

# PAINT IT BLACK



Blasts, drones and vibrations: the many faces of Aldo Tambellini

Aldo Tambellini – radical renaissance man of 1960s New York – finally gets his due at Tate Modern's Tanks

By Agnieszka Gracza

Until a spate of recent film and video retrospectives rescued his name from obscurity, Aldo Tambellini was virtually unknown except among a few diehards in New York. His neglect might partly be explained by his decision to leave the city that had been his muse in 1976, following a period of intense activity in the 1960s that culminated in the Black Film Series – a sequence of boldly experimental black-and-white shorts deploying a range of cameraless techniques and equally inventive, noise-ridden soundtracks – and the dazzling Electromedia environments, which fused different art and media forms and influenced Andy Warhol's Exploding Plastic Inevitable, among others. While Tambellini's outspoken criticism of American policies and institutions – including the Museum of Modern Art, the Guggenheim and the Whitney

Museum, which he accused of turning art into commodities and financial investments – did not endear him to the (art) establishment at the time, it took on a new resonance in the climate of social and political unrest leading up to and generated by Occupy Wall Street.

Rather than simply furthering his own career, Tambellini poured much of his energy into fostering links among artists and the racially mixed (mainly Puerto Rican and African-American) community of the Lower East Side, where he settled in 1959 with his partner, Elsa. As editor and publisher of *The Screw*, a radical newsletter written in poetry form, and founder of the countercultural artists' collective Group Center (whose members included anarchists such as the painter Ben Morea), he organised colourful protests directed at major museums and galleries, anti-Vietnam War rallies, exhibitions, poetry readings, jazz concerts and film screenings, contributing to the establishment of the Lower East Side as the new Bohemian destination.

In 1966, Aldo and Elsa Tambellini opened the Gate Theatre on 10th Street and 2nd Avenue, in protest against "Lincoln Center's alarmingly superficial representation of American

independent filmmakers". An "underground cinema" (as the sign above the entrance spelled out), the Gate set out to promote avant-garde films by emerging filmmakers with the aim of making their work available to the general public rather than a more select audience. It was open every day, charged modest admission fees and had a changing weekly programme of films by the likes of Kenneth Anger, Jack Smith, Stan Brakhage, Bruce Conner, Maya Deren and the Kuchar brothers. Brian De Palma's first feature film *The Wedding Party* (1969), co-directed with his theatre teacher Wilford Leach and starring the then-unknown Robert De Niro, was among the experimental films premiered there.

A group of black poets who regularly met across the street from where the Tambellinis lived – some of whom would take part in the collaborative Electromedia events – published the magazine *Umbra*, dedicated to exploring black identity issues at a time when racial conflict was rife in the city. Black Power and the civil-rights movement were among the causes that Tambellini himself came to champion. *Black Trip 2* (1967) – one of seven titles in the Black Film Series (1965-9), which range from three to 14 minutes – has a soundtrack of children chanting 'Black is beautiful' to the beat of drums as abstract white shapes and patterns flit in and out of view against a jet-black background, with occasional filmed footage of charging cavalymen and other scenes from revolutionary Russia thrown into the mix. Shot with a handheld camera, *Black Plus X* (1967), from the same series, alternates images of amusement-park rides with beach scenes, in which black children and teens bathing at Coney Island appear in negative image, so that black effectively becomes white and vice versa.

Race-related issues subtend Tambellini's fascination with blackness as a complex aesthetic, metaphysical and political concept, reflected in the titles of his films and in the near-exclusive use of this non-colour, starkly contrasted with white, in the decade or so following his move to the city. (Colour does feature, usually in monochrome, in later 'Cathodic Works' like *6637* or *Clone*, made in 1973 and in 1976 respectively.) "There was something 'black' in New York," he confides in the autobiographical account *A Syracuse Rebel in New York*. "It became spontaneous to work in black." More than just a pigment and a skin colour, the banner of rebellion and anarchy, for Tambellini black is the beginning and end of things, the womb and the cosmos, an entity to which he attributes generative and destructive powers. *Black Is* (1965), Tambellini's four-minute-long first film – made without a camera by painting on the celluloid and manipulating it by scratching, scraping and doing all manner of violence to the filmstrip – has images of cell-like formations, protoplasm, starbursts, splotches and brushstrokes reminiscent of cave or action painting, projected at 30 frames per second to the sound of an amplified heartbeat.

Though born in Syracuse, New York, in 1930, to parents of Italian-Brazilian origin, Tambellini grew up in Italy, returning to the



## Tambellini broke new ground in cameraless filmmaking, multimedia events and underground exhibition

US to study painting and sculpture shortly after the end of World War II. The area where he lived in Lucca had been bombed during the war, killing many of his friends and neighbours, and the experience left a mark on his work. Concentric circles, points of impact, targets and searchlights frequently crop up in the Black Film Series, matched by the noise of air-raid sirens, explosions, blasts, drones and vibrations, especially in *Blackout* (1965), *Black TV* (1968) and *Minus One* (1969), which interweaves sounds of children singing and clapping hands with machine-gunfire and the countdown of a rocket launch. At once energizing and numbing, the constant onslaught of visual and aural information leaves one shell-shocked.

Two years of TV news broadcasts "compressed into a staccato barrage of sight and sound" is how Gene Youngblood describes *Black TV* in his landmark *Expanded Cinema* (1970). The most brutal and perhaps the most accomplished in the Black Film Series, constantly re-edited over the course of four years, *Black TV* won the Grand Prix at the Oberhausen Film Festival in 1969. The split-screen video, shot with a 16mm camera, appropriates haunting footage of, among other things, Robert Kennedy's assassination with reporter Andrew West commenting live on the scene in replay mode. Some of this material feeds into *Black Gate Cologne* (1968), the first artist-made TV broadcast of a happening that showed members of the audience interacting with giant polyethylene tubing suspended from the ceiling. Produced in collaboration with Zero Group member Otto Piene, who had made the helium-inflated installation, it was recorded in a Cologne TV studio using a video mixer and professional TV equipment.

In 1967, Tambellini and Piene co-founded the Black Gate theatre. Located directly above the Gate Theatre cinema, the new space

was specifically dedicated to multimedia performances and installations merging different artistic forms – dance, film, painting, light projections, kinetic sculpture – for which Tambellini coined the term 'electromedia'. It was on Piene's invitation that Tambellini left New York to take up a fellowship at the MIT Center for Advanced Visual Studies that lasted from 1976 to 1984. Though he continued to collaborate with other artists on various experimental TV programs and news broadcasts in the decades that followed his move to Boston, Tambellini increasingly turned to writing and performing his poetry. This shift in creative focus perhaps accounts more than anything else for the fact that Tambellini's legacy has not hitherto received due attention. The growing appetite among museum-goers for immersive, multi-sensory environments and alternative types of projection has also created a more receptive audience for the artist's startlingly original output.

The current revival of interest in Tambellini's intermedia practice – which started with modest retrospectives of his films and videos at New York's HOWL festival in 2003-5 and at the Anthology Film Archives in 2008, followed by a restaged performance of *Black Zero* (1965) at PERFORMA 09 in 2009 – owes much to Pia Bolognesi and Giulio Bursi, who delivered this year's comprehensive film retrospective at Paris's Centre Pompidou and curated, with Tate Modern's film curator Stuart Comer, *Aldo Tambellini: Retracing Black* (9-14 October), which takes place inside the Tanks. Tate Modern's recently unveiled underground space adjoining the Turbine Hall lends itself superbly to screening the Black Film Series and restaging some of the historical Electromedia events, *Black Zero* and *Moondial* among them. Given the prevalence of circular, cell-like motifs that course through these dark films and videos – last shown in the UK at a Leeds retrospective in 2007 – Tambellini's body of work seems tailor-made to show off the round, pitch-black, secret chambers that are the Tanks. ©

**i** 'Aldo Tambellini: Retracing Black' is at the Tanks at Tate Modern, from 9 to 14 October

● **Lindsey Seers's** mesmerising film installation for Artangel, entitled 'Nowhere Less Now', was conceived specially for a 19th-century, Grade II-listed corrugated-iron chapel in Kilburn, known locally as 'The Tin Tabernacle'. It combines photography, performance, video and animation in its exploration of image-making media, seafaring and migration. Showing several times daily, Wednesday to Sunday, until 21 October. [www.artangel.org.uk](http://www.artangel.org.uk)

● **Black Huts Festival** – a brand-new festival of writing, poetry and film in Hastings, hatched by Andrew Kötting and Nicholas Johnson – includes film work by Chris Petit and Iain Sinclair ('Asylum'), Timothy Neat ('Play Me Something'), Rebecca E. Marshall and Nicola Bruce ('I Am Weather'), Roland Jarvis and Kötting himself. Apart from Neat, all the films shown are made by filmmakers living and working on the South Coast. Various venues in Hastings, 2-4 November. [www.e-truscan.co.uk](http://www.e-truscan.co.uk)

● **Filmaktion** was the name used by a group of filmmakers who worked together during an intense period of activity in the early 1970s – core members Malcolm Le Grice, William Raban, Gill Eatherley and Annabel Nicolson are major figures in the development of experimental film in the UK. A week-long series of events in the Tanks will revisit some of Filmaktion's key performances and installations and celebrate the group's radical reshaping of the experience of film and the cinematic viewing space. [www.tate.org.uk](http://www.tate.org.uk)



● **BFI London Film Festival's** Experimenta section this year is packed with desirable items, most notably a rare opportunity to see work by Jerome Hiler, in a double bill with two films by Nathaniel Dorsky, with whom he shares a heightened sense of wonder at the world. Hiler builds sensuous layers of superimposition at the moment of shooting, and until recently only showed his work as camera originals. This screening of 'Words of Mercury' (above) is his first digital transfer. [www.bfi.org.uk](http://www.bfi.org.uk)

● **Laida Lertxundi**, the Bilbao-born filmmaker, continues a long and fascinating tradition of European directors engaging with Los Angeles. Her short 16mm works map physical and psychological geographies while experimenting with cinematic conventions. ICA, London, 23 October. [www.ica.org.uk](http://www.ica.org.uk)



'Black', Electromedia performance 1967



'Black Gate'