

At the Hirshhorn, 'Dreams' Melds Cinema and Psyche To Hypnotic Effect

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"Dreams," the stunning show that opened yesterday at the Hirshhorn Museum, is like nothing you've ever seen in a museum. Its 21 works of moving-picture art -- part of an ambitious Hirshhorn project called "The Cinema Effect: Illusion, Reality, and the Moving Image" -- are strung along a dark labyrinth of rooms. The installation perfectly captures that magic moment of potential when the lights go down in movieland and anything can happen.

Sometimes you witness a nightmare. In a piece called "Release," German artist Christophe Girardet takes a few seconds of casual terror from the original 1933 "King Kong" -- from the moment when a bound Fay Wray first spots the ape -- and drags them out ad infinitum. Like a DJ scratching endless variations from a single passage in a classic track, Girardet takes these bare instants from the classic film and makes them jitter and shudder in the darkened gallery.

The famous scream is drawn out into an endless, ear-piercing gurgle. A few frames from the original scene in which Wray's pelvis pushes forward are repeated and transformed into a drawn-out moment of raw sex, as her pelvis thrusts and thrusts and thrusts. At one point in Girardet's 9 1/2 -minute loop, Wray's whole body is made to twitch like a puppet on a string; at another, it's given a quick tremble, like a poisoned animal in its death throes. One way or another, all this sex and death and torture is there in the original footage, but the mainstream narrative devices in "King Kong" carry us along, through the horror and beyond it.

"Release" brings that latent dread to the surface and makes its power clear, the way a dream can take what ought to be a trivial frustration and reveal its true psychic weight -- serving up a boss whose ears have disappeared.

The exhibition also includes long-drawn-out moments of peaceable beauty, such as we're more likely to encounter in dreams than in waking life. (I remember having a dream when I was 7 that was so unutterably, everlastingly gorgeous that I faked my way to staying home from school, in the hopes of falling back to sleep and into that same dream.) Andy Warhol's "Sleep," a 5 1/2 -hour movie he made in 1963, is the oldest work in this show. Its almost-static footage simply shows the naked body of his paramour, the poet John Giorno, caught in moments of delicious sleep. (Only two hours' worth of "Sleep," transferred to video, is included in the exhibition's galleries. The whole film will be screened in the Hirshhorn auditorium on April 6 at noon.)

A normal movie, like normal waking life, is not allowed to dwell and dwell and dwell on the beauty found in it. It can only deal with beauty in the barest snippets before moving on to something else. Warhol's moving-picture art has the permission to wallow in its subject's beauty, and extends that permission to its viewers.

But it's not only the beauty that matters in this Warhol; it's also the sheer wallowing. It's saying that movies don't have to lead you forward in a cliched narrative arc. "Sleep" insists that there are other things that films can do as well -- that their rules are made to be broken, and that only by breaking them can you understand

the way that you've been governed by them all along.

Dreams are where the normal rules of reality break down and anything becomes possible. The kind of moving-picture artworks featured in this show are the dreams of movieland. They're where the rules and cliches of standard filmmaking get picked apart, and even fail.

Several pieces in the show invite us to observe as movie worlds are born. "Rheinmetall/Victoria 8," a strangely compelling installation by Vancouver artist Rodney Graham, plunks a huge 1950s film projector -- a 35mm "Victoria 8" -- down beside us in the gallery. We then watch as it unspools a somewhat sentimental portrait of a shiny Rheinmetall typewriter from the 1930s: The camera runs caressingly across the shiny deco body of the machine, then fake snow begins to fall until the typewriter's almost covered in it. An obsolescent piece of technology presents a still-life image of an even more obsolete device -- and still we're touched. Such is the inescapable power of film, which can't be defeated even when we're in on its manipulations.

In a captivating projection by Anthony McCall, there's not even a subject to the film that's shown: It's just a few straight or wavy lines that waltz across the screen. By filling his dark gallery with fog, however, McCall lets us recognize and play inside the cone of light that generates his abstract image. We become the ghost in the machine of cinema, and take pleasure haunting it.

Warhol's "Sleep" is the first film in the show, and its title and subject make it a kind of talisman for the entire exhibition. But the fact that it's about sleep is almost beside the point. The same artist's "Empire" -- one eight-hour shot of the Empire State Building -- would have done the job as well. What matters most is the act of dishing up an alternate reality to the ones that Hollywood presents. When it works best, this exhibition takes the "Dream" in its title as a metaphor. It stands for a place, any place, beyond the normal. Which means that it's also a metaphor for what art, in general, can do to shake things up. Art is to our culture's standard imagery -- including the imagery of film -- what a dream is to waking life.

In fact, the more a work in "Dreams" is explicitly about dreaming, the less potent it is. When a piece is made to look the way we imagine a dream looking, it rarely offers the escape a true dream does. A psychedelic cartoon such as "City Glow" by Chiho Aoshima, full of trees bearing severed heads and skyscrapers that crawl across the screen like caterpillars, ends up looking more like a dream sequence from a Hollywood movie than like what really goes on inside your mind at night. Which also makes it feel more like a mainstream commodity than like truly probing art.

The very best art in this show isn't about dreams, per se. It's not even about the mechanics of movies. It's about the world beyond the silver screen and how the movies touch it. The show's organizers -- Hirshhorn curators Kerry Brougher and Kelly Gordon -- use the term "cinema effect" to point to how movies have managed to encroach on our reality. Even in the most normal lives, they say, there has come to be a blurring of the boundaries between fact and cinematic fiction. Movies may even help to build our notion of what the world is like. New main streets in America are built to look like Main Street in "The Music Man."

Every culture's norms and codes have to be stored *somewhere*. Medieval knights found out about themselves by reading chivalric romances. The huge castle of Tintagel, in Cornwall, may have been built mainly as an Arthurian fantasy; it barely had a military function, and its name came out of fiction that preceded it. Today, we've got movies to keep us posted on who we are and what we are supposed to do. Which means that when the works in "Dreams" probe what cinema is all about, they're also poking at the realities it builds.

The 12 monitors in a work by the Czech-born Berliner Harun Farocki show decade-by-decade footage of 20th-century workers leaving their factories -- and dare us to figure out which screen's clip was lifted from

a documentary and which from a feature film.

Another highlight of the Hirshhorn show is a nine-minute black-and-white "wrestling movie" called "Bear," by Steve McQueen. (No, not *that* Steve McQueen. This one's a British artist born in 1969. See how movies can affect our reading even of a name?) In "Bear," two naked black men square off for a fight, but the imagery is full of doubts and ambiguities that normal moviemaking would rule out. In McQueen's fight club, we're not sure what's affection and what's aggression, what's standard machismo and what's the homophilia such machismo hates.

The scene is shot from all the normal, polite camera angles, but there are also shots that show the fighters from below, with their genitals flopping as in a two-beast tussle from a nature film. Which, of course, zooms in on the racial issues also treated in the piece. For decades, Hollywood presented blacks as more nearly animal than whites. (Some would say that tradition continues, with more blacks still playing violent, "primeval" hoods than steady, "civilized" heroes.) This piece by McQueen -- who happens to be black -- unsettles some of those established images.

Other pieces also look at how the world gets built in moving pictures. A very recent piece called "Up and Away," by Michael Bell-Smith, clips the landscape backgrounds out of the very earliest video games, and presents them in an endless scroll of hypersaturated scenery and cityscapes. It's the sublime panorama from J.M.W. Turner, updated and brought home to every child's game console. Nineteenth-century romantics traveled far in search of landscapes that could match the ones their art fed them. Where can we go to find ours?

We can't simply run to our TV screens and cinemas, this show seems to say. The final projection in the exhibition, "Niagara" by German-born New Yorker Wolfgang Staehle, is the only one that seems straightforwardly realistic. It's simply a wall-filling projection of the great cascade, falling in what seems to be real time. But after being roughed up by this show's other moving images, our sense of what is real or not is shaky. For all of its reality effect, is Staehle's image truly any less a manufactured thing than Fay Wray's scream? Its live-looking footage has, after all, been carefully framed and shot and packaged for projection in a Hirshhorn gallery.

Can we trust it to be real? Or is it like one of those moments in a dream that seem as unremarkable as normal life -- until your boss begins to sprout a tusk?

Dreams, Part 1 of "The Cinema Effect: Illusion, Reality, and the Moving Image," runs through May 11 at the Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Museum, on the south side of the Mall at Seventh Street SW. Call 202-633-1000 or visit <http://www.hirshhorn.si.edu>. Part 2, titled "Realisms," runs from June 20 to Sept. 7.

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