

## Pinpointing the 'cinematic' in twenty-first century art: 'Dreamlands' / 'On Desire'

NECSUS 8 (2), Autumn 2019: 341–350

URL: <https://necsus-ejms.org/pinpointing-the-cinematic-in-twenty-first-century-art-dreamlands-on-desire/>

**Keywords:** art, book review, cinematic

As audiovisual practices become increasingly multiplied and complex – from the omnipresence of (multi-)screens to the overstimulation of digital technologies – art is more sociopolitically-oriented than ever and, conversely, society acquires an aestheticised bias. Cinema still plays an important role in the current media landscape, but it is increasingly pervaded by other art forms and experiences and risks turning into something else altogether – or does it?

Both books reviewed in this text address the interconnected topics of the fate and essence of audiovisual art in general and of cinema in particular, but they go about it in different ways. Not coincidentally, both books are catalogues of major audiovisual art exhibitions in highly-reputed venues and can be considered valuable tools for the assessment of the current media landscape. More importantly, they both supply more than information; they provide the reader with sensorial *stimulae*, truly incorporating the spirit of the artworks exhibited in their respective events and the artistic positioning upheld by the curators. Of the two, *Dreamlands* is a theoretical gem, worth a perusal by any media researcher; *On Desire* congregates many of the most relevant types of art objects currently being made. They complement each other perfectly, but here I will address them separately.

*Dreamlands: Immersive Cinema and Art, 1905-2016* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2016) started out as an exhibition curated by Chrisie Iles at the Whitney Museum in New York. The edited volume contains engaging top-quality images of artworks exhibited at the Whitney event, an alphabetical index of artists featured in the exhibition, and a plate list of all the works mentioned in the texts. However, the core of the book is made up of a theoretical file issuing articles on different subjects, written by different

authors. Although all of these articles address the sensorial dimension of audiovisual art, they first seem randomly selected, apparently covering too much historical ground (from the so-called cinema of attractions of early film to current digital hybrids). In time, one sees it is an editorial decision undertaken to highlight the interaction between diverse sensorial aspects and to reinforce the hybridity and spectatorial immersion, something which all the articles stem from or come back to. Therefore, in the spirit of the book, I abstain here from providing a detailed account of the articles in their featured order and instead focus on certain issues which cut across the entire book and overtly correspond to Iles' own position, revealed in the first article of the volume, 'The Cyborg and The Sensorium'.



In this article, Iles states that while preparing for the exhibition she realised that the nature of the image had changed and it is now anchored in space. The curator argues that a change of paradigm has occurred in the visual arts, which now engage in the 'haptic model' that operates by prioritising the senses, immersiveness, spectacle, artificiality, and hybridity (p. 122). According to her, 'our environment has become an all-surrounding, all-surveilled sensorium in which cyberspace determines the contours of everything [...]' (p. 121), a position also held by the authors of *Multimedia: From Wagner to Virtual Reality*.<sup>[1]</sup> By cyberspace Iles generally means digital culture brought about

in the age of the internet and marked by intense connectivity. The importance of space, both physical and digital, is what links all the articles in this book.

In the aggregate of the articles contained in *Dreamlands*, four particular aspects of the haptic model are posited throughout the history of cinema as being directly responsible for immersion: light, colour, movement, and shapes. Giuliana Bruno, in 'The Screen as Object: Art and the Atmospheres of Projection', claims that cinema's ability to create multiform light spaces is what characterises the medium from the beginning. She distinguishes between cinema as an activity from 'the cinematic', which is a property not exclusive to film and that emerges 'through other art forms such as painting, photography, and sculpture, and is dispersed across various material terrains' (p. 157). Hence, Bruno proposes that the famous Bazinian question 'What is cinema?' (in the eponymous book in two volumes)[2] be changed to 'Where is cinema?' Films and installations exhibited at museums and art galleries reveal the materiality of the medium and support Bruno's claim that 'the cinematic' (i.e., the behaviour of light in space) is 'the zero degree of cinema', that which allows it to exist in the first place. Tom Gunning, for his part, places greater importance on movement. In the article 'What Is Cinema? The Challenge of the Moving Image Past and Future', he claims that cinema cannot simply be reduced to images that move, but grants that motion is an inescapable property of cinema. He changes the focus of the issue slightly in order to reinforce his point: 'Cinema does not simply present us with a technology that captures motion visually: it provides us with a sensory (that is, aesthetic) tool that makes us see, that makes us *aware* of movement, and that overcomes our habitual oblivion of taking movement for granted [...]' (p. 142, emphasis in the original).

Motion is of the essence in cinematic animation, of course. It could be argued that with the advent of digital cinema and CGI effects cinema itself has become a form of animation: 'To animate is to create, to restore movement, to bring inert matter to life or back to life' (p. 181). Esther Leslie in 'Animation and Transformation' defines animation broadly as 'a more-or-less anarchic play of moving light broken into spectral colors or blacks, whites, and grays, which are coaxed into forms and figures that seem to possess life or liveliness' (p. 187). In other words, animation is a kaleidoscopic experience of light, colours, and shapes in motion. For Leslie, it is also highly adaptable to new technologies and combines artificiality with immersion: 'Animation distracts and entices' (p. 190). Probably nobody knew this better than Walt

Disney, whom John Canemaker in 'Walt Disney: Experimental Animator' credits as having played a crucial role in the development of cinematic art in general. Disney explored all the possibilities of colour, movement, light, sound, and mood and used the most cutting-edge technology of his day: the combination of live action and animation, synchronous sound, Technicolor, multiplane cameras. More importantly, according to Canemaker, *Synaesthesia* would have been a more apt title for the film *Fantasia*, since in it Disney pursued a fusion of art and technology worthy of Richard Wagner's concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total work of art) and the resultant spectatorial immersion.[3] Therefore, as far back as 1940, when *Fantasia* opened in the US, immersion was already a concern, and I posit that this film is a precursor of the haptic paradigm.

Adam D. Weintraub in the 'Foreword' acknowledges the increase of the immersive tendency in recent years, but goes farther back than Disney in his search for a worthy ancestor to today's prevailing trend. He argues that in the 1905 short film *Coney Island at Night* (Edwin S. Porter) immersion coexists with distraction, since the film shows the dazzling lights of the Coney Island amusement park *Dreamland* and the natural motion of its many rides. It is implied that the film mesmerises the viewer excessively. Thus, the paradoxical combination is indirectly attributed to the nature of the cinematic apparatus itself, well ahead of the haptic model.

Such a claim reinforces the role played by architecture in spectatorial immersion. Noam M. Elcott in 'Bodies in the Dark: Cinema, Spectatorship, Discipline, Residue' corroborates this perspective by engaging with the role of light and shadow in film theatres, a research avenue he continues to pursue in his new book *Artificial Darkness* (2019).[4] In his opinion, the darkness in the auditorium enables the viewers' bodies to be suspended in a 'null space', but he argues that the use of lighting design is capable of creating attractions and distractions, just like what happened in the early 1920s. J. Hoberman in 'After 2001: The Dematerialization of the Film Object in the Twentieth-First Century' also addresses architecture as a film viewing space endowed with a self-reflexive nature of its own. In a way, he *expands* the scope of cinematic possibilities without really using the key concept – expanded cinema[5] – which it entails. In his article, Hoberman refers to Stanley Kubrick's film as having 'prophesied and, in a sense, preempted the late twentieth-century white-cube cinema of movies made for galleries and museums' (p. 179). The film opened in Lowe's Capital Cinerama Theater, in a 70mm copy with stereophonic sound projected onto a screen two floors high. Also, the increased

hybridity of cinema has transformed this medium into a sort of 'cyborg cinema' – that is, a mixture of apparently irreconcilable corporeal matters. In 'Embodied Differences: Monsters, Cyborgs, and Cinema', Karen Archey posits it as a symbol of bodily empowerment through the politically motivated representation of alterity (monstrous and disabled bodies, nonsexual women's bodies, black bodies, transgender bodies, and so on), just as Donna Haraway had done before her (originally 1985).[6] The body has become part of the current digital expansion. Iles maintains that in Anthony McCall's celebrated installation *Line Describing a Cone* (1973) the spectators' bodies fuse with the filmic apparatus in a single space. By penetrating the light cone, whose presence is highlighted by smoke in the gallery room where the thirty-minute film is projected, and interacting with it, the spectators' bodies become 'temporary cyborgs' (p. 124).



The book *On Desire: Positions of Time-Based and Immersive Arts* (Bielefeldt: Transcript Verlag, 2018) is actually a bilingual German-English catalogue of B3, a digital audiovisual event of the highest magnitude that takes place annually in the city of Frankfurt, in Germany. In its own way, it addresses all of the aforementioned issues as well. Moreover, the third edition of B3 focused on 'desire', which has important sensorial implications, as the opening

essay of the book, 'The Moving Image of Desire', by Marc Ries, lets on. Indeed, Ries comments that '[D]esire is a mingling of perception, presentation and imagination, fantasy, dream and delirium' (p. 21). Thus, desire and awareness are connected, namely by the assimilation of media. However, this does not preclude – quite the opposite – a social and political leaning. Ries argues that the inner life of the individual interconnects with social tendencies and the institutions of economy, politics, culture, technology, and science; hence, the recurrence of issues such as migration, exclusion, etc., in many of the works presented at B3. Not having attended the exhibition, I will concentrate on the contents of the catalogue and especially on its many artistic and technological avenues, of which the common denominators seem to be liveliness and absorption.

Indeed, Bernd Kracke, President of Offenbach University of Art and Design and artistic director of B3, and Anita Beckers, the event's curator, jointly state: 'With the help of moving images, our goal is to make it possible *to experience* desire and aspiration through the entire spectrum of art, media, science and technology' (p. 35, emphasis mine). For instance, one of the private collections featured at B3 exhibited Julius von Bismarck & Benjamin Maus's *The Perpetual Storytelling Apparatus*, an artefact that finds drawings on the internet whose descriptions match keywords from an account provided by the artist, and prints them in real time under the *gaze* of the public. This example proves how much the audience is catered to and made an effective part of the exhibition process, in much the same vein as the multi-channel and/or interactive gallery events. In fact, it could be argued that by attending this issue of B3 the audience does pretty much what a regular attendant of Coney Island at night at the turn of the last century in the US did: was immersed in spectacle and sensorially seduced by the novelty of the attractions. Again, he or she is an integral part of the haptic model.

The catalogue reveals that the most space-dependent projects, made to stimulate the viewers' senses via light, colour, movement, and shapes, are the collective ones, in which the artwork is experienced along with the architecture that composes the apparatus and the other viewers that occupy it in the same time frame. One such work is *An den Saal* (2017), a five surface / three-channel video installation work produced at Film University Babelsberg Konrad Wolf by the group Site Specific, who use a given location as both the subject of recording and its projection site. This particular film is made up of nineteen works 'lodged in the plenary hall of the former Supervisory Board

offices of Deutsche Bank' (p. 161), giving viewers the impression of *being there*, while at the same time being aware of the artifice involved.

Yet, to my mind, the cornerstone of B3 – exhibition and catalogue – is the fulldome 360° experience, an exhibition *within* the exhibition. The variety and number of films on offer and the designation of 'specials' in the catalogue give some credit to my claim. It is here, in 'productions that have broken out of the format-related limitations of a flat rectangular canvas', that one feels the kernel of immersion resides (p. 139). These 'gigantic projections in a 360° dome surround the observers completely, allowing them to become entirely immersed in breath-taking worlds', as the catalogue explains (p. 138). Contrary to VR, fulldome films are to be experienced in groups and deliberately play on the viewers' unconscious as well as conscious perception, while allowing for bodily reactions. Although the catalogue does not use this word, the experience seems highly visceral: images, sounds, forms, and colours 'dance' all around us, as in *After Cherenkov* (Masashige Lida, 2016, Japan), which shows waves of radiation permeating the air; and *Samskara* (George Aistov, 2015, Thailand/US), a kaleidoscopic rendering of the paintings of Android Jones, where the viewers feel they are becoming part of the works themselves.

The fulldome experience, a transition from the IMAX large screens to the planetarium-type of view, begs two orders of questions which, due to the catalogue nature of *On Desire*, remain unanswered in the book. First, the 360° immersion, like VR experiences, depends upon the removal of the sensorial experiences of the real world combined with the introduction of a feeling of presence in a virtual environment. However, it is undeniable that the senses are more fully activated in the fulldome, because the viewers are collectively bombarded by *stimulae* coming at them from all sides, which could be said to enhance the immersiveness of the experience and the visual/aural envelopment of the participants. The choice of fantasy spaces made by the directors of these films add to this fact. Yet, many of the fulldome films contained in the catalogue present images which are an extension of the basic rectangular visual perspective, artificially made to fill an all-surrounding space. This is true of *Multiverse/s* (Patrick Pomerlau and Sean Caruso, 2015, Canada), which depicts '[A] voyage between dimensional planes, reaching beyond the observable universe and into imagined environments where the laws of physics are ever changing and unrecognizable to our own' (p. 147). Yet, it can also be used in stories for children, like *The Secrets of Gravity – In the Footsteps of Albert Einstein* (Peter Popp, 2016), which has a twelve-year-old protagonist walking

around in indoor spaces, necessarily distorted to fit the 360° geography of the auditorium. In this sense, the expression ‘virtual reality’ which in and of itself is already a true paradox[7] becomes doubly contradictory. This takes us back to the dialects between Brechtian distance and Wagnerian immersion, a fine line which only the best creators can walk, and which may serve to prove that immersion is never complete, not even – or especially – in the post-cinematic age. Second, the production of films for exhibition in full-dome is costly and requires the involvement of technological companies and/or academic research laboratories, even for very short films, most of them ranging from three to six minutes in length. This raises the question of the corporative interests involved in this type of cinema. Ultimately, who or what does it serve, considering that the exhibition avenues are still very limited? The possibilities to experience these films as they have been conceived do not abound, as regular auditoria are not equipped with planetarium-like screens.

Apart from these collective works, the B3 exhibition was a forum for all sorts of immersive digital creation, of which the remaining catalogue is the best evidence and an important account for researchers. The VR films listed in the catalogue combine, for the most part, the immersive form of virtual reality, which requires VR glasses as part of the (renewed) digital apparatus, with the sensorial nature of the films themselves. This seems to indicate that effects alone may not necessarily convey a full scope immersion, precisely what Brian Droitcourt argues in his article ‘The Cinema of Feels’ in *Dream-lands*. [8] The B3 VR short film *Lifeline* (Victor Michelot, 2017, France) is a good example. The film

tells the story of that frozen moment when you’re realizing you’re falling in love. There’s no past, no present, no future, only a unique sphere outside of time and space (p. 134).

The individual works listed in the catalogue include single-channel videos (shown once or in a loop), multi-channel projects, installations, stop-motion video, computer-animated holographic multi-stereograms, performance pieces containing technology, mixed media with audio and video components. Their diversity and immersive power, luxuriously depicted in colour in this catalogue, is proof of the growing importance of immersive arts in the current audiovisual scene.



The apparently anarchic line-up of articles in *Dreamlands* and the diversity of content featured in *On Desire*, despite its rigorous division in self-contained categories, establish a material connection between pre- and post-cinema, allowing me to answer the question I posed at the beginning of this review: has cinema transformed into something else? The answer now seems to be 'no'. As Gunning contends, cinema is far from being 'no more'; it is only film, the flexible semitransparent strip, that is under assault. As long as there are images projected onto a screen, cinema lives on. I take the liberty to add that as long as anything can be a screen, then at least 'the cinematic' will not die out.

Fátima Chinita (Lisbon Polytechnic Institute, Portugal)<sup>[9]</sup>

## References

- Bazin, A. *What is cinema?, Vol. 1* (second edition). Berkeley-Los Angeles-London: University of California Press, 2005.
- Elcott, N.M. *Artificial darkness: An obscure history of modern art and media*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019.
- Grau, O. *Virtual art: From illusion to immersion*. Cambridge-London: The MIT Press, 2003.
- Haraway, D. 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century' in *Simians, cyborgs, and women: The reinvention of nature*. New York: Routledge, 1991: 149-181.
- Iles, C (ed.). *Dreamlands: Immersive cinema and art, 1905-2016*. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2016.
- Kracke, B. and Ries, M (eds). *On desire: Positions of time-based and immersive arts*. Bielefeldt: Transcript Verlag, 2018.
- Packer, R. and Jordan, K (eds). *Multimedia: From Wagner to virtual reality*. New York-London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001.
- Youngblood, G. *Expanded cinema*. London: Studio Vista, 1970.

## Notes

- [1] Packer & Jordan 2001.
- [2] Bazin 2005.
- [3] Packer & Jordan 2001.
- [4] Reviewed in NECSUS Autumn 2018\_#Mapping.
- [5] Coined by Youngblood in 1970.
- [6] Haraway 1991.
- [7] Grau 2003, p. 15.

- [8] He mentions a certain type of products that, through the use of digital technologies, use the moving image medium to convey the emotional experiences of characters, which, according to him, reflect those of the audience members. The cinema of feels as expressed by Droitcourt, however, is far from having a positive value, as it is no longer a vehicle for storytelling (Droitcourt 2016).
- [9] Research for this work was supported by FCT – Foundation for Arts and Technologies (Portugal), under the post-doctoral fellowship programme SFRH/BDP/113196/2015.