# Neither Black Nor White
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**Artificial Darkness: An Obscure History of Modern Art and Media, by *Noam M. Elcott*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2016, 306 pp., 147 b. & w. illus., £31.50 hbk**

Is it always the case that to know what is happening is to know what has already happened? To make a claim for contemporary art and media, Noam M. Elcott argues in his first book-length study that the figure of an 'abstract body playing in spaceless darkness' is the result of a complex tenebrism developed from the theatres, cinemas, studios and photographic darkrooms of the nineteenth century (228). Elcott is an associate professor of Art History and Archaeology at Columbia University and an editor of *Grey Room*, a journal that has done much to expand critical engagement with the political and formal ends of media, art, and architecture over the last two decades. With *Artificial Darkness: An Obscure History of Modern Art and Media*, this mode of inquiry has shifted. It now historicizes a rich seam of research, elaborating a counter-modern practice that emerged from within the established binary of black and white, without any reference to colour. If a dependable critical strategy of inversion pervades Elcott's thesis, this is because the stakes are high. Indeed, over the book's five chapters Elcott makes the case for artificial darkness as historically motivating nothing less than the 'world we know' today (228).

Elcott's study, which includes a short coda on contemporary art, initially attests to one fact. This is that the intensity of research into the artistic use of what theorists like Vilém Flusser, Horst Bredekamp and others have termed 'technical images' is producing new narratives for the history of art in the age of its industrialization.[1] By focusing on the enveloping darkness that both literally and figuratively surrounds technical novelty, artificial darkness is a concept as thoroughly imbued with the rapid and innovative scientific developments of the period as it is haunted by their subsequent acculturation. Examples can be drawn from almost anywhere, and Elcott's initial survey of both science and art means that we are well into the book before his central contention becomes clear. Claiming that, until now, 'histories of art and media have tended to focus on the autonomous luminous screen', Elcott instead addresses a particular, almost inverted arrangement of the augmented environments virtually sliced by proscenia. 'No less crucial', he states, 'were the spatial dislocations effected by dispositifs of artificial darkness' (49). The 'dispositif' is a concept Elcott has adapted from Michel Foucault. It is employed mainly for marking reorganizations of ordering principles effected by technological novelties, whether for the elaboration of bodies in physical movement or affectively. By playing with the potentialities presented by modernity's redoubled industrialization, in the camera as on the stage, new meanings are formed out of existing tropes for the representation of bodies in space. Articulating without reifying these 'dispositifs' is Elcott's concern for the rest of the book.

Elcott's study begins with the arrival of electricity. Thus the controlled darknesses exploited by the 'black arts' of early cinema appear as a 'dialectical inversion rather than continuity' of a science of absolute black or, alternatively, of total darkness in the theatre (75). The question of how this model alters our approach to the camera arts is Elcott's central concern in his monochromatic tour of a new generation of darkness, ranging from the mid-nineteenth century until the late 1920s. Distinguished by its relation to the production of an audience instructed to be 'no longer aware of their bodies' – as Jules Romains had realized as early as 1911 – this idea is challenged by Elcott's persistent pursuit of the book's central thesis and coupled with the resulting effect of 'spacelessness' (163). Not unlike Theo Van Doesburg's abolition of any distinction between spectator and performer in 'Film as Pure Form' (1929), Elcott's approach seeks to complicate the growing sense of dematerialization figured by the cinema. He does so with a vast and ambitious drawing together of often well-documented but disaggregated moments from the histories of modern art and media. By focusing on pre-cinematic, 'primitive' film and theatre performances employing 'Black Screens', Elcott attests to transfigurations that undoubtedly took place. At the same time he aims to wrest back the body from any false transcendence that attempted to leave it behind.[2] Finding neither illusion nor enlightenment in these ends, the goal is to suggest that a complete inversion, black to white or back again, can never truly take place. Rather, the playful occupation of the paradoxically 'spaceless' space opened by technology returns Elcott's argument to the well-trodden zone of aesthetic education as mediator of the half-light of these environments. Providing for an expanded notion of art

and media, the study is in fact placed firmly within the didactic tradition already set forth by Friedrich Schiller at the end of the eighteenth century.

If this programmatic intention does not immediately grate it is because a long list of historical figures anchors Elcott's wide-ranging investigations, from scientists to trick photographers and avant-garde theatre directors. It is the effects of these approaches to controlled darkness that distinguishes Elcott's foray into the work of Étienne Jules Marey, and also Richard Wagner's 'artificial deprivation of distraction' (59). Such practices are understood here as emerging out of an optical science in which the chemist Michel Eugène Chevreul could pronounce a thenceforth discredited notion of 'absolute black', which would nevertheless return in the emergence of aesthetic modernism. The book's two case studies, Georges Méliès and Oskar Schlemmer, prove that the medium articulating this indistinct zone is in fact the body of the artist in concert with its material supports.

Elcott then develops a counter-notion of the black screen. Despite the relatively common use of the term darkness in the context of cinema (to 'bridge the darkness', is how Mary Ann Doane posits cinema's role in normalizing cultural anxieties in the age of machines as animated by the heterosexual kiss) he encourages his readers to dwell on this spaceless, indeterminate threshold for it is here that the work done by the pioneers of the 'dispositif' is made explicit.[3] The doubling and matting of bodies and body-parts masked by a black ground, through multiple exposures superimposed in the frame, are then dispersed by the controlled lighting and the usual smoke and mirrors expected of *trucage*, but now find more purchase as constitutive means rather than as mere attractions (see *plate 1*).

In the significance of its reinvestment within industrial cultural life, Elcott's project is also committed to extending a familiar source in Walter Benjamin's reading of the cinema as 'creating figures of collective dream'.[4] It is here, through the redeployment and development of Benjamin's idea of 'technological innervation' and '*Spielraum*' (play-space) – recovered from the second version of Benjamin's 'Work of Art' essay (212–13) – that Elcott posits an important distinction from earlier studies like Doane's *Emergence of Cinematic Time*. Where for her purposes 'the cinematic representation and celebration of mobility are founded on a basic stillness or immobility subtended by darkness', Elcott poses darkness as ultimately founded

in an atemporal 'dispositif'.[5]

'But where danger is, grows / the saving power also.' Martin Heidegger used Friedrich Hölderlin's hymn as a prophetic judgement for modern technology. For Elcott this suggests a redemptive power provided by the network of subjectivizing relations, and it is telling in his palpable enthusiasm for even the most mundane examples discussed in *Artificial Darkness*.[6] In its attempt to revise the established field for writing on photography as not only a physical, light-oriented practice, the book is perhaps the germination of a seed sown in Molly Nesbit's *Atget's Seven Albums*, where she sets the scene with the photographer's image of the public observing the solar eclipse in 1912.

Elcott's study fits within the recent turn to critical histories examining the formal heuristic value of terms already developed by the discursive milieu of previous historical studies. In this way the book's strategy

**1 Davies & Co., albumen carte-de-visite of Dr Lynn [Washington Simmons], c. 1860. Melbourne: State Library of Victoria.**

**2 T. Lux Feininger, *Manda von Kreibig, Werner Siedhoff, and Albert Mentzel in Oskar Schlemmer's Schwarz-Weiß-Trio [Black-White-Trio]*, 1928. Berlin: Bauhaus-Archiv. © Estate of T. Lux Feininger.**

is not dissimilar to Devin Fore's publication from 2012, *Realism after Modernism*, where the human body is paradoxically adopted as the 'device', or apparatus, for 'interrogating the work at the level of artistic form'.[7] In fact Fore's writing on the equivocal strategies developed by figures such as László Maholy-Nagy, with reference to Damisch's identification of perspective as one such 'dispositif' reorganized by media in art, prepares the revisionist ground Elcott tracks in *Artificial Darkness*. Where Fore attempted to problematize the reductive binary cemented by the 'return to order' narrative, Elcott envisions an ephemeral network of techniques motivating the very conditions for, the responses to, and engagement with, modern media by thoroughly modern artists. Maholy-Nagy's colleague Oskar Schlemmer is referenced by Fore in passing. In his dances within the darkling apparatus the Bauhaus theatre artist now features as the crux of Elcott's study: a play with the 'dispositif' of artificial darkness where he concludes that it is 'here, in and before the black screen, that the pervasive interpenetration of reality with the apparatus as such could be exhibited and acted upon' (215) (see *plate* 2).

If the shadow is for art history the origin of a tradition for representation, Elcott's study marks the attempt to figure darkness as the ground upon which the study of media may take place, whereby the analysis of highly technical ensembles is directed towards the work of art. The success of *Artificial Darkness* rests on how it outlines the ideological (dis)contents of modernity, set against the apparently unquestionable importance of the black square as the apotheosis of modernism by writers such as Boris Groys (and even T. J. Clark).

However, in its tentative reliance upon inversion as its principal strategy, *Artificial Darkness* ultimately does not allow for the 'spaceless' body it proposes to be fully realized, and the argument stops short of establishing just what the consequences of its fascinating speculations might be. The implications of these artists' endeavours are rarely judged for their political or social import. Given the thought and the constellations of works that this book produces along the way, it should certainly be read for its descriptions of such a large assembly of marginalized historical agents for artificial darkness – Segundo de Chomón, Dr Lynn, and Henry Pepper, and others. Elcott's work is of importance to anyone concerned for the future of art and media as a project which lies in developing an archaeology of the present out of the artifice of the past.

**Notes**

1 See, for example, the argument for extending iconology to the study of scientific images, in 'A history of styles of technical imagery: Between description and interpretation, a conversation with Horst Bredekamp', in Horst Bredekamp, Vera Dünkel, and Birgit Schneider, eds, *The Technical Image: A History of Styles in Scientific Imagery*, Chicago, Il, 2015, 18–31. The classic introduction of the term is Vilém Flusser's, *Into the Universe of Technical Images* (1985), trans. Nancy Ann Roth, Minneapolis, MN, 2011.

2 Returning to ground well covered by theorists Tom Gunning and André Gaudreault and their debates with figures such as Noël Burch, Elcott seeks to revive a particularly fierce engagement with the arrival of film. See Tom Gunning, '"Primitive" cinema: A frame-up? Or the trick's on us', *Cinema Journal*, 28: 2, 1989, 3–12.

3 Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive*, Cambridge, MA, 2002, 205.

4 Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, cited in Noam M. Elcott, 'In search of lost space: Stan Douglas's archaeology of cinematic darkness', *October*, 139, Winter 2012, 179.

5 Doane, *Emergence of Cinematic Time*, 205.

6 Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt, New York, 1977, 28.

7 Devin Fore, *Realism after Modernism: The Rehumanization of Art and Literature*, Cambridge, MA, 2012, 11.