

**FROM MÉLIÈS TO NEW MEDIA:
SPECTRAL PROJECTIONS**

by Wendy Haslem. Intellect Press,
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From Méliès to New Media: Spectral Projections is an exploration of the presence and importance of film history in contemporary digital culture. Using a media archaeology approach, the author aims to demonstrate that innovative new media forms are not only indebted to but firmly embedded within the traditions and conventions of early film culture. Throughout the book Haslem presents an array of projects that deftly move through topics like indexicality, semiotics, memory and digital restoration to light, materiality/immateriality, creative experimentation, time and obsolescence. While the overall goal is to introduce a new language of cinema and an alternative approach to historiography, the net result is a

good start but falls short. The study is strongest and most original when presenting contemporary projects and examples of spectacle. Haslem tells us,

Many of the films that I explore in this book favour spectacle over realism, some prioritize non-linear, experimental narration over linear, classical narrative form. Many of the older (and some of the newer) films exhibit surfaces etched with markers of time, and as such, they provide a rich surface aesthetic to encounter and explore. My approach to writing on film has always been to try to explore the surface of the film itself. That means prioritizing the aesthetic, looking for moments where details of the spectacle reveal history. My tendency is to zoom into surface details, focusing on the traces of celluloid that remain present within a digital ecology. Material detail, surface, aesthetic and *mise-en-scène* drive my film analysis. This is also an approach that prioritizes the senses. [p. 28]

A key emphasis is “spectral projection,” as the subtitle indicates, though the term is capable of multifold interpretations. The idea is used to accentuate a tension between materiality/immateriality, a concept that comes up repeatedly throughout the book. In terms of presentation, “spectral projection” references the trope of situating ghostly (spectral) presences from the past in the present to move the narrative. Theoretically, it is associated with the French literary theorist, essayist, philosopher, critic and semiotician Roland Barthes, who used it to refer to abrasions on surfaces. What he means is that there is a double space, so to speak, because one is fascinated by the image and by what surrounds it as well. Haslem extends this concept filmatically to include the slight scratches on an old celluloid print or the intermittent (and extra-diegetic) cue marks within that material that are intended for the projectionist. In other words, digital copies of films today include marks

that obviously are not a part of the overall cinematic narrative; these references survive as a reminder of the materiality of celluloid film even after a film’s transfer to the immaterial digital format. Key here is that these “spectral” impressions of the celluloid remain as “reminders of the continuing presence of film history” in digital transfers (p. 17), serving as a reminder that many media products retain the layering of old and new forms.

The impact of the digital is a reinvigoration and extension of film history, visible through an analysis of the intersections of new and old materials, transforming the indice within what has been thought to be an immaterial context. Another way of reanimating the index is by producing spectral impressions of time. [pp. 17–18]

Haslem divides her research into three sections both to show “the endurance of the cinematic image as a living illusion” (p. 29) and to make the point that there is increasing complexity of what she characterizes as indexicality in a post-medium culture. The first section, “Early Cinema: Colour and Spectrality,” includes two chapters that investigate initial film experiments and their influence on digital technologies. The first, on applied color, centers around the restoration of Méliès’s *A Trip to the Moon* (1902). Here Haslem considers questions about originality in preservation and the ethics of digital transfer. A serpentine dance chapter follows, with Loïe Fuller’s (1862–1928) work serving as the author’s touchstone. Fuller was an American actress and dancer who pioneered both modern dance and theatrical lighting techniques. While not filmed herself, her form of swirling dance enhanced with color offered mesmerizing spectacles created out of fabric, motion, tinted color and light that had a multimedia type of resonance. Early filmmakers throughout the world quickly recognized that this kind of spectacle would entice audiences. Through juxtaposition with Lana Del Rey’s 2013 music video *Shades of Cool*,

we see that contemporary tools now create similar works that likewise stimulate our senses.

The second section, “Luminescence, Montage and Frame Ratios,” looks at the interrelationship of films of different eras, or how classical narrative intertwines older with newer films. The opening chapter, “Memory and Noir,” primarily critiques the *Blade Runner* films, *Memento* (2000), Wong Kar-wai’s *In the Mood for Love* (2000), *Drive* (2011) and Yang Fudong’s work, particularly *The Fifth Night* (2010). Light is a key component of the analyses, as are memory, contrast, design and aesthetics. The film choices were excellent, and I was glad the book enticed me to seek them out. Fritz Lang’s exceptional film *M* (1931) is also briefly noted here.

Cutting and editing come up next and are used to consider how experimentation in celluloid and digital projects align. In my view, it is the most disappointing chapter in the book despite being interesting on its own terms: Haslem’s decision to pair early cinema with later work undermined her goal to present a new historiography, because it was never clear to me what the study gained by leaving a void in the mid-twentieth century. This chapter jumps from 1929 films (e.g. *The Man with a Camera*, Vertov, 1929) and *Un Chien Andalou*, Buñuel and Dalí, 1929) to the 1960s (*Eyes without a Face* [*Les yeux sans visage*], Franju, 1960, and *Psycho*, Hitchcock, 1960), ending with Christian Marclay’s recent, magnificent work.

Clearly, the author missed an opportunity here. Since her stated intention is to prioritize nonlinear, experimental narration over linear, classical narrative form, this section and the study overall would have had more coherence if she had included some of the exciting avant-garde work and film projects that struggled for exposure outside of the studio systems in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. One option would have been to include the paragraph on Joseph Cornell’s movie *Rose Hobart* in this discussion rather than briefly remarking

on it later in the book. Produced in 1936, the reedited film, Haslem notes, was included in a 2006 exhibition, *Le Mouvement des Images*. Her point when she introduces it is that the film served as a “reminder of the influence of the influence and continual presence of early cinema in gallery exhibition” (p. 160). Putting aside that I do not consider 1936 as “early cinema,” I do think Haslem could have made a more powerful statement if she had used the Cornell work to create a historical bridge in the cutting and editing chapter. In her paragraph, she also tells us that the Cornell film was a part of a surrealist exhibition in 1931. (She doesn’t explain why she dates the film as a 1936 work when it was premiered in 1931.)

I also think this chapter would have benefitted by including the work of someone like Hans Richter (1888–1976) to further bridge the older and newer work. His complex, avant-garde film work spanned the Atlantic Ocean and would have offered the author a way to combine the experimental aspects of early cinema with later digital experimentation. Because Richter’s work is intertwined with art, it would have also buttressed her urge to align art projects with commercial film. By 1929, Richter had done pioneering abstract films such as *Rhythm 21* and *Rhythm 23* and worked on creative projects with both well-known artists and two of the filmmakers discussed at length in this chapter, Eisenstein and Vertov. (Richter’s extensive body of film work included collaborations with Charlie Chaplin, Alexander Dovzhenko, Marcel Duchamp, Viking Eggeling, Fernand Léger, Man Ray, Germaine Dulac and Walter Ruttmann.) My larger point is that, after leaving Europe, Richter had a tremendous influence on the avant-garde film community and on American art in particular through his directorship of The Institute of Film Techniques in New York in the 1940s and his close involvement with Peggy Guggenheim’s *Art of This Century* gallery.

Haslem’s discussions of Tacita Dean’s *Film* (2011) and Charles Boltanski’s *Chance* (2011) after the

cutting and editing chapter are worth the price of the book. It should be noted that Tacita Dean is generally described as a British visual artist who works primarily in film, so her work falls under a different rubric than that of a commercial auteur filmmaker such as Martin Scorsese. Similarly, although people describe Christian Boltanski as a French filmmaker, this characterization is not in terms of commercial movies. Rather, he, too, is characterized as an artist, known for his work in sculpture, photography, installation and painting.

The third section, “Cinema beyond the Frame,” attempts to bring it all together. Situating her argument in terms of “Expanded Cinema” once again underscored that Haslem’s history leaves a large lacuna in the mid-twentieth century. The term *expanded cinema* was coined in the mid-1960s by the U.S. filmmaker Stan Van Der Beek. Haslem presents it in a conventional sense to speak of a counter-history to the more established narratives that began to show up more in mainstream film culture in the 1960s. Indeed, when introduced, it was intended to denote that artists and filmmakers were starting to challenge the conventions of spectatorship, creating more participatory roles for the viewer. Yet, and to my point in mentioning Richter’s impact on film history, innovative filmmakers had never stopped experimenting.

I had hoped that the final chapter, “Ephemeral Screens: The *Muybridgizer*,” would bring the strands together. Instead, it underscored a difficulty this kind of project has in analyzing new technologies in relation to older ones. The *Muybridgizer* is an app developed by the Tate Gallery in 2010 to allow users to create their own content based on Eadweard Muybridge’s experiments with capturing time and movement on film. Because her presentation of the app didn’t translate well for me, I decided to play with it myself to better conceptualize her ideas. Unfortunately, I discovered the *Muybridgizer* app is no longer available. This outcome brought to mind artists I know who have projects they can no longer show

because they will not work on newer versions of either the software or the hardware. Perhaps these become another kind of spectral projection?

Overall, this is an effort to show that the digitalization of celluloid plays an integral role in the development of new networks, new audiences and the facilitation of innovative modes of exhibition for film. It also serves as a reminder that film studies is now an academic field, largely given its current form in the mid- to late-twentieth century by many who started out as cinephiles and turned their passions into a legitimate field of research. In some sense, Haslem's materialist history is an outgrowth of their project to delve into film critically. Indeed, her ideas about viewing practices draw on the work of film luminaries such as Thomas Elsaesser, Laura Mulvey, Laura Marks, Tom Gunning and André Gaudreault. *From Méliès to New Media* is thus firmly embedded within the academic traditions and conventions of film critiques of aesthetics and technologies. As a modernist historiography, the book was also influenced by Walter Benjamin, Michel Foucault and the Deleuzian approach.

In closing, Wendy Haslem demonstrates ways in which early cinema's viewing style is now in effect re-created in nontheatrical cinematic spaces and on our mobile screens. Her discussions about how we watch films today led me to think about the disjointed ways we read and what we mean by narration. Because she leaves out nonfictional films and experimental aspects, it is worth noting that the social documentary work of the 1930s and 1940s was innovative, creative and another aspect of film that was not discussed in this book. Initial documentary-type projects bring to mind early cinema actualities as well as nonnarrative works like the serpentine dance. Because many

documentaries were made outside of the studio systems, it is easy to fail to see them and how their spontaneity captured moods and feelings in ways studio staging did not. The entry of sound allowed these filmmakers to convey points of view more decisively than actualities had and, more importantly, to offer in-depth stories and portraits of events. These alternatives to studio productions received little play in theaters, and their innovative contributions are underemphasized in the story of academic film studies crafts. Nonetheless, even if not fully comparable to how we view films on a small digital screen, the lack of access to commercial venues frequently resulted in the type of nonlinear viewing we associate with digital products. Indeed, incomplete segments were used to raise money to continue projects. Also, like the serpentine dance tradition, these pioneers documented "live" events. More to the point in terms of historiography, social documentarians technically dispute tenets of how New Wave cinema changed film because these earlier commentators were documenting events using hand-held camera and shooting on location (despite the industry's movement into studio locations).

Finally, although *From Méliès to New Media* is a fine, well-researched book, I wish Haslem had provided more connective tissue between the experimental nature of early cinema and the film studies canon that began to find academic footing in the 1960s. She does do a superb job in capturing aspects of celluloid cinema, explaining how traces of celluloid remain within the digital ecology, and introducing related contemporary new media. *Leonardo* readers will no doubt enjoy the element of the book that looks at contemporary work, particularly the many rich details she interjects as she introduces the topic.

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