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# At the Whitney, a Different Take on the Moving Image

The exhibit 'Dreamlands: Immersive Cinema and Art, 1905–2016' chronicles the intersection of art and film



After Oskar Schlemmer (1888–1943), 'Das Triadische Ballett [Triadic Ballet],' 1970 35mm film transferred to video, color, sound. PHOTO: BAVARIA ATELIER FOR SWR IN COLLABORATION WITH INTER NATIONES AND RTB

By **SUSAN DELSON**

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Put down that smartphone. Step away from the remote. “Dreamlands” is here.

Opening Friday at the Whitney Museum of American Art, “Dreamlands: Immersive Cinema and Art, 1905–2016” presents a bracingly different take on the moving image—not as something to catch on your phone or binge-watch on weekends, but a full-body experience engaging all the senses.

“The history of cinema has been written and understood purely through narrative,” said the show’s curator, Chrissie Iles. “This is a whole other way to understand what ‘the cinematic’ is.”

At the Whitney, that way might involve walking through a light sculpture made by the projector beam in Anthony McCall’s “Line Describing a Cone” (1973). Or wading ankle-deep through unspooled celluloid while images flit around you in Jud Yalkut’s “Destruct Film” (1967).

It could mean inhaling the scent of oranges in “Easternsports” (2014) by Alex Da Corte and Jayson Musson. Or donning 3-D glasses and stretching out inside a cardboard geodesic dome—held together by binder clips—to watch an all-enveloping video in Ben Coonley’s “Trading Futures” (2016).



Still from Alex Da Corte with Jayson Musson's 'Easternsports' (2014), which includes the scent of oranges as part of the installation. *PHOTO: ALEX DA CORTE*

Laid out in a gentle maze of hallways, rooms and open spaces, the show itself has a dreamlike feel, inviting exploration and discovery.

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Works by 38 artists run the technological gamut from handmade drawings to artificial-intelligence bots.

Explorations begin with the first work visitors see stepping off the elevator: a performance

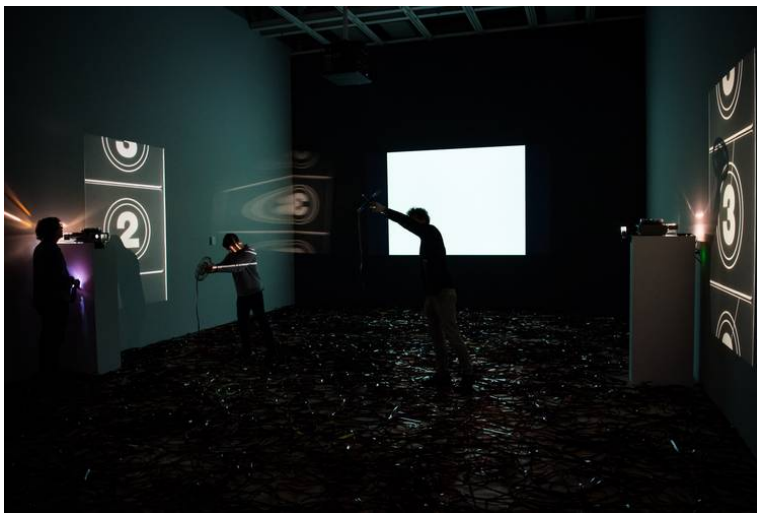
of “Triadic Ballet,” created in 1922 by German artist and designer Oskar Schlemmer.

With its geometric costumes and machine-like choreography, Schlemmer’s work conjures up the figure of the cyborg—one of the show’s recurring themes—and the bright colors, superimposed grids and bodies in motion that reappear in other works across the decades.

Among earlier works, perhaps the most dreamlike is Joseph Cornell’s “Rose Hobart.” Best known for his surrealist box assemblages, Cornell took a similarly evocative approach to film. Here, “Rose Hobart” is shown as it was at its 1936 premiere, projected through a blue glass filter that bathes the imagery—largely slowed-down shots of actress Rose Hobart from the 1931 movie “East of Borneo”—and the room in a reverie-inducing underwater light.

Artist Josiah McElheny, a master glassblower whose own multimedia work is included in the show, worked to replicate the blue filter to help the museum approximate the 1936 viewing experience. After studying an archival photo, he said, he determined that the filter was actually comprised of three layers and made from a glass specifically fabricated for car speedometers.

Hollywood makes a few cameo appearances in “Dreamlands.” Look for original concept drawings for Disney’s 1940 classic “Fantasia,” a rare film-industry experiment blending color, motion, and music. In a separate screening program,



Among the show's earlier works is 'Destruct Film' (1967) by Jud Yalkut, seen here in the process of being installed at the Whitney. PHOTO: MARK KAUZLARICH FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

the film itself is given the big-screen, surround-sound treatment.

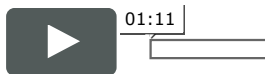


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Conceived as a core aspect of the exhibition, the screening program includes 74 works by 70 artists, presented at the museum and at Microscope Gallery in Bushwick, Brooklyn.

Back in the gallery, classic animation takes an existential turn with Mathias Poledna's "Imitation of Life" (2013). The three-minute film introduces a donkey with an identity crisis, who nonetheless tosses off a dance routine worthy of Gene Kelly at his finest. Offered as an elegy, perhaps, to a vanished era of filmmaking, it is a moment of pure joy.



Screens for Stan VanDerBeek's 'Movie Mural' (1968). PHOTO: MARK KAUZLARICH FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Other works are decidedly less Disney-esque. Appearing on an outsize, 14-foot-tall screen, Ian Cheng’s “Baby feat. Ikaria” (2013) captures three chatbots—each represented by a swirl of abstract shapes—endlessly conversing with each other.

“I wanted the work to feel public and un-precious, like a life form hanging out on a street corner,” Mr. Cheng said, noting that the work isn’t a video but an open-ended, ongoing simulation.

“Videos are for us, the viewer,” he explained, but simulations exist for themselves alone. “‘Baby feat. Ikaria’ is a means to snoop in on an ongoing conversation among artificial agents, the same way a baby monitor is a way to snoop in on a growing baby.”



Hito Steyerl's 'Factory of the Sun' (2015), as seen in an installation at the Hessel Museum of Art at Bard College.  
*PHOTO: SARAH WILMER*

Visitors looking to join a conversation themselves might seek out Lynn Hershman Leeson’s “DiNA” (2004–2006). One of the earliest works to use artificial intelligence, “DiNA” takes the form of actress Tilda Swinton, projected onto a small mirror.

“You can talk to her and she will talk back to you,” said Ms. Iles. “You see yourself and you also see the AI [artificial intelligence] figure. And you talk.”

Perhaps the edgiest Hollywood-meets-AI mashup is Terence Broad’s “Blade Runner—Autoencoded” (2016). An artist and computer scientist, Mr. Broad built an artificial neural network and showed it the 1982 sci-fi classic “Blade Runner.”

The result, said Ms. Iles, isn’t a copy of the film but an AI memory of it. Although the video reproduces the film frame by frame, the image is blurred, as if seen through wet glass.

“It’s like watching someone dreaming,” she said.

Which could be said—in multiple variations across time and technology—of the show itself.