, der har lært ham farverne, er et af svarene derfor formentlig, at ingen har prøvet, eller rettere: ingen har prøvet at begribe, hvad et andet syn i det hele taget indebærer. Man har ikke forsøgt at begribe akromatopsiens underfundige univers og de forhold ved lidelsen, der gjorde sig gældende. For Sofie Thorsen er pointen netop, at man ikke kan forstå den akromatiske perception og omvendt. Som den post-moderne og postkoloniale teori så ofte har gjort opmærksom på, kan man ikke tale for et andet menneske, og ligeledes kan man heller ikke se for det. Men man kan prøve at forstå.

Følger man Knut Nordbys udlægning, er der ikke gjort mange forsøg på at imødekomme hans særlige syn og behov under hans skolegang, men der findes flere eksempler på det modsatte, hvor han er blevet bortvist. Akromatopsien udgør således et vitalt eksempel på, hvordan samfundet ekskluderer det, der falder uden for normerne frem for at imødekomme det. I sit forsøg på at beskrive og forstå det akromatiske verdensbillede sætter Sofie Thorsen altså også afsluttende emblematiske spørgsmålstejn ved normalsamfundet og dets håndtering af anomalier. På et overordnet plan debatteres dermed samfundets håndtering af akromatopsi, af et andet syn og ja, måske andethed i det hele taget. Ekkoende den franske idéhistoriker Michel Foucault diskuteres dermed de identitetsetiketter, der mere eller mindre frivilligt tildeles individer, som eksempelvis 'seende' eller 'blind'.

På et andet, mere umiddelbart plan, afdækker kunstneren i **The Achromatic Island** individuelle erfaringer med total farveblindhed. Det sker gennem tekstfragmenterne og gennem samtalen med Henning Dalsgaard, men rent billedligt tilbydes man også et eksklusivt portræt af akromatopsiens verden. Filmen præges nemlig visuelt ikke så meget af et fravær af farver, som den bæres af kontraster, skift mellem lys og mørke, overblændinger og udviskninger.

**The Achromatic Island** er optaget under forskellige lysforhold, eksempelvis er overblændingen anvendt, således at visse konturer i billedet udviskes, for at lade andre fremstå mere klart. Filmen bevæger sig igennem et spænd fra mørkets ro over tilnærmelsesvist transparente konturer til hvide pletter og tilbage igen. Resultatet er nærmest grafisk og filmen

surrerig som akromatopsia. During the conversation, Henning Dalsgaard describes the image he sees when looking at the field, and Sofie Thorsen asks a number of additional questions about the details. They start talking about the foreground of the picture but slowly move farther and farther into the picture. In this way, a person with normal eyesight gets a chance to understand an achromat's picture of the world in words as well as in images.

The film ends with the artist and Henning Dalsgaard discussing the various grey nuances Dalsgaard sees in place of actual colours. For instance, he can see that the colour yellow is lighter than the colour green, but he cannot identify which colour is yellow and which is green. Actually, it is odd that Dalsgaard even mentions the names of the colours because he has never learned them, and the final statement of the film is a significant question indeed: "Why did they never teach me the names?"

With this question, the film introduces a number of social and cultural factors connected to achromatopsia. It seems clear that if you suffer from total colour-blindness, you fall outside the norm: you see best in darkness; you are blinded by daylight, and you cannot distinguish between any colours whatsoever. The scientist Knut Nordby has described his own life as an achromat and his resulting problems with adjustment within the public school system.<sup>7</sup> These descriptions are more or less contemporaneous with Henning Dalsgaard's schooling and therefore it's only appropriate to offer them a bit of attention here.

Nordby describes how his poor vision in regard to image sharpness and light sensitivity was a major obstacle for him in his school days. Paradoxically, the fact that he was actually able to see was an equally big problem at the school for the blind, to which he was sent after a couple of years in the public school system. Nordby was in fact expelled from the public school system because he couldn't see – and then later expelled from the alternate school because he was able to see. Nordby describes how he was punished at the school for the blind for "cheating" by reading Braille with his eyes instead of feeling the letters with his fingers in the way Braille writing is supposed to be read.

According to his own testimony, Nordby was seen as a problem child at the school for the blind and was eventually sent back to a regular public school. There, a sympathetic teacher and a magnifying glass saved him, and he ended up getting a university degree. Again, according to Nordby, there were relatively few assistive devices at hand to help him get a degree within the 'normal' educational system – a system that, as a child, Nordby fell outside of and was excluded from in every imaginable way.

Returning to Hennings Dalsgaard's question of why nobody ever taught him the names of the colours, one of the answers is that no one had probably ever made an attempt, or rather, that no one had ever tried to understand what it actually meant to have a different kind of vision. No one had tried to grasp the subtle universe of an achromat and the consequent aspects of the disorder. For Sofie Thorsen, the point is that it is impossible to understand an achromat's perception – and vice versa. As has often been pointed out in post-modern and post-colonial theory, it is impossible to speak for another person – and likewise, it is impossible to see for others. But one can try to understand.

If one follows Knut Nordby's interpretation, relatively few attempts had been made to comply with his special vision and needs during his school days, but there are several examples of the opposite – for instance, when he was expelled. In this way, achromatopsia stands as a vital example of how society rejects what falls outside the norm instead of accepting it. In her attempt to describe and understand the world view of an achromat, Sofie Thorsen also indirectly questions 'normal' society and its handling of abnormalities.

In principle, Thorsen discusses society's handling of achromatopsia, of a different way of seeing, and, perhaps, of otherness in general. Echoing the French historian of ideas, Michel Foucault she thereby explores the labels of identity that are, more or less, voluntarily given to individuals – labels such as 'seeing' or 'blind'.

In **The Achromatic Island** the artist unveils individual persons' experiences with total colour-blindness on another and more direct level. This happens by means of the text pieces and the dialogue with Henning Dalsgaard, but through the film's images, we also get an exclusive insight into the world of an achromatic. Visually, the film is marked by an absence of colours but, more importantly, by its contrasts, shifts between light and darkness, image overlays, and blurring.

**The Achromatic Island** was filmed under various light conditions, using dissolves to blur the contours in order to let others stand out more clearly.



giver indtryk af et poetisk og til tider tegnet univers. Hermed fremstiller **The Achromatic Island** på sin egen måde et andet syn på verden. Et var vittigt, sensibelt syn, der på den ene side hylder mørket og gråzonerne og på den anden side udstiller dagslysets ubarmhertighed. Måske kan man afslutningsvist sige, at Sofie Thorsen også metodisk ekkoer Foucault og hans såkaldte arkæologiske fremgangsmåde i hendes undersøgelse af faktiske, historiske begivenheder, som hun dissekerer lag for lag via tekst, lyd og billede. Med afgrænsede, for menigmand ukendte, problemstillinger inddrager hun mange forskellige stemmer og historier i sit arbejde, og trækker perifere fænomener frem i lyset, hvorved hun konsekvent undsiger sig 'den store historie' med dens forkromede fortællinger. I dette lys får **The Achromatic Island's** optagelser af fossiler på Molermuseumet på Fur en anderledes, væsentlig betydning som små parafraser over hendes overordnede ærinde og metodik. Det handler om at se, om at se på en anden måde, om at læse eller genlæse det, der overleveres, i et nyt lys. Kun sådan kan vi sammenstykke stumperne af et mere komplekst billede af verden.

The film moves through a wide range, from the serenity of darkness over almost transparent contours to white spots and back again. The result takes on an almost graphic quality and the film gives the impression of a poetic and, at times, almost-drawn universe. In this way, **The Achromatic Island**, so to speak, presents a different view of the world. A strange, sensitive view that, on the one hand hails the darkness and the grey scale and on the other parades the cruelty of daylight. In conclusion, one might say that Sofie Thorsen also methodically echoes Foucault and his so-called 'archaeological' method in her examination of actual historical events, which she dissects layer by layer by means of text, sound and image. With clearly defined and, to the average citizen, unknown topics, she involves a number of different voices and stories in her works and pulls peripheral phenomena into the light, whereby she consequently renounces 'the grand story' with its chromium-plated narrative style. In this light, the images of fossils at the moler museum on Fur obtain a different and substantial meaning in **The Achromatic Island** in the form of small parafrases referring to her overall goal and methods. It's all about seeing, about a different way of seeing, about reading or re-reading what is handed over in a new light. Only in this way can we piece together the fragments of a more complex picture of the world.

1

Jf. Lindsay T. Sharpe og Knut Nordby, "Total colour-blindness: an introduction", R. F. Hess, L.T. Sharpe og Knut Nordby: *Night vision: basic, clinical, and applied aspects*, Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. 280.

2

Ibid. p. 255.

3

Jf. Ejler Holm og C.V. Lodberg, "A family with total colour-blindness", *Acta Opthamologica # 18*, 1940. Her gøres antallet af personer med akromatopsi op til at være 23 ud af 1600. I "Total colour-blindness: an introduction" p. 267 sættes frekvensen herudfra til 1:70, hvilket vurderes til at være 4000 gange over det normale.

4

Ibid. p. 234 ff.

5

Jf. Sharpe og Nordby, "Total colour-blindness: an introduction" p. 267.

6

Moler er en lys havaflejring af mikroskopiske kiselskaller af diatoméer og ler tilført fra land, karakteristisk for de vestlige Limfjordsegne. Mange fossiler kan ses på Fur Museum. Jf. Gyldendals store danske encyklopædi.

7

Jf. Knut Nordby, "Vision in a complete achromat: a personal account" in Sharpe, Hess og Nordby, *Night vision: basic, clinical, and applied aspects*, Cambridge University Press, 1990, pp. 290–315.

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Cf. Lindsay T. Sharpe and Knut Nordby, "Total colour-blindness: an introduction", in R. F. Hess, L.T. Sharpe and Knut Nordby, *Night vision: basic, clinical, and applied aspects*, Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. 280.

2

Ibid., p. 255.

3

Cf. Ejler Holm and C.V. Lodberg, "A family with total colour-blindness", *Acta Opthamologica # 18*, 1940. Here the number of persons with achromatopsia is assessed to be 23 out of 1600. In "Total colour-blindness: an introduction", p. 267, the frequency is thus estimated to be 1:70, which is more than 4,000 times over the norm.

4

Ibid., p. 234 ff.

5

Cf. Sharpe and Nordby, "Total colour-blindness: an introduction", p. 267.

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Moler/diatomite is a light sea deposit consisting of microscopic silicon shells from diatoms and clay added from land – and moler is a characteristic feature in the western parts of the Liim Fiord. A large number of fossils are exhibited at the Fur Museum.

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Cf. Knut Nordby, "Vision in a complete achromat: a personal account", in Sharpe, Hess and Nordby, *Night vision: basic, clinical, and applied aspects*, Cambridge University Press, 1990, pp. 290–315.

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