

NOAM M. ELCOTT, *ARTIFICIAL DARKNESS:
AN OBSCURE HISTORY OF MODERN ART
AND MEDIA*. CHICAGO: CHICAGO UNIVERSITY
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If we were to pinpoint the implicit target that young American art historian Noam M. Elcott's book *Artificial Darkness: An Obscure History of Modern Art and Media* is launched against, we ought to turn to the list of authors he acknowledges at the beginning of the volume. Rosalind Krauss and Jonathan Crary – Elcott's former teachers, now colleagues at Columbia University – are front and centre. Once we look at the index, however, we discover that while Crary is cited on several occasions, Krauss is not – despite the fact that it was she who brought him to Columbia and who two years ago led with him a lecture series focusing on the role of film and video in twentieth-century art history. This conspicuous absence could be explained by the simple act of pointing out the historical framework of the book, which is concerned with the so-called long nineteenth century (1789–1914) – a period Krauss rarely focuses on. Still, zooming in on the terminology that Elcott provides in the book's introduction, we discover that it is none other than his former teacher's work that he is challenging: for Elcott, "artificial darkness," or the controlled environment in which modern theatre, photographic, and film images are produced and distributed, is not a medium but a "dispositif". He thus distances himself from the Greenbergian medium, defined through its physical implications, as well as from the medium functioning as "technical support," as theorized by Krauss, subscribing instead to the ideas of German philosophy and media theory, where film and other technical images are defined as "dispositifs" – systems of relations in a heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulations, laws, administrative regulations and scientific claims.

The break with Krauss and the recourse to German philosophy and media theory are openly revealed in the abovementioned debate surrounding the definition of “medium,” which runs stealthily through the entire book; and it is also seen in the author’s choice of topics and ways of posing questions. Since “artificial darkness” is neither a thing nor any other substance, we cannot ask “what?” but rather “where?” (p. 5). This is especially the case in the first three chapters, where Elcott explicitly adheres to German media archeology and discusses different types of “artificial darkness,” such as the Physiological Station (*station physiologique*) where Étienne-Jules Marey took his chronophotographs; the festival theatre, built for Richard Wagner’s opera productions in Bayreuth; the black-screen, used in magic theatres. The choice to incorporate Marey’s Physiological Station in the very first chapter is deliberate, as it helps Elcott explain the tradition he draws upon in his work. The Station, consisting of a dark room of the camera in a wheeled wooden box and a black velvet light-absorbing chamber, embodies a similar dispositif connecting the visible and the invisible, the one described by Michel Foucault in his well-known interpretation of Bentham’s Panopticon in his *Discipline and Punish*. As we know from Foucault’s interpretation, however, the disciplinary dispositif of the Panopticon is not just a means of organizing the visible in order to provide effective surveillance, but was also used at the time to transform human beings into subjects. This aspect of Foucault’s interpretation of the dispositif is what Friedrich Kittler, Elcott’s other predecessor, draws upon when he argues that modern man at the end of the nineteenth century emerged as his “essence escape[d] into apparatuses”.¹ According to Elcott, this also applies to the “artificial darkness” of the Physiological Station, which reduced the human body to mere visual data, used to analyze and control movement.

Elcott carries on with media archeology in the second chapter, where he seeks to determine whether Wagner’s dispositif of the festival theatre in Bayreuth considered to be the predecessor of modern-day cinemas. Wagner’s audience were invited to experience a loss of their

¹ Cf. Friedrich A. KITTLER, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999, p. 16.

sense of physicality and spatial awareness, which later became a key condition for film spectatorship. Wagner, in collaboration with the architect Gottfried Semper, achieved this effect through a series of sophisticated technical innovations, including an orchestra hidden below the recessed auditorium, a double proscenium creating a unique sense of depth, a fan-shaped amphitheater seating, and also the impenetrable darkness that the stage was immersed in. The singers that appeared before spectators in this situation were transformed into images not unlike those that came from the human bodies in front of the black screens of Marey's Physiological Station. Magic theatre, which Elcott discusses in the third chapter, operates in a similar way. In this case, however, the images step out into the space in front of the black background: they were painted onto blackened glass slides which were suspended before the audience to resemble ghosts hanging freely in the air. The chapter sheds more light on Elcott's relationship towards Krauss thanks to the illustration to the frontispiece of Étienne-Gaspard Robertson's *Mémoires récréatifs, scientifiques et anecdotiques* (picture 3.1 on p. 79). Incidentally, Krauss used the very same illustration in her introduction to the translation of Nadar's piece on Balzac and daguerrotype.² For Krauss, the depiction is vaguely understood as some form of "19th century séance", and it is used to illustrate the well-known theory of spectral layers, which postulates that perception occurs through physical contact between sensory receptors and the surface layer detaching itself from the perceived object; Elcott, on the other hand, identifies the illustration clearly, and uses it very thoroughly in his interpretation of a specific type of magic lantern called "phantasmagoria". This phenomenon, regarded by Krauss as the other, marginal side of modernity, is central to Elcott's interest, and becomes a prerequisite for film and other modern apparatus.

In the two main chapters, which are devoted to Georges Méliès's films and Oskar Schlemmer's *Triadic Ballet*, Elcott employs methods used in art history and theory, while pointing out the continuity between modern and pre-modern art. Méliès's work can be used to

² Rosalind KRAUSS, "Tracing Nadar," *October*, 1978, 5, p. 37.

demonstrate the cross-pollination between early cinema and pre-modern *variété* and magic theatres, with cinema adopting their black background, while providing them with truly modern cinematographic techniques. It might seem as though Méliès's early works, where the main figure (the filmmaker himself) takes off his head and places it on a table, or lets disappear a female figure and replaces her with a skeleton – are but film recordings of magic shows. In fact, they employ purely modern cinematic techniques such as stop-motion animation, montage and editing, and other special effects. Unrecognizable as they may be, they constitute the films' brilliance, and greatly surpass generic magic theatre. This chapter also secretly hints at Rosalind Krauss. In order to prove the modernity of Méliès's films, Elcott quotes the well-known formulation by film theorist Tom Gunning, who incorporates them into the "aesthetic of attractions" which addresses, or sometimes even attacks, the audience directly. Even though Elcott refrains from acknowledging it, Gunning is taking part in the famous debate about minimalist art between Krauss and Michael Fried: "The cinema of attractions stands at the antipode to the experience Michael Fried, in his discussion of eighteenth-century painting, calls absorption. For Fried, the painting of Greuze and others created a new relation to the viewer through a self-contained hermetic world which makes no acknowledgement of the beholder's presence. Early cinema totally ignores this construction of the beholder. These early films explicitly acknowledge their spectator, seeming to reach outwards and confront. Contemplative absorption is impossible here. The viewer's curiosity is aroused and fulfilled through a marked encounter, a direct stimulus, a succession of shocks."³

Even though Elcott convincingly reveals the modern aspects of Méliès's film project, which transformed pre-modern magic theatre into modern cinematic spectacle, it is in *Triadic Ballet* (1923) by Bauhaus theatre master Oskar Schlemmer that he finds a truly modern use of artificial darkness. Unlike Méliès, Schlemmer did not adapt the illusionary dark space to magic and film tricks but rather attempted

³ Tom GUNNING, "An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In) Credulous Spectator," in: Linda Williams (ed.), *Viewing Positions Ways of Seeing Film*, New Brunswick (N.J.): Rutgers University Press 1995, pp. 123–124.

the very opposite – to adapt the human body to a real, pre-controlled dark dimension that we encounter not only in theatre but also in our modern everyday life. As we know from Schlemmer’s drawings as well as from many texts, the laws of the abstract theatre scene embodied a network of planimetric and stereometrics relationships. He believed that they also applied to the artificial darkness of *Triadic Ballet*. The figures do not disappear into it, as they do in Méliès’s films, but instead they actively modulate their bodies in response to the dark dimension surrounding them. In documentary photographs from the performance, we can see the author performing an abstract figure (*Abstrakte*), whose body is completely dematerialized, and in its interaction with the dark background it is reduced to a mere fragment. Thus, the body does not disappear in the darkness but constructs itself again according to the new rules, like the body of any modern human who has been plugged into the network of production and reproduction apparatus. This can also be observed in a uniquely preserved film from 1926, where we can watch Schlemmer’s movement. In three brief shots we can see how he lets his body permeate the surrounding darkness using simple turns. Since Schlemmer did not have any formal ballet training, his dance consisted of long steps, short jumps, turns, and expressive gestures – that is to say, figures that anyone moving through the modern city is able to perform.

Today, the once modern “artificial darkness” apparatus of Marey’s Physiological Station, Wagner’s festival theatre, Méliès’s trick films as well as Schlemmer’s *Triadic Ballet*, are a thing of the past. Along with the disappearance of analog film and photography, the dark rooms of photo studios and the black boxes in cinemas are vanishing too. On the other hand, the work of contemporary artists such as Tacita Dean, who captured on film the closing of the last Kodak film factory (2006), or Hiroshi Sugimoto, who documents rays of light in abandoned cinemas (1975-2001), brings these obsolete devices back to life. Noam Elcott’s relationship towards his teacher is an equally ambivalent one. Though Elcott’s views have diverged from Krauss’s, he functions in the same role today that she once did. In the same way that Krauss and her colleagues at *October* magazine brought French poststructuralist ideas and deconstruction to American art history in

the 1970s and 80s, Elcott, together with other editors at *Grey Room*, now brings German philosophy and media theory as taught at Bauhaus University in Weimar and in Humboldt University in Berlin.