



HISTORICAL PRESENCE IN VISUAL CULTURE

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## ***Dreamlands: Immersive Cinema and Art, 1905 – 2016***

Whitney Museum of American Art,  
October 28, 2016 – February 5, 2017

Benjamin Ogrodnik

### Exhibition Review

Exhibition catalog: Chrissie Iles, *Dreamlands: Immersive Cinema and Art, 1905–2016*. New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2016. 256pp.; 300 color and 100 b/w ill. Hardcover \$65.00 (9780300221879)

Exhibition schedule: Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY, October 28, 2016–February 5, 2017

### About the Author

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## ***Dreamlands: Immersive Cinema and Art, 1905-2016***

Whitney Museum of American Art, October 28, 2016 – February 5, 2017

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*Dreamlands: Immersive Cinema and Art, 1905–2016*, is the first survey of moving image art at the new Whitney Museum of American Art building in Manhattan, New York. Curated by noted film curator Chrissie Iles, *Dreamlands* aims to rewrite the history of cinema with a focus on images of—and from—cyberspace, abstract animation, science fiction, and various situations of viewer immersion. The big question driving Iles’s show is: how can we better understand the way artists engage with moving images today? How do artists make sense of digital technology, 3D images, and virtual reality?

For anyone following film and media studies over the past several decades, these questions may not seem terribly original. What is original, however, is the breadth and comprehensiveness of the show. Up until this point, moving-image exhibitions have been much smaller, or more concerned with tracking specific historical movements, regions, or tendencies within them, including *The Cinema Effect: Illusion, Reality, and the Moving Image*, 2008, at the Hirschorn Museum; *Le Mouvement des Images*, 2006-7, at the Pompidou Center in Paris; or *The Renegades: American Avant-Garde Film, 1960–1973*, at the Walker Art Center, in 2012. *Dreamlands* features over fifty artists from around the world.

Also noteworthy is the exhibition’s break away from the two dominant modes of historicizing experimental media artists. First, the film-as-art paradigm, which seeks to elevate film to the same terrain as sculpture and painting. This model privileges artists who pursue the essential technical properties of film, regarding them as singular poets and artisans rather than as workers in a collaborative industry. The second, complementary tendency of political Modernism posits experimental media art as “countercinema,” a radically “other” space for producing authentic experiences outside the ideological apparatuses of late capitalism. Both paradigms denigrate the black box of the movie theater and the commercial sphere in general, while affirming the artist as a Romantic genius standing above the fray.

Iles rejects these well-established artistic classifications and curatorial models as unhelpful classifications for tracking moving-image artists working in our current age. Today’s generation produces media for theatres as well as for museums and galleries, and draws from cultural reference points that are born digital, heavily commercial in nature, and not defined by a particular sphere of activity. A more or less random list of cultural/technical landmarks influencing them might include: Michael Bay’s *Transformers* series, 3D Hollywood films, VR (virtual reality) computer games, *Fruit Ninja*, Kimojis, always-on social media, and Netflix.

Thus, our current media ecology requires a new framework, one that does not put artists, audiences, or artworks into separate and reified spheres—abstract/realistic, video/celluloid, commercial/artistic, white cube gallery/black box theater, and so forth. “Artists working across all mediums take the immateriality of digital technology as a given,” Iles rightly points out in an interview. “Binaries no longer feel useful as a way to rationalize what is happening” to the moving image, a problem that Iles seeks to resolve through her visionary curatorial practice.

In place of the filmmaker-poet or artist-activist, the protagonist of Iles’s show is the cyborgian artist. Iles adopts Donna Haraway’s term in her catalog essay, using it to designate a protean figure who manipulates the interpenetration of technology and nature, capitalism and revolutionary politics. In *Dreamlands*, cyborgian artwork exists in multiple forms and formats, unconcerned with barriers of high and low culture or creative medium.

With this conception in mind, the problematic conceptual divisions of the past disintegrate, as we witness such odd juxtapositions as mainstream Hollywood film—*Blade Runner* storyboards—alongside sculptural High Modernist Para-Cinema—Anthony McCall’s *Line Describing a Cone*, 1973. The cyborg greets us in multiple guises. From the whimsical, marionette-like dancers in a 1970 restaging of Oskar Schlemmer’s *Triadic Ballet*, 1922; to the *Tron*-like computer generated avatars in Hito Steyerl’s immersive screen installation, *Factory of the Sun*, 2015; to the neon-pink-illuminated viewing space of *Easternsports*, 2014, a five-act video opera and installation by Alex Da Corte and Jayson Musson, which slows down footage of operatic actors to a robotic, sputtering crawl.

Iles rejects traditional curatorial models and their attendant conception of filmic experience as necessarily involving a dark auditorium, large screen, movie projector, and rows of seats. Instead, she transforms the Whitney’s 18,000-square-foot fifth floor into a maze of luminous rooms. The viewer is not so much directed through the space, as invited to wander and discover objects of interest, half distractedly, as if in a dream. Much of the audiovisual work on display is porous, fluid (ambient sounds and flickering light spill over from one room to the next); and much of it is interactive, requiring 360-degree movement on the part of the observer, emphasizing haptic rather than optic qualities of recent moving-image practice. Such an all-surrounding media environment is best represented by Stan VanDerBeek’s *Movie Mural*, 1968, with its raucous web of newsreels, found films, slides, the artist’s own films, and screens trapping the viewer like an insect under a jar. The museum-goer’s body often merges with an ensemble of architecture and pure, projective light, dissolving the boundaries among screen, image, and cinematic apparatus. While it reflects and enacts the major technical transformations of cinematic space in recent decades, this curatorial strategy recalls cinema’s beginnings, an age of magic lanterns, phantasmorgias, and shimmering light.

In providing context for today’s cyborgian artist, *Dreamlands* showcases young and emerging artists who work in both digital and analog forms. The show also provides a historical perspective with a heavy focus on activity from the 1920s and 1960s, two futuristic decades that Iles believes have a direct relevance to the twenty-first century through an interest in machines and humans, and cybernetic visions of a society to come.

One such proto-cyborgian artist whose work re-appears, specter-like, throughout the show is Oskar Fischinger. In the 1920s, Fischinger married abstract painting with new techniques of cinematic motion (slow motion, reverse motion, stop-motion). He also completed several highly successful commercial projects, such as the 1934 *Muratti Greift Ein* (*Muratti Marches On*) with its stop-motion dancing cigarettes, or, later, the 1952 advertisements for Oklahoma Gas, made in Los Angeles. *Dreamlands* presents both aspects of Fischinger’s career in one of his first-ever multimedia projections, *Raumlichtkunst* (*Space Light Art*), a recreation of his multiple-screen film events, first shown in Germany in 1926.

The cybernetic artist that sees the world rendered in blocks, grids, and geometric forms—first postulated by Fischinger and his German compatriots—is mirrored nearly a hundred years later by a video work included in the exhibition, titled *Blade Runner—Autoencoded*. Artist Terence Broad built an artificial intelligence program to remember every single individual frame of the 1982 cult film and reconstruct each one as a memory. Broad’s A.I.-assisted film reduces *Blade Runner* to a montage of blurry, abstract visuals, without legible people, places, or objects. Only human dialogue faintly heard on the soundtrack, and slight variations in color tone and lighting serve to indicate where we are in the story, as we watch the film through the eyes of a computer.

Other contemporary cyborgian artists in the show are Philippe Parreno and Pierre Huyghe. In 1999, the artists purchased the copyright for a nondescript Japanese character—a prepubescent teenage girl, with large eyes and no predeveloped story or personality—from a popular animation firm, Kworks. They named her Annlee, then hired a group of artists to produce a series of commissioned “artworks” emanating from the mysteriously empty

intellectual property. These unassuming pieces, intended to establish the personality of Annlee, take the form of a short animation, a music video, poster, and drawing. This project, *No Ghost Just a Shell*, reveals the shadow protagonist of Iles’s show to be the elusive and ever-changing nature of capitalist enterprise. Adopting the role of the business manager or entrepreneur, Parreno and Huyghe demonstrate that the cyborgian artist, like the Annlee character, is infinitely reproducible. Forgoing traditional values once attached to experimental media—like technical virtuosity or handmade approaches to image-making—they instead utilize branding, marketing, business deals, and intellectual-property reproduction expertise, enabling new expansions of the moving image.

Considered a work of cyborgian moving-image art, *No Ghost Just a Shell* typifies the show by asking not *what* cinema is, but *where* cinema is being taken by contemporary artists. The rise of “transmedia”—as seen in the boom in streaming movies and television, or children’s franchises that materialize as toys, costumes, and video games—suggests an exponential proliferation of the moving image, and a corresponding liberation of the visual from its technical support. *Dreamlands* argues that, more important than focusing on a specific medium, artistic movement, or exhibition space, we should focus on how today’s artists have found new means to render images mobile and where, precisely, we encounter them. Images no longer remain tied to a medium, but multiply across many different sorts of screens, virtualities, and real/imagined spaces.

Overall, the show downplays the ominous potential of cinema’s continuous transformation through digital technology and media industries, but does so successfully with its persuasive argument that film/media exhibitions should be moving toward a focus on how contemporary artists are mobilizing images. With the title “Dreamland” borrowed from the early movie theatre that projected various amusements or “attractions” to largely immigrant or working class audiences for the price of a nickel, Iles’s exhibition similarly represents a refreshingly optimistic and entertaining outlook on the evolution of the moving image.



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