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ARTIFICIAL DARKNESS, AN OBSCURE HISTORY OF MODERN ART AND MEDIA

Noam M. Elcott

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There is a rich connection between early cinema and the avant-garde. Even Hitchcock argued that “pure cinema” went out with the talkies. It’s no coincidence that Tom Gunning, author of numerous sublime essays on early cinema, has also written about experimental filmmakers such as Ernie Gehr, Ken Jacobs, Zoe Beloff and Douglas Gordon. Similarly, Noam M. Elcott, author of *Artificial Darkness*, has written about Christian Marclay and Tony Oursler.

In *Artificial Darkness* Elcott delivers further inspiration to those experimentalists interested in early cinema as he adds new marvels to the canon beyond the magic lantern performances of the Phantasmagoria and the shadow plays performed at Le Chat Noir. To this reader’s delight, the author also reveals the curious fact that occasionally shadows were even antithetical to certain early filmmaking techniques. And ultimately Elcott explores how these methods were also used to objectify women.

Elcott begins his remarkable narrative with Friedrich Kittler’s story of developments in late nineteenth century theater design for opera. Though serious questions about the meaning of his work should be asked because of his antisemitism, Richard Wagner’s theater in Beyreuth, Germany (1876) anticipated early twentieth century movie palaces by being the first to place the audience in an artificially darkened space. Before Wagner, the audience was illuminated in order to observe the reactions of their aristocratic patrons during the performance. How annoying it must have been to have one’s attention distracted by the narcissistic utterings and gesticulations of a rich ignoramus. With a single stroke, Wagner plunged theaters into immersive darkness, creating the prototype for modern movie theaters, and setting free a significant erotic dimension of modernity.

Beyond Wagner’s Festspielhaus, a next step in the evolution of modern movie theaters was the screen, of which we have

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several types beginning with standard white screens, silver lenticular screens for polarized 3-D projection, rear screens, translucent screens, split screens, and of course, the metaphorical silver screen signifying Hollywood. Most important in this discussion, however, is the black screen, the prototype of the blue and green screens currently used for digital video compositing. An important distinction among screens is that some are intended to be projected upon, while others are to be photographed against. The black screen, upon which no shadow can be cast, falls into the latter category. Elcott further identifies the black screen as a *dispositif*. Appropriated from French theorist, Michel Foucault, a *dispositif* is a technical system and knowledge structure that may be used for asserting power within society. This concept is central to Elcott's discussion of "artificial darkness."

In order for a black screen to work it must be Chevreul black. This is not a color but rather a black volume used to create a psychophysiological sensation of blackness. Michel Eugène Chevreul, the savant who explained simultaneous contrast to the Impressionists in an age long before Vantablack, observed that the best way to create perceived total darkness is to build a box, paint or line the interior black, and then cut an aperture into it in order to create a light trap. Artificial darkness is always three-dimensional. Imagine artificial darkness as a garage, with a black interior and a door that opens varying amounts. This was precisely what Étienne-Jules Marey used as a photographic backdrop at the Physiological Station of Paris. Marey occasionally even used

three black screens simultaneously, front, side and top, in order to create wondrous, multi-exposure combination photographs from three different angles. Taken together these three matched photographs documented a calculus based on measurable spectral traces of human and animal locomotion.

American inventor Thomas Edison visited Marey's research facility in the Bois de Boulogne (1889) and observed that he used a black screen. Elcott suggests that Edison's appropriation of the black screen in early films from the Black Maria movie studio in West Orange, New Jersey represented an unabashed technical misconstruing of Marey's research. To put it simply, there was absolutely no technical reason for Edison's filmmaker, William Kennedy Dickson, to photograph against a black background, even though as Kittler describes in *Optical Media*, it did end up creating a body of work contrasting dramatically with the *cinéma en plein air* of the Lumière brothers in France.

Conversely, Georges Méliès correctly deployed the *dispositif* of the black screen to create the first generation of spectacular visual effects-based cinema. Uniquely relevant is that Méliès began his career as a stage magician, and as Elcott points out, stage magic began using the techniques known as "black art" two decades before the magic cinema of Méliès, Émile Cohl and Segundo de Chomón, when Max Auzinger, performing under the name, Ben Ali Bey, set up an on-stage room with a blackened interior in which he created many startling illusions.

Practitioners of black art stage illusions also utilized dazzlers (bright lights) that were placed along the edges of the black room, aimed directly at the audience. This enhanced the effect of lighting contrast, to better disguise movements of the human assistants dressed in black on stage, who manipulated disconnected skeletal arms or who appeared as decapitated heads, the rest of their bodies hidden from audience view.

Elcott notes that in many films employing the artificial darkness *dispositif*, women appeared as if fetishistically controlled by a male, god-like magus figure. In these early films preceding the age of movie starlets, women were treated as little more than props to be sawn in half, disappeared at will, or otherwise dismembered.

When a movie magician did transform one woman into many, it resulted in a group of similar looking women who were visually interchangeable but never exactly the same. Such tropes were reserved for the all-powerful man, while women were objects to be subjugated by a male will. When Méliès duplicated himself, we witnessed the multiplication of the exact same individual. In *Melomaniac* (1903), Méliès created multiple duplications of his own severed head that he repeatedly tossed up onto a music staff. After re-growing his head, he then severed it again, and repeated the action of tossing it up onto the staff. Creating this effect necessitated running a film strip through the camera seven times while accurately remembering the actions executed along the way. Elcott identifies this as "male mastery through duplication," and it utilized a combination of the spatial black screen with trick photographic techniques also known as *trucage*.

Though such Grand Guignol era antics portraying sexual predators in early cinema appear mild in comparison to the exploitation (i.e. female exploitation) films of the 1960s and '70s, they do however, aid in establishing a trajectory of sexism and misogyny in early modern media that is symptomatic of the denial of power to women in our society.

Like Tom Gunning, Elcott is a writer who is also a reader, and for those interested, *Artificial Darkness* unleashes a startling array of primary and critical source materials to further expand and enrich our experience of darkness in cinema.

After reading *Artificial Darkness* I was fortunate to witness a live performance by avant-garde filmmaker, Ken Jacobs (dramatically assisted by Flo Jacobs), entitled *Black Space*, that extends the discussion further. In this work Jacobs strategically sidestepped the cinematic conventions of projector and screen, and instead probed the three-dimensional blackness itself, as it unfolded a packed audience one night at Microscope Gallery in Brooklyn.

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