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Artificial Darkness: An Obscure History Of Modern Art And Media



Synopsis

Darkness has a history and a uniquely modern form. Distinct from night, shadows, and artificial light, “artificial darkness” has been overlooked until now. In fact, controlled darkness was essential to the rise of photography and cinema, science and spectacle, and a century of advanced art and film. *Artificial Darkness* is the first book to historicize and theorize this phenomenon and map its applications across a range of media and art forms. In exploring how artificial darkness shaped modern art, film, and media, Noam M. Elcott addresses seminal and obscure works alongside their sites of production—such as photography darkrooms, film studios, and laboratories—and their sites of reception, including theaters, cinemas, and exhibitions. He argues that artists, scientists, and entertainers like Étienne-Jules Marey, Richard Wagner, Georges Méliès, and Oskar Schlemmer revolutionized not only images but also everything surrounding them: the screen, the darkness, and the experience of bodies and space. At the heart of the book is “the black screen,” a technology of darkness that spawned today’s blue and green screens and has undergirded numerous advanced art and film practices to this day. Turning familiar art and film narratives on their heads, *Artificial Darkness* is a revolutionary treatment of an elusive, yet fundamental, aspect of art and media history.

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Customer Reviews

“Groundbreaking and revisionist. . . *Artificial Darkness* will be essential reading. . . Elcott’s study should speak to those who consider photography or film’s

shadows and dark spaces in whatever period; to those who consider how bodies occupy, and are perceived to occupy, space; and indeed, to all scholars of the interplay between the visible and the invisible in visual culture.

— (Critical Inquiry)

— “Elcott’s mining of what Roland Barthes declared the cinematic condition — the urge to disappear into an anonymous, indifferent cube of darkness — proves enlightening.

— (Film Comment)

“Elcott’s account of artificial darkness takes the reader on an intriguing tour into the dark corners of early modernism, even if some of these recesses seem a little impenetrable. The book asks the existential, and perhaps nostalgic, question: ‘How does one best live in a world of images?’” (Times Literary Supplement)

“In Artificial Darkness Elcott delivers further inspiration to those experimentalists interested in early cinema as he adds new marvels to the canon beyond the magic lantern performances of the Phantasmagoria and the shadow plays performed at Le Chat Noir. To this reader’s delight, the author also reveals the curious fact that occasionally shadows were even antithetical to certain early filmmaking techniques.” (Millennium Film Journal)

— “Brilliantly researched and stunningly argued. . . . The book . . . cut[s] across . . . diverse creative fields with the same elegance and erudition with which it takes on a whole range of academic disciplines.

— (Another)

“Provides a genuinely new perspective.” (Art Newspaper)

— “A pioneering look at the phenomenon of artificial darkness as a controlled condition and at its applications in art and film.

— (Pro Photo Daily)

“Delving deep into the modern artifice of manufactured darkness, Elcott mines the mechanisms of constructed blackness and technologies of the invisible that developed in the late-19th and early-20th centuries into new means of expression and ambience in the visual and performing arts. . . . Highly Recommended.” (Choice)

— “[This] thorough text is beautifully illustrated with the ghosts conjured with magic lanterns in Étienne-Gaspard Robert’s 19th-century phantasmagoria, — Black Art — shows from the 1890s when skeletons hovered in inky space, held aloft by hidden performers, and — Georges Méliès’s early 20th-century films that conjured fantastic illusions through dark screens, such as — making heads of actors disappear.

— (Hyperallergic)

— “This century belongs to the light, — exclaims László Moholy-Nagy in 1927 a propos photography and cinema, echoing other avant-garde artists from Frederick Kiesler to the Lumières brothers. — Artificial Darkness shows that the inverse is also true, namely, that the age of light also belongs to darkness, and that, by delving into one, one finds oneself inexorably in the other.

— (Les Cahiers du Musée National d’Art Moderne)

— “Theoretically astute, historically rigorous, and visually precise, — Artificial Darkness sets a standard for film and media scholarship while also making

extremely significant and original contributions to fields such as art history, the history of science, and theater studies. Elcott's research is subtle and meticulous, and his ability to embed and web his vast and complex archival discoveries into a swiftly moving and lucid narrative is truly impressive. This is a model of interdisciplinary work. (Karen Beckman, University of Pennsylvania) "Elcott tells the story of what must remain invisible so that the optical and acoustic arts of modernity can exist. Artificial Darkness provides us with thrilling insights about the dark side of media history, demonstrating that images and sounds in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were not related to formlessness as nothingness, but rather to darkness as technical form. From the moment you begin reading, you know that this is the book we have always needed. An astonishing expedition by an author whose scholarship and perspicacity offer unequalled opportunities, Artificial Darkness reveals the common background of modern art and media history. (Bernhard Siegert, Bauhaus-Universität Weimar) "Cinema consists of focused projected light, but Elcott shows that it craves the darkness. His investigation of the darkened theater, the role of darkness in creating optical magical illusion, and the modernist discovery of the anti-representational power of darkness show how cinema's passion for darkness became a major figure of twentieth-century culture. (Tom Gunning, University of Chicago) "Breaking down the barriers between disciplines and mediums, Artificial Darkness constructs and questions an object that had never really been detected before: modern controlled darkness. Spanning photography, cinema, theater, and entertainment, this is a deep read and highly enlightening transdisciplinary journey into early modernist artistic practices. (Quentin Bajac, Museum of Modern Art)

Noam M. Elcott is associate professor of art history and archaeology at Columbia University and an editor of the journal Grey Room.

One of the best books on art history that embraces methods from media theory.

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