

## Cinema between Monochrome Painting and Light Vibrations: *Essentieel* (1964) by Jef Verheyen and Paul De Vree

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### Abstract

*Essentieel* (1964) is a short experimental film made by Belgian abstract painter Jef Verheyen in collaboration with poet Paul De Vree. A cinematic equivalent of Verheyen's attempts in representing the warmth and vibrations of light in his monochrome or "essentialist" paintings of the late 1950s and 1960s, the film plays on the tensions between abstract color surfaces and natural elements. Apart from offering a close-reading of *Essentieel*, this article investigates the film's production context. In addition, it situates *Essentieel* in the history of experimental cinema, particularly abstract and visionary film, and it investigates the work's relation to the aspirations of the landmark exhibition *Vision in Motion – Motion in Vision* (Antwerp, 1959), which is usually considered the first important international manifestation of the ZERO art movement. Consequently, this article analyzes *Essentieel* in the larger European context of ZERO and Verheyen's collaborations and affinities with leading neo-avant-garde artists such as Lucio Fontana, Piero Manzoni, Yves Klein, and Jesús Rafael Soto.

### Keywords

Jef Verheyen – Paul De Vree – Monochrome Painting – Abstract Film – ZERO Movement – Sound Poetry - Experimental Music – Experimental Film

European avant-garde cinema of the 1950s and 1960s and its relations with contemporaneous art currents are still understudied fields. This also applies to the situation in Belgium although leading Belgian artists such as René Magritte, Pierre Alechinsky, Marcel Broodthaers, Marcel Mariën, Luc Peire, and Serge Vandercam among others were involved in the production of experimental films in these decades. One of those films that fell into oblivion is *Essentieel* (*Essential* in English), which was shot in 16mm in 1964 by abstract painter Jef Verheyen (1932-1984), who had developed his own kind of monochrome painting, focusing on light streams and color spectra.<sup>1</sup> [Fig. 1]

Based on our research in various archives and the consultation of various contemporaneous documents (reviews, folders, posters), this article discusses the film's production context, introducing all artists involved. In addition, this article situates the film in various relevant contexts. First, we analyze the film in relation to the oeuvre of Jef Verheyen, more particularly his personal version of monochrome painting with its interest in color vibrations, which he described as "Essentialism." In doing so, we demonstrate that the film can be interpreted as a cinematic extension of Verheyen's pictorial work. In addition, this article situates *Essentieel* in the history of postwar experimental cinema. Although the result of a cross-medium encounter by a painter, poet, and composer who are all Belgian, the film unmistakably resonates with contemporaneous experiments with both abstract and visionary cinema in other European countries as well as North America. Combining "pictorial" forms abstraction (in line

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<sup>1</sup> On Jef Verheyen and his art, see Paul De Vree, "Essentialisme 2," *De Tafelronde* 10: 3 (1965); Willy Van den Bussche and Léonore Verheyen, *Retrospectieve Jef Verheyen, 1932-1984*. Brugge: Stichting Kunstboek, 1994; Freddy De Vree and Marie-Claire Nuyens (eds.), *Jef Verheyen: Lux est Lex*. Wijnegem: Vervoordt, 2004; and Jef Verheyen and Dirk Pörschmann, *Jef Verheyen: Le Peintre flamant*. Brussels: ASA, 2010.

with Verheyen's paintings) with various "cinematic" strategies to abstract footage of natural elements, *Essentieel* situates itself at the crossroads of various tendencies in experimental cinema. Last but not least, this article demonstrates how *Essentieel* can be considered a paradigm product of the international ZERO art movement with its interests in multimedia experiments as well its fascination for a dematerialized art consisting of light and space that reflects the sensibilities and aspirations of the postwar "Space Age."

### Verheyen, *Filmgroep 58*, and Paul De Vree

Verheyen made *Essentieel* in close collaboration with poet and essayist Paul De Vree, filmmaker Jos Pustjens, and composer Jan Bruyndonckx. It remains unclear who initiated the production of this 20-minute film, which was the only collaboration of these four artists, though De Vree had worked together with Pustjens and Bruyndonckx on earlier occasions.<sup>2</sup> Several of their collaborative projects developed in the context of *Filmgroep 58*, a film club closely connected with the Antwerp artist group G58.<sup>3</sup> Both groups jointly organized experimental film screenings at the local Hessenhuis and several G58 members collaborated on projects of *Filmgroep 58*.<sup>4</sup> Originated from various smaller amateur film clubs, *Filmgroep 58* had the ambition to share "technical and artistic knowledge" in order to "contribute, on a national level, to the development of the art of cinema."<sup>5</sup> Apart from filmmakers such as Rik Kuypers and Harry Kümel, *Filmgroep 58* included writers such as Paul De Vree and visual artists such as Jan Dries and Jef Verheyen among its members or sympathizers.<sup>6</sup> Though generally focused on narrative shorts or amateur documentaries, *Filmgroep 58* provided a platform for extensive experimentation that made possible the development of films such as *Essentieel* that were closely connected to various postwar neo-avant-garde artistic tendencies such as monochromatic painting, kinetic sculpture, or other new practices involving light and space.

There is no doubt that Paul De Vree (1909-1982) was the thriving force behind *Essentieel*. [Fig. 2] Apart from being a teacher, art critic, curator, and organizer of all kinds of

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<sup>2</sup> Composer Jan Bruyndonckx, who created a soundscape for *Essentieel*, worked closely with filmmaker Jos Pustjens for, among others, the film *Amen* (1962). Together with De Vree, he also made several sound poems. Bruyndonckx also wrote the score for the experimental short *Mijn Evanaaste* (1963), which Pustjens structured on the basis of poems by De Vree. The three artists also collaborated on *Kleine Caroli* (1964) while Bruyndonckx also recorded the poem *Een Roos a rose* (1966) together with De Vree. At the 1962 Benelux Film Festival, *Amen* was awarded the prize for best film and best music. See Folder 'Benelux Film Festival 1963,' Antwerpen – Gevaert Auditorium – Nationaal Centrum voor Moderne Kunst. Archives Paul De Vree, M HKA, Antwerp. Pustjens and Bruyndonckx were highly respected in amateur film circles. On 5 November 1964, both "amateur cineasts with great renown" were invited by Amateur Ciné Brabo to screen their most recent films and to elucidate their "sonorization." See N.N., "Mededelingen: Amateur Ciné Brabo," *Gazet van Antwerpen* (4 November 1964): 13. On De Vree's sonorous poems, see Hugh Davies, *Répertoire international des musiques electroacoustiques / International Electronic Music Catalog*. Paris: Groupe de Recherches Musicales de l'O.R.T.F., 1968, 13-14.

<sup>3</sup> Paul De Vree, "De Nieuwe Vlaamse School. Achter- en voorgronden," *De Tafelronde* 16, 1 (1971): 14-19. On the problematic relation between Verheyen and G58, see Maarten Liefvooghe, "Een brief van Jef Verheyen aan Jean Buyck: Inleiding," *De Witte Raaf* 138 (March-April 2009): 13.

<sup>4</sup> Rik Stallaert, "Film in de jaren '60 te Antwerpen," in *Antwerpen. De jaren zestig*, edited by Bobb Bern, Mandy Nauwelaerts, Jean F. Buyck, Willem Houbrechts, and Herbert Binneweg. Antwerp: Hadewijch Uitgeverij, 1988, 105-106.

<sup>5</sup> Ronny Vos, "Wel en wee van de Vlaamse 'free lance'-kineast: De Nationale Filmgroep 58," *FILM 78* (1967): 16.

<sup>6</sup> *Filmgroep 58* was associated with the *Modernistisch Centrum*, in 1960 renamed as *Nationaal Centrum voor Moderne Kunst*, with Paul De Vree as president. The Centrum brought together experimental poets with avant-garde artists and organized exhibitions, poetry programs, and film screenings. (De Vree 1971: 15; Bern et. al. 1988). See also *Filmgroep 58* brochure, Archives Letterenhuis, Antwerp.

art and poetry manifestations, De Vree was first and foremost a poet.<sup>7</sup> Having started his literary career before the war, he moved to a more experimental style in the late 1950s and early 1960s, more or less simultaneously with the development of Verheyen's pictorial abstraction. Furthermore, De Vree often presented his verses as a form of visual poetry or they were released on gramophone records in international circles of experimental poetry. This outspoken interest in intermedial experiments drove him into the realm of film.

Within the context of Filmgroep 58, De Vree frequently acted as theorist and spokesman for young cineasts. He set up meetings, organized press releases, wrote dialogues, created poems for voice-over soundtracks, and occasionally even became an actor.<sup>8</sup> In the film group he was described as “poet, essayist, scholar of modern art, and great stimulator,” constantly “scouting for talent.”<sup>9</sup> It was De Vree who brought Bruyndonckx and Pustjens into contact with Verheyen. Already before the production of *Essentieel*, Verheyen's art had been covered extensively in the art journal *De Tafelronde (The Round Table)*, which De Vree, in his capacity of editor-in-chief in the late 1950s and early 1960s, had transformed into an international platform for experimental literature and art with a particular focus on visual poetry and sound poetry.<sup>10</sup> Apart from essays on Verheyen's work, the journal included several of the painter's own writings. Aside from Verheyen's 1959 “Essentialist” manifesto and various kinds of notes, *De Tafelronde* also published his correspondence with leading European artists such as Lucio Fontana, Piero Manzoni, and Yves Klein.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, in 1963 and 1965, *De Tafelronde* produced two theme issues dedicated to Verheyen's “Essentialism.”

### Verheyen, Achromia, and Essentialism

Verheyen's “Essentialism” is first and foremost associated with monochrome painting. In 1966 German art critic Will Grohmann called Verheyen “the best-known representative of monochrome painting.”<sup>12</sup> Verheyen himself, however, described his paintings as “achrome” or “colorless” works. [Fig. 3] Before the word “achrome” appeared in Verheyen's 1959 manifesto, Piero Manzoni had created, already in 1957, a series of “achromes,” which were completely nonreferential, inspired by Yves Klein's monochrome paintings. According to Verheyen, it is impossible to say what Manzoni borrowed from him or, conversely, what he borrowed from Manzoni: it was a “give and take” in a flow of like-minded ideas.<sup>13</sup> Precisely in order to differentiate himself from Manzoni and Klein, Verheyen labeled his particular practices as “Essentialism.” Nonetheless, despite their different agendas, Verheyen, Klein, and Manzoni exhibited their works together on more than one occasion. Their works, for instance, were on display together at the exhibition *Monochrome Malerei* at the Städtisches Museum in Leverkusen in 1960 – according to Verheyen, one of the most important exhibitions of that era.<sup>14</sup>

According to Paul De Vree, Verheyen's monochrome paintings were triggered by an extra-pictorial element: it is “light in space” that becomes visible on the canvas. For Verheyen, the word “monochrome” was inadequate as it insufficiently evoked the immateriality to which

<sup>7</sup> Johan Pas and Colette Broeckaert, *Neonlicht: Paul De Vree & de Neo-Avant-Garde*. Ghent: AsaMER, 2012.

<sup>8</sup> Fugitive Cinema. *25 Years of Fugitive Cinema. Film Production & Project Development 1966 – 1991*. Antwerp: Fugitive Cinema, 1991, 39.

<sup>9</sup> Fugitive Cinema, 55.

<sup>10</sup> On the journal *De Tafelronde*, see Dirk De Geest, “Avant-garde als strategie: het tijdschrift *De Tafelronde*,” *Nederlandse Letterkunde* 15, 3 (December 2010): 221-40.

<sup>11</sup> See the letters by Piero Manzoni, Lucio Fontana, and Yves Klein as well as Verheyen's short biography by Paul De Vree in *De Tafelronde* 8, 3 (1963): 5-10.

<sup>12</sup> Will Grohmann, *New Art Around the World: Painting and Sculpture*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1966, 225.

<sup>13</sup> Verheyen and Pörschmann, *Jef Verheyen*, 5.

<sup>14</sup> Verheyen and Pörschmann, *Jef Verheyen*, 5.

he aspired.<sup>15</sup> Verheyen precisely attempted to demonstrate that his art was not based on the materiality of the paint on the canvas – as advocated in some formalist theories – but rather on what it suggests.<sup>16</sup> Inspired by the ideas of Paul Kee, Verheyen attempted to evoke the “eternal rhythm” of nature, representing “light, warmth, and energy.”<sup>17</sup> In order to acquire this effect, Verheyen developed a highly particular painting practice – the so-called technique of *irisation* – that enabled him to kindle, contain, and reflect light.<sup>18</sup> In order to do so, Verheyen used a method in which a subtle gradation of colors and multiple layers of paint conjure a new (metaphysical) dimension. He attempted to capture the light shining through the colors, thus disclosing a space in the canvas – an effect Lucio Fontana had demonstrated literally with his *Concetto spaziale*, which involves the slashing or piercing of the surfaces of monochrome paintings. However, despite his metaphysical aspirations tallying him with Klein, Manzoni, and Fontana, Verheyen kept referring to natural phenomena. Although Verheyen’s canvasses evoke something that is beyond tangible reality, nature remains a necessary intermediate step: “the idea reveals itself in the variety of nature,” he wrote.<sup>19</sup> By holding on to natural phenomena, Verheyen differentiated himself from Yves Klein, the figurehead of monochrome painting, who attempted to erase completely the “intermediate matter” in order to bring the beholder directly in a “pictorial state of mind.”<sup>20</sup> A 1968 issue of *De Tafelronde* described Klein’s practice as a “brute monochrome fact” whereas Verheyen managed to reproduce color “in all its mystical nuances.”<sup>21</sup> De Vree adds that precisely Verheyen’s technique of *irisation* marks the difference between his Essentialism and monochromy. Many instances of postwar monochrome painting (Yves Klein, Ad Reinhardt, Barnett Newman, Ellsworth Kelly) are emphatically flat and unicolored or “unichrome” while Verheyen’s canvasses consists of a “subtle and secure merging” of colors, opening a new space thanks to the right angle of the incidence of light.<sup>22</sup>

### ***Essentieel* and Cinematic Essentialism**

As an artist interested in light and color disconnected from the materiality of paint, Verheyen’s involvement with film, and hence the production of *Essentieel* seem a logical step. [Fig. 4] Crucial elements in Verheyen’s painting such as the ambiguous relation between two- and three-dimensionality, light, color, and vibrations (and therefore movement) touch upon the essentials of cinema. Film, after all, is better capable of demonstrating the warmth, vibrations, and energy that light radiates. Cinema, according to Verheyen, is an *addition* to painting, an extension of the imagination: “Giving a dynamic form to what in painting can only be translated in a static or almost static way. Recording an irrational phenomenon on celluloid: the metamorphosis of colors and light. Consequently showing their materialization in spatial qualities.”<sup>23</sup>

For Verheyen, film has the possibility to capture the distillation of pure light from colors, after which the fractured light manifests itself spatially. The vibrations, which Verheyen attempted to evoke by means of paint on a canvas, could now be made more concrete with the help of the film medium. This is even made explicit in a sequence at the end of *Essentieel*, in which abstract curved shapes are made visible against a background in various colors. The

<sup>15</sup> Jef Verheyen, “Kombinatoriek,” *De Tafelronde* 10, 3 (1965): 137.

<sup>16</sup> Jef Verheyen, “Essentialisme,” *Het Kahier* 6, 13 (1959): 38.

<sup>17</sup> Verheyen and Pörschmann, 10. See also De Vree, “Essentialisme 2,” 112.

<sup>18</sup> De Vree, “Essentialisme 2,” 114.

<sup>19</sup> Verheyen, “Essentialisme,” 36.

<sup>20</sup> De Vree, “Essentialisme 2,” 113.

<sup>21</sup> Freddy De Vree, “Bij de dood van Marcel Duchamp,” *De Tafelronde* 13 (1968): 5-6.

<sup>22</sup> De Vree, “Essentialisme 2,” 113.

<sup>23</sup> Verheyen and Pörschmann, *Jef Verheyen*, 133.

texture of the image suggests that these are painted surfaces over which light moves in the foreground. This sequence is exemplary for *Essentieel*, which can be considered a monochrome painting in the making.

Lasting about twenty minutes, *Essentieel* opens with a succession of alternating monochrome color surfaces, representing the entire spectrum. On the soundtrack, Bruyndonckx's drone sounds are combined with the voice of actor Julien Schoenaerts reciting a poetic text by De Vree, in which words such as "sun," "cosmos," "infinity," and "vibrating" (spoken in various languages) stand out. Next, the consecutive color surfaces are gradually obscured to the point where they are almost entirely black, after which a new color lightens up.

After this opening sequence, experimental music takes over the accompaniment of the images (De Vree's poetic voice-over text only recurs at the very end). In addition, the "pure" or abstract colors of the introduction are now exchanged for figurative shapes, albeit sometimes with out-of-focus contours that cannot be situated in a recognizable spatial context. Flashes of light and footage of glowing liquid metal and leaping welding fire as well as its crystal-shaped reflections give a yellowish warmth to the tonality of this sequence. Showing less color gradations than the introduction, this sequence is though richer in its exploration of surfaces and textures.

Whereas the first seven minutes primarily draw our attention to light in relation to fire and water, the following sequence rather deals with light and its manifestations on earth and in the air, resulting in a configuration of the four "classical elements." After having focused on different kinds of earth textures, the film registers light shining through the clouds. At that moment, the predominantly static camera starts to move. Slow panning shots scan the landscape and a rude zoom-out expands the cloudscape. As the camera moves, the landscape remains still. Inversely, when there is movement in the shot, the camera rests. This juxtaposition typifies Verheyen's fascination for the harmonic antithesis between stasis and flux, as expressed in his writings with their explicit references to Heraclitus.<sup>24</sup>

In the last part of *Essentieel*, figuration disappears altogether. Resuming its static position, the camera zooms in on the texture of painterly surfaces while light reflections introduce movement in the flat imagery. Similar to the beginning of the film, unicolor images succeed one another – pulsating between a kindling or fading black. The sober tonality of earth and sky is exchanged for red, blue, green, and purple surfaces with a white stripe that evokes a brush stroke absorbing light. Whereas the previous sequence evokes the artist's gaze at the landscape and at colors appearing in nature, the final part rather visualizes his abstract canvasses. The film ends with an almost invisible sun, surrounded with a bright white light. Verheyen's attempt to open a new kind of space as well as his ambition to distill light from the colors reach their apex in this sequence. Apart from the images and the sensuous text, Bruyndonckx's "cosmic sounds" open up a new space. The soundtrack comprises spatial echoes and sounds of satellites and radio stations, intensifying the connection between earth and cosmos.

*Essentieel* can be considered as a cinematic exploration of Verheyen's pictorial Essentialism – an effect that is almost explicitly dealt with in the last sequence, which is the most monochrome part of the film, ending in an "achromatic" way. In the film, "achromatic" white, black, or gray hues pulsate in between monochrome color surfaces and images of a landscape, a muddy sandpit, or light descending between clouds. De Vree described the theme of the film as follows: "Light is essential matter, the warmth of light the only reality, the energy of colors the only dimension (or adimension). Light, warmth, energy, these are the three non-plastic essentials, spatial vibrations that constitute color."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> De Vree, "Essentialisme 2," 112-113, 135.

<sup>25</sup> De Vree, "Essentialisme 2," 135.

By scanning, shifting, or repeating footage of colors and nature, the filmmakers seem to suggest that *Essentieel* evokes the investigating eye of the painter. According to De Vree, the film teaches the spectator how “the pictorial state of mind of the painter is specialized and stabilized into a given space.”<sup>26</sup> The film emphasizes abstract and immeasurable essential natural elements such as fire, water, sky, and earth, which become manifest in concrete images of nature. However, the filmic recordings of nature in close-up generate abstract images. The film emphasizes the process of abstraction as Jos Pustjens brings the camera out of focus. But from these out-of-focus images reflections emerge, originating in dew or low standing water on swampy earth. As described in *De Tafelronde*, the rationale of the film is “the recognition that essence has become something thoroughly human instead of supernatural, and that the experience of essence is the awareness of the identity of Being and the Light, i.e. a unification with the lyricism of the light in the epic of the elements.”<sup>27</sup>

The vibrating colors, which merge into each other, evoke this a-dimensional feeling. Monochrome surfaces are often presented without reference or contrast, visualizing pure light, warmth, and energy. The five-lingual voice-over text by Paul De Vree borrows many phrasings from Verheyen’s “Essentialist Manifesto” and repeats his intention of “sensing color,” i.e. the process that the spectator of the film is experiencing intensely: “to go mad with colour, kleur worden, farbtoll werden, essere colore.”

### Abstract and Visionary Cinema

Apart from being a cinematic extension of Verheyen’s pictorial essentialism, *Essentieel* can also be considered an example of cinematic essentialism – an artistic reflection on the essences of the film medium achieved by a reduction of the imagery to some “essential” components, in this case monochromatic images. In so doing, *Essentieel* unmistakably situates itself in the tradition of abstract film as exemplified by the Futurist experiments by Bruno Corra or the films by the pioneers of abstract animation such as Viking Eggeling, Hans Richter, Walther Ruttmann, and Oskar Fischinger. However, as Verheyen presented his paintings with subtle color gradations as alternatives for the emphatically flat and unicolored works of postwar monochrome painting, his film also attempts to go beyond the flattened patterns frequently used in abstract animation – this is particularly demonstrated in the sequences that juxtapose footage of unicolor painted surfaces to monochromatic hues achieved by filming natural phenomena. Fluctuating between pictorial and cinematic colors as well as conflating pictorial and cinematic space, *Essentieel* combines the painterly practices of abstract animation with an outspoken interest in natural phenomena of the *cinéma pur* of pre-war avant-garde cinema. Like French impressionist cinema of the 1920s, Verheyen’s camera particularly explores and cherishes ephemeral substances such as water, clouds, and fire as phenomena that only the medium film is capable to represent in their perceptual complexity.

However, the reflexive dimension of *Essentieel* does not so much relate to the *photogénie* of the shots, the construction of the montage, the operational logic of the camera, or the materiality of the film stock but rather to the primary qualities of light and time, which,

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<sup>26</sup> De Vree, “Essentialisme 2,” 113. With the phrasing “specialized and stabilized” De Vree refers to the 1958 exhibition of Yves Klein in Paris with the title *La spécialisation de la sensibilité à l'état de matière première en sensibilité picturale stabilisée*, which is primarily known as *Le Vide*. See Pierre Restany, “Yves Klein ‘Le Vide’: Die Leere von Yves Klein, Paris, den 28. April 1958,” in *Die Kunst der Ausstellung: Eine Dokumentation dreißig exemplarischer Kunstausstellungen dieses Jahrhunderts*, edited by Bernd Klüser and Katharina Hegewisch. Frankfurt: Insel Verlag, 1991, 142-47; Thierry De Duve and Rosalind Krauss, “Yves Klein, or The Dead Dealer,” October 49 (1989): 73-90; and Nuit Banai, “Rayonnement and the Readymade: Yves Klein and the End of Painting,” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 51 (2007): 202-15.

<sup>27</sup> Paul De Vree, “De film *Essentieel*,” *De Tafelronde* 8 (1963): 135.

according to authors such as David James, Sheldon Renans, and Gregory Zinman, take a crucial position in the experimental cinema of the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>28</sup> Films by Norman McLaren, Henri Lemaître, Stan Brakhage, Marie Menken, Nicolas Schöffer, and Tony Conrad among others, seem also to concentrate, in completely divergent ways, on the capture of light and color, which are (partly) disconnected from photographically recognizable images. Just like the creators of *Essentieel*, these filmmakers explore an ambiguous spatiality that oscillates between the two- and three-dimensional and between figuration and abstraction. Almost always, they are inspired by (often somewhat vague) spiritual and mystical impulses, advocating an intense, direct, and lively confrontation with objects and natural elements without recurring to a cinematic realism. Rather than reproducing or representing reality, film is for them a machine that projects visions or that makes possible a transmission of pure energy. Their films answer to what Anton Ehrenzweig presented as a “low-level vision,” generating abstract images that bring the spectators back to the depths of their inner-selves.<sup>29</sup> These films refer to a way of seeing that precedes language, exemplifying a kind of inner vision that, according to Stan Brakhage, evokes the first image a newborn is seeing or the strange configurations that emerge when we press our eyeballs. Like several Brakhage films, *Essentieel* explores natural phenomena such as earth, water, fire, and air, turning them into abstract images and presenting them as symbolically charged elements with cosmic dimensions. In line with Brakhage’s work, *Essentieel* presents images of earthly and material nature that stand for another nature that is mental or celestial, connecting a trope that recurs to Romanticism with the aspirations of the postwar Space Age. With this metaphysical dimension, Verheyen’s film tallies with what P. A. Sitney coined “visionary film,” which often includes out-of-focus shots or anamorphic imagery that congests the space and isolates the images, suggesting the realm of dream, memory, or a visionary state.<sup>30</sup> *Essentieel* perfectly answers to Sitney’s discussions of a cinema exploring inner states of being through abstract imagery, often based on the representation of the natural world, abstracting reality by means of cinematic devices such as extreme close-ups, out-of-focus footage, motion blur, and the use of over-exposure.

With their own interest in the filmic medium and their involvements in Filmgroep 58 and G58, we can assume that both Verheyen and De Vree were familiar with some of the key works of the tradition of visionary film mapped by Sitney. Works by Maya Deren, Kenneth Anger, and Gregory Markopoulos were screened in Belgium as early as 1949 and discussed in local art journals.<sup>31</sup> Other examples of the American film avant-garde (including those of Stan Brakhage) were prominently present at the 1963 and 1967 editions of the *Exprmntl* festival at Knokke-Le Zoute.<sup>32</sup> In addition, in the decades immediately following the War, the Belgian art scene was to a large extent still under the influence of Post-surrealism and its fascination for dream states and visionary imagery that also marked various experimental films by Belgian artists such as *Perséphone* (Luc de Heusch, 1949), *Un autre monde* (Serge Vandercam and

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<sup>28</sup> Sheldon Renans, *An Introduction to the American Underground Film*. London: Studio Vista, 1968, 252-57; Gregory Zinman, *Making Images Move: Handmade Cinema and the Other Arts*. Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2020, 159-210; David E. James, *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989, 237-38.

<sup>29</sup> Anton Ehrenzweig, *The Hidden Order of Art: A Study in the Psychology of Artistic Imagination*. London: Paladin, 1967.

<sup>30</sup> P. A. Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde 1943-2000*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

<sup>31</sup> Their films were screened at the first edition of a festival (that was called EXPRMNTL only from its third edition in 1964), which was organized by Jacques Ledoux of the Cinémathèque Royale de Belgique in June 1949. See *Les Beaux-Arts: Hebdomadaire d'information artistique* 3, 460 (Vendredi 1er Juillet 1949) and *Cobra* 3 (1949).

<sup>32</sup> Xavier Garcia Bardon, “EXPRMNTL: An Expanded Festival. Programming and Polemics at EXPRMNTL 4, Knokke-le-Zoute, 1967,” *Comparative Cinema* 2 (2013): 53-64.

Henri Kessels, 1958), and *Images d'un monde imaginaire* (Henri Michaux and Eric Duverger, 1963).

## ZERO Cinema

At the crossroads of abstract painting and visionary film, *Essentieel* also situates itself in a long tradition of interchanges between abstract art and multimedia experiments that evoke or create immersive chromatic experiences. With its fascination for pulsating and immaterial colors, *Essentieel* can be considered a descendent of the early- and mid-century color organs developed by artists such as Arnalda Ginna, Vladimir Baranov-Rossine, Oskar Fischinger, and Ludwig Hirschfeld Mack among many others, who, inspired by Expressionist, Futurist, Cubo-Futurist, or Orphist painting, attempted to turn abstract painting into immaterial chromatic fields.<sup>33</sup> Verheyen's film, for instance, answers perfectly to the ambitions stipulated in the *Manifeste Dimensioniste* by Hungarian poet and theorist Charles Sirato, which advocated the abolishment of distinctions between media and the use of new image technologies to make painting and sculpture immaterial.<sup>34</sup> With its emphatic preoccupation with color, light and movement, *Essentieel* not only shares similarities with monochrome painting but also with the new sculpture of the 1950s, which increasingly focused on the integration of light and movement as spatial entities. Already in his 1947 book *Vision in Motion*, László Moholy-Nagy stated that modern sculpture evolved into a form of ephemeral and immaterial art with cinematic qualities.<sup>35</sup> With the introduction of literal movement in so-called kinetic art and the increasing importance of glass, perforated surfaces, and electric light, postwar sculpture appropriated aspirations that share striking resemblances with the ambitions of abstract film. Art no longer had to represent light, the light installations of the late 1950s and early 1960s by artists such as Thomas Wilfred, Nicolas Schöffer, John Healey, Julio Le Parc, Jésus Rafael Soto, and Gunther Uecker consisted themselves of light and movement. Given this perspective, Jésus Rafael Soto's *chronochromes* or Gunther Uecker's *Kosmische Visionen* can be seen as a form of "paracinema," a non-filmic art form that nonetheless played emphatically on certain qualities or aspirations of the film medium. Gene Youngblood included Otto Piene's *Light Ballets* along similar lines in his history of *Expanded Cinema*.<sup>36</sup>

There is no doubt that Verheyen and De Vree were familiar with the various experiments of these artists. In 1965, a year after the release of *Essentieel*, many of these tendencies were brought together in the exhibition *Lumière, mouvement et optique* curated by French critic Jean Clay at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels.<sup>37</sup> First and foremost, Soto, Uecker, and Piene had participated in the landmark exhibition *Vision in Motion – Motion in Vision*, organized by G58 in 1959 at the Hessianhuis in Antwerp. This exhibition combined several forms of monochrome painting (Pierro Manzoni, Yves Klein, Otto Piene) with kinetic art and light installations (Heinz Mack, Jean Tinguely, Pol Bury, Jésus Rafael Soto). The exhibition is considered the first important international manifestation of the ZERO movement, which was founded in 1957 in Düsseldorf by Heinz Mack and Otto Piene. Attempting to move away from the highly subjective art movements like lyrical abstraction, *art informel*, and *tachisme* of the

<sup>33</sup> See Kenneth Peacock, "Instruments to Perform Color-Music: Two Centuries of Technological Exploration," *Leonardo* 21, 4 (1988): 397-406; Kerry Brougher, Judith Zilcher, Jeremy Strick, Ari Wiseman, and Olivia Mattis, *Visual Music: Synaesthesia in Art and Music Since 1900*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2005; Gregory Zinman, *Making Images Move: Handmade Cinema and the Other Arts*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020.

<sup>34</sup> Gregory Zinman, *Making Images Move: Handmade Cinema and the Other Arts*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020, 171.

<sup>35</sup> László Moholy-Nagy, *Vision in Motion*. Chicago: Paul Theobald, 1947, 219-37.

<sup>36</sup> Gene Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema*. New York: P. Dutton & Co, 1970, 299-301.

<sup>37</sup> Jean Clay (ed.), *Lumière Mouvement et Optique*. Brussels: Palais des Beaux-Arts, 1965).

immediate postwar era, ZERO advocated an art that was more about the work's materials, emphasizing monochromy, light, and movement, which were often linked to the conquest of extraterrestrial space – the name of the movement refers to the countdown for a rocket launch.<sup>38</sup>

This fascination for (extraterrestrial) space, light, and movement as well as the ambitions to create a symbiosis of nature, art, and technology also mark the film *Essentieel*. Connecting monochromy to movement and light, the film *Essentieel* can also be considered as Verheyen's answer to the *Vision in Motion – Motion in Vision* exhibition (at which Verheyen was strikingly absent). Moreover, *Essentieel* resonates with crucial ambitions of various ZERO artists taking part in the 1959 Antwerp exhibition. With its Heraclitian tension between flux and stasis, *Essentieel* does not only appeal to the paradoxical “vibration sur place, le mouvement stable” propagated by Verheyen in his 1959 Essentialist Manifesto,<sup>39</sup> but also to the kinetic-sculptural experiments by Jesús Rafael Soto, who was interested in the dematerialization of objects and in the way in which large monochrome color surfaces are transformed into spatial installations.<sup>40</sup> In Soto's “chronochromes,” the image planes seem to shift as the beholders situate themselves in relation to the artwork, its perception thus structured as a temporal process.

This kind of movement also fascinated artists such as Tinguely, who incorporated actual movement in his sculptural installations, as well as Verheyen, who deplored that critics only remembered the word “movement” of the *Vision in Motion* exhibition at the Hessenhuis. “They were probably inspired by the works by Tinguely whom they saw moving but that were, beyond movements, static nonetheless,” he concluded in his Essentialist Manifesto.<sup>41</sup> The constant emphasis on change, process, and movement in relation to stasis is crucial in *Essentieel*, something that De Vree also affirmed once again in 1965. Critics, according to De Vree, had confused the film “with Verheyen's essentialist canvasses,” although *Essentieel* goes beyond the limits of the abstract paintings in two ways. On the one hand, the film offers a possibility for developing Verheyen's Heraclitic position because the painter can add actual movement to his color conceptions.<sup>42</sup> On the other hand, De Vree notes, the film follows “the metamorphosis of perception” and the spectator is subjected to Verheyen's imagination. Looking at a Verheyen painting is, in De Vree's words, looking at “the final process of a (terrestrial) vision in which the realia have disappeared completely.” Attending a screening of *Essentieel*, is looking at Verheyen's “lived experience of color.”<sup>43</sup> The film primarily consists of footage of nature that is transformed with the help of close-ups and out-of-focus shots into monochrome images, although some sequences contain volatile contours of identifiable elements: water becomes a sea and fire a flame. According to Paul De Vree, critics thought “that the deviation of the immaterial light and color events into ‘palpable’ nature was wrong because the film was incapable to preserve ‘the purism’ of Verheyen's paintings.”<sup>44</sup>

## Between ZERO Art and Documentary

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<sup>38</sup> On ZERO, see Otto Piene and Heinz Mack. *Zero*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1973; Anette Kuhn. *ZERO. Eine Avantgarde der sechziger Jahre*. Frankfurt am Main / Berlin: Propyläen, 1991; and Tiziana Caianiello, Mattijs Visser, et al. *Zero 5: The Artist as Curator: Collaborative Initiatives in the International Zero Movement, 1957-1967*. Ghent: MER Paper Kunsthalle, 2015; On ZERO in Antwerp specifically, see Johan Pas, “ZERO in Antwerp,” in *Zero 5: The Artist as Curator*, 187-88.

<sup>39</sup> Verheyen, “Essentialisme,” 38.

<sup>40</sup> Guy Brett, “Interview with Jesús Rafael Soto (April 1965),” in *Force Fields: Phases of the Kinetic*. Barcelona: Museu d'Art Contemporani, 2000, 262.

<sup>41</sup> Verheyen, “Essentialisme,” 37.

<sup>42</sup> De Vree, “Essentialisme 2,” 112.

<sup>43</sup> De Vree, “Essentialisme 2,” 112-14.

<sup>44</sup> De Vree, “Essentialisme 2,” 112.

In 1965, a year after the release of *Essentieel*, Verheyen stated that he would make more paintings and films.<sup>45</sup> However, *Essentieel* remained the only film of Verheyen, who unmistakably saw the medium of film as a means to integrate various art forms such as painting, music, and poetry – an idea that lay at the base of the exhibition *Integratie 64*, which took place in the same year as the release of *Essentieel*.<sup>46</sup> Also with this predilection for integration or interaction between various artistic disciplines, Verheyen tallied explicitly with the artists of the ZERO movement, which was marked by various collaborative initiatives.<sup>47</sup> In the fall of 1962, Lucio Fontana, for instance, had travelled from Milano to Knokke in Belgium in order to “perforate skillfully the central panel of Verheyen’s triptych *Le Jour*.”<sup>48</sup> [Fig. 5] It is no coincidence that the premiere of *Essentieel* (on 3 April 1964) took place in *Galerie d* in Frankfurt, which was founded in 1962 by Hermann Goepfert and had developed into one of the most important meeting places for the German branch of the ZERO movement. At the premiere, De Vree recited some poems, novelist Ivo Michiels was supposed to read a fragment from his experimental novel *Het boek Alfa* (1963), and there were also screenings of *Mijn Evanaaste* (1963) and *Adem* (1962) by Jos Pustjens.<sup>49</sup> The program was organized on the occasion of the exhibition *Dokumentation 6, Antwerpener Essentialisten* – the only exhibition mentioning Verheyen’s Essentialism in its title.

After the première in Frankfurt, the film was also screened in Belgium, at, among others, the second edition of the Benelux Film Festival in 1965 where it won several awards.<sup>50</sup> Strikingly, some reviews and newspaper articles described *Essentieel* as a film *on art*. Ivo Nelissen, for instance, wrote that the film registers the painter’s process of thought in a very subjective way, without any didactic commentary.<sup>51</sup> Jos Van Liempt saw the film as a kind of “art initiation,” albeit in a very experimental way: “to tell the truth, after seeing the film, we did not become any wiser about the so-called ‘essentialist movement’ in painting.”<sup>52</sup> Although the film cannot be considered a documentary on painting, *Essentieel* illustrates Verheyen’s search for essences, which are supposedly outside the realm of painting and outside the realm of cinema. The film uses real landscapes and real colors in order to capture a cosmic reality – something that Bruyndonckx’s sonorisation even confirmed. Another documentary characteristic of *Essentieel* is its emphasis on processes. Jos Pustjens captured the chromatic sensations of the painter. By bringing shots of a plowed field or of reflections on light on water out of focus, by zooming in on a fragmented nature, and by deconstructing figurative forms by only showing vague contours, Pustjens and Verheyen emphasized the process of awareness, comparable with a painter who squeezes the eyes in order to discern separate shapes and colors. In so doing, *Essentieel* answers to an ambivalent position in which abstraction is recorded as well as created. The history of film experiments of the ZERO movement (which is still to be written to a large extent) comprises similar projects hovering between abstraction and

<sup>45</sup> Verheyen, “Kombinatoriek,” 137.

<sup>46</sup> Paul De Vree and Renaat Braem, “Kataloog Integratie 64,” *Plan 1* (1964): n.p.

<sup>47</sup> Caianiello, Visser, et al. *Zero 5. On the Antwerp neo-avant-garde*, see Johan Pas, “The Last Modernists: Jef Verheyen, Paul De Vree, and the ‘Flemish Landscape’ of the 1960s,” in *Jef Verheyen: Le Peintre Flamant*, 113-140; and Johan Pas, *Neonlicht: Paul De Vree & de neo-avant-garde*. Ghent: AsaMER, 2012.

<sup>48</sup> Paul De Vree, [“Short Bio of Jef Verheyen”], *De Tafelronde* 8 (1963): 7-8. The event was captured on film and is included in the opening credits of Gerd Winkler’s film *OxO=Kunst* (1962).

<sup>49</sup> On 1 April, a newspaper announced that Ivo Michiels would be reading from his book on the opening night of the exhibition. A few days later De Vree asked the audience to excuse Ivo Michiels since the latter “unfortunately had not been encountered in Frankfurt yet.” See an unidentified newspaper clipping and a handwritten speech by De Vree, Archives Paul De Vree, M HKA, Antwerp.

<sup>50</sup> N.N., “2e Benelux-festival van experimentele kunst- en poëtische films met vooruitstrevend karakter,” *Gazet van Antwerpen* (24 May 1965): 8.

<sup>51</sup> Ivo Nelissen, “Filmgroep 58, Laboratorium voor vormvernieuwing,” *De Nieuwe* (21 October 1966): n.p.

<sup>52</sup> Jos Van Liempt, “Laboratorium van filmkunst,” *Gazet van Antwerpen* (5 June 1964): 19.

figuration, art work and documentation. Heinz Mack's *Tele Mack, Tele-Mack, Telemack* (1959-1968), for instance, explores the Sahara desert in order to investigate light.<sup>53</sup> Likewise, Gerd Winkler's *0x0=Kunst: Maler ohne Farbe und Pinsel* (1962) presented itself initially as a documentary on ZERO art for German television but acquired quite quickly the status of a ZERO work of art.<sup>54</sup> Showing artists at work, this film also contains extreme close-ups of artworks or of their reflections and shadows – elements evoking *Essentieel*. However, rather than showing existing artworks, *Essentieel* attempts to evoke cinematically the sensorial perceptions and pictorial aspirations of Verheyen. In addition, like other ZERO film experiments, *Essentieel* returns to essentials such as light and movement, reconsidering the material and ontological characteristics of film.

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<sup>53</sup> See website Heinz Mack: <https://www.mack-kunst.com/en/Desert-and-arctic.htm>

<sup>54</sup> Christine Mehring, "Television Art's Abstract Starts: Europe circa 1944-1969," *October* 125 (Summer 2008): 52.