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'Dreamlands' at the Whitney Museum: Between Illusion and Reality

After Oskar Schlemmer (1888–1943), Das Triadische Ballett (The Triadic Ballet), 1970. 35mm film transferred to video.

The first work one encounters when entering "Dreamlands: Immersive Cinema and Art, 1905–2016" is also one of the most uncanny: a 1970 film showing a restaging of the Bauhaus artist Oskar Schlemmer's "Das Triadische Ballett" ("Triadic Ballet," 1922), in which dancers in sculptural costumes move like marionettes or machines against flatly colored backdrops. Archival footage of Schlemmer dancing is screened nearby, as are Edwin S. Porter's paean to illumination and urban entertainment "Coney Island at Night" (1905) and Pierre Huyghe's video installation "One Million Kingdoms" (2001), showing a silhouetted anime adolescent girl wandering on the moon.

The show charts a terrain encompassing early cinema, 1920s Weimar Germany and contemporary digital artworks. As the exhibition's curator, Chrissie Iles, writes in her catalog essay, "The structure of this immersive map produces a matrix of interconnections between different historical moments." The title is taken from a parallel world, accessible by dreams, conjured up by the horror and science-fiction writer H.P. Lovecraft. It also echoes the name of one of the amusement parks in Porter's Coney Island film, made for Thomas Edison, which captures a kingdom of lights made possible by Edison's invention of the electric light bulb.

"Dreamlands" suggests its own nocturnal kingdom, one where technology is constantly reshaping the relationship between art and the moving image. It also includes an extensive program of film screenings at the

Whitney, as well as expanded cinema events—from a restaging of a Bauhaus performance to newly created works—organized by Microscope Gallery in Bushwick, Brooklyn, in collaboration with the museum.

The Weimar era also yielded Oskar Fischinger's mesmerizing three-screen projection "Raumlichtkunst" ("Space Light Art," 1926), shown in a 2012 reconstruction, an explosion of color, pattern and sound. After leaving Nazi Germany, Fischinger created concept drawings for Disney's "Fantasia" (1940), some of which are on view. ("Fantasia" is screening with surround sound in the film program.) A quieter engagement with synesthesia than "Raumlichtkunst," Jenny Perlin's tinted, hand-drawn 16mm film "Twilight Arc" (2016)—exploring the history of the color organ and similar efforts—is installed beneath her sound piece incorporating recorded Russian Orthodox church bells, "Canopy" (2016).

"Dreamlands" is ambitious and thought-provoking, but some works feel lost in its dense, at time cacophonous labyrinth, such as Joseph Cornell's exquisitely enigmatic collage film "Rose Hobart" (1936). Cornell re-edited a 16mm print of the 1931 movie "East of Borneo," creating an otherworldly tribute to its female star, focusing attention on her presence, adding found footage and screening it at a slowed-down speed. The version in "Dreamlands" was transferred to video and is shown using a replica of the twilight-blue glass filter Cornell originally used, made by the artist Josiah McElheny.

Elsewhere in the show is exhibited Mr. McElheny's "Projection Painting II" (2015), in which he projects reworked footage from Maya Deren's unfinished 1951 film "Ensemble for Somnambulists" onto a painted, glass-covered relief, bathing its surfaces in ghostly shadows. It's one of numerous works by contemporary artists that find fertile ground in the history of avant-garde filmmaking.

Several historical works are more effectively installed than "Rose Hobart," including installations by Stan VanDerBeek, Jud Yalkut and Anthony McCall. VanDerBeek's "Movie Mural" (1968), is a dynamic array of screens and overlapping projections including drawings, newsreels, found footage and VanDerBeek's experimental films. Anticipating the current digital landscape, "Movie Mural" is a movable version of VanDerBeek's "Movie-Drome" (1963-65), a space for multimedia events he created inside the dome of a grain silo.

Yalkut's "Destruct Film" (1967) invites viewers to walk through strips of celluloid film strewn like dead leaves in a room where a film is projected and beam-splitters also cause still images to fly around the walls. In McCall's "Line Describing a Cone" (1973)—a phantasmagoric work that echoes the pre-cinematic days of the magic lantern—bodies dematerialize or become fragmented in the velvety shadows of a room filled with mist (originally cigarette smoke) where the projector beam takes on a sculptural solidity as an animated white circle is slowly drawn in the darkness.

As screens multiply in our lives, artworks are reflecting that perceptual fragmentation. In Trisha Baga's installation "Flatlands" (2010), viewers don paper 3-D glasses to watch a video in which reality and illusion intermingle through layered surfaces; a disco ball near the screen also scatters light into the room and over the spectators. As Giuliana Bruno writes in the catalog, the screen becomes a "sensorial, mobile object."

The cyborg, often female, is a recurring theme and is a potent presence in works by Lynn Hershman Leeson and Ivana Bašić. Mr. Huyghe's "One Million Kingdoms" is part of the project "No Ghost Just a Shell," in which Mr. Huyghe and Philippe Parreno purchased an unfinished anime figure of an 11-year-old girl, Annlee, and allowed other artists to create works incorporating it.

And one can step into the claustrophobic interior of Dora Budor's "Adaptation of an Instrument" (2016), a freestanding cube in which light streaks along the walls like neurological pathways and special-effects frogs from Paul Thomas Anderson's 1999 film "Magnolia" appear silhouetted against the ceiling's glowing resin in response to movement. It evokes technology's apocalyptic potential, but also bracingly reflects contemporary art's evolving relationship with the essential elements of cinema.