

(V)
FX

LORETTA FAHRENHOLZ, MASHES OF THE AFTERNOON, 2018
ANDREW NORMAN WILSON, KODAK, 2019
LUCY RAVEN, RP31, 2012
PAUL SPENGMANN, UNTITLED, 2015
VIKTORIA SCHMID, W O W (KODAK), 2018
NADIM VARDAG, OPENING SHOT (SCHINDLER HOUSE), 2016
DARA BIRNBAUM, TECHNOLOGY/TRANSFORMATION: WONDER WOMAN, 1978-79
PAUL SPENGMANN, SPIN JUMP CRAWL CLIMB DREAM BITE HUNT, 2024, LASERSHOW
NADIM VARDAG, ZOETROP (1), 2009

(6)

TWENTYSIX

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EPIPHANY: A FLICKER
BY JULIAN ERNST

Takata is one of the most famous attractions at Vienna's Wurstel Prater. The entire cabin begins to rotate and I am tossed around a central point. Unease rising within me. Pressed against the wall, a sensation of losing control moves through my body.

The spinning leaves me with a distinct mixture of dizziness and nausea. Still wobbly, I stumble down the steps of the ride. Surrounded by people seeking entertainment and the next adrenaline rush, I stand there for a moment, disoriented. I let the motion settle in my body and reconnect with the reality around me.

I think of the cinema.

This transition from a physically overwhelming experience back to the seemingly stable present evokes a familiar feeling in me. It is the instant when you emerge from a film and your perception of the world shifts for a moment. It is a state described by Roland Barthes in *Leaving the Movie Theatre*: "...the moviegoer newly emerged from the dark, a little dazed, warped up himself, in his body gone, soft, limp: In other words, obviously, he is coming out of hypnosis."¹

There is something unsettling about this step we take as we walk out of the cinema into the outside world — fragments of images still floating through our minds, while outside freezing rain hits our faces. Reality catches up with you, they say. Yet occasionally the question arises: what, then, is reality?

Just as the passengers' bodies are whirled around inside the rotating drum, the zoetrope — one of the first machines to create the illusion of motion — also sets its images spinning. Arranging them into a new sequence.

In its rotating cylinder, the separate images flickered past the viewers' eyes, fragmented by the narrow slits of the drum. The photographs, originally intended to capture a moment and give the past a lasting form, were stripped of their function. They broke free from the rigidity of memory and came to serve a new force of attraction: that of the emerging cinema.

In the rotating movement of the apparatus, their connection to reality loosened. The images actually moved, thereby creating the illusion of motion that existed only in the eyes of the viewer.

In its spatial staging, the mumok cinema embodies the tension between the ephemeral and the permanent. The seating platform, constructed from scaffolding poles, appears like a temporary guest within the museum, one that could be dismantled at any moment and reassembled elsewhere. As if the nomadic nature of early cinema had not yet fully settled here. In its form as a black box, it becomes a time capsule that eludes the linear passage of seconds and minutes.

While the film is running, time is stretched, condensed and repeated. The journey to the cinema opens up a space in which the world and perception are reordered. From its beginning, the medium has revolved around the collision between reality and illusion.

André Bazin viewed cinema as an idealistic phenomenon. Whilst he regarded the act of filmmaking itself as a profoundly irrational undertaking: an almost obsessional quest for a perfect, seamless representation of reality. Every single new technological development — sound film, colour film, stereoscopic or 3D films — contributed to bringing cinema closer to its imaginary essence. In Bazin's thinking, this goal would be achieved as soon as the medium itself became redundant. In other words, when cinema completely merged with the world and thereby ceased to exist. He described this failed attempt as the '*Myth of Total Cinema*'.²

When Bazin wrote this in 1946, he believed that this might happen by the year 2000. In fact, something else happened: the development of digital computer-generated images irritated the special relationship that existed between photography and the world. Digital images require neither the real world nor a camera.

Visual effects condense the question that has accompanied cinema from the very beginning: how much reality does an image need to be impactful? VFX makes visible what escapes the camera, with a persuasiveness that redefines the photographic image. Herein lies one of cinema's most fundamental impulses: to navigate between the world in front of the camera and the one it constructs. The more perfect this illusion becomes, the more invisible the mechanism that produces it, and the more the question of the effect shifts away from the relationship to the world, towards the experience of time itself within the image.

The reel is still turning, though it has vanished from view. Visual effects, too, transform individual frames into an illusion of continuity. The effect lies not solely in the image itself, but in the rhythm of its interruption, in what happens between the frames.

Perhaps it is precisely this flickering that we seek to preserve, less as objective time than as a condition. A longing to be able to sit in the flickering light, gazing in wonder with our mouths wide open, without being interrupted. In the certainty that the screen will unfold anew, the projector will cast its light, and the images will begin to move once more, as an invitation to surrender to the dreams once again.

The cinema is not merely a place of seeing, but itself an apparatus of seeing. It is the architectural conditions that produce the actual effect — less the images on the screen than the darkened room, the enforced stillness, the collective focusing of all gazes on the same point. The cinema isolates, surrounds and excludes everything that does not take place on the screen, thereby creating, for the duration of a film, a world that follows different rules from the one left behind outside its four walls. By surrendering ourselves to this space and accepting the same horizon for a time, the crucial question is no longer what we see, but how this space brings about the act of seeing itself.

- 1 Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), p. 348
- 2 André Bazin, "The Myth of Total Cinema," in *What is Cinema? vol. 1*, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), pp. 17–22.



(Fig.01)

Loretta Fahrenholz, *Mashes of the Afternoon*, 2018

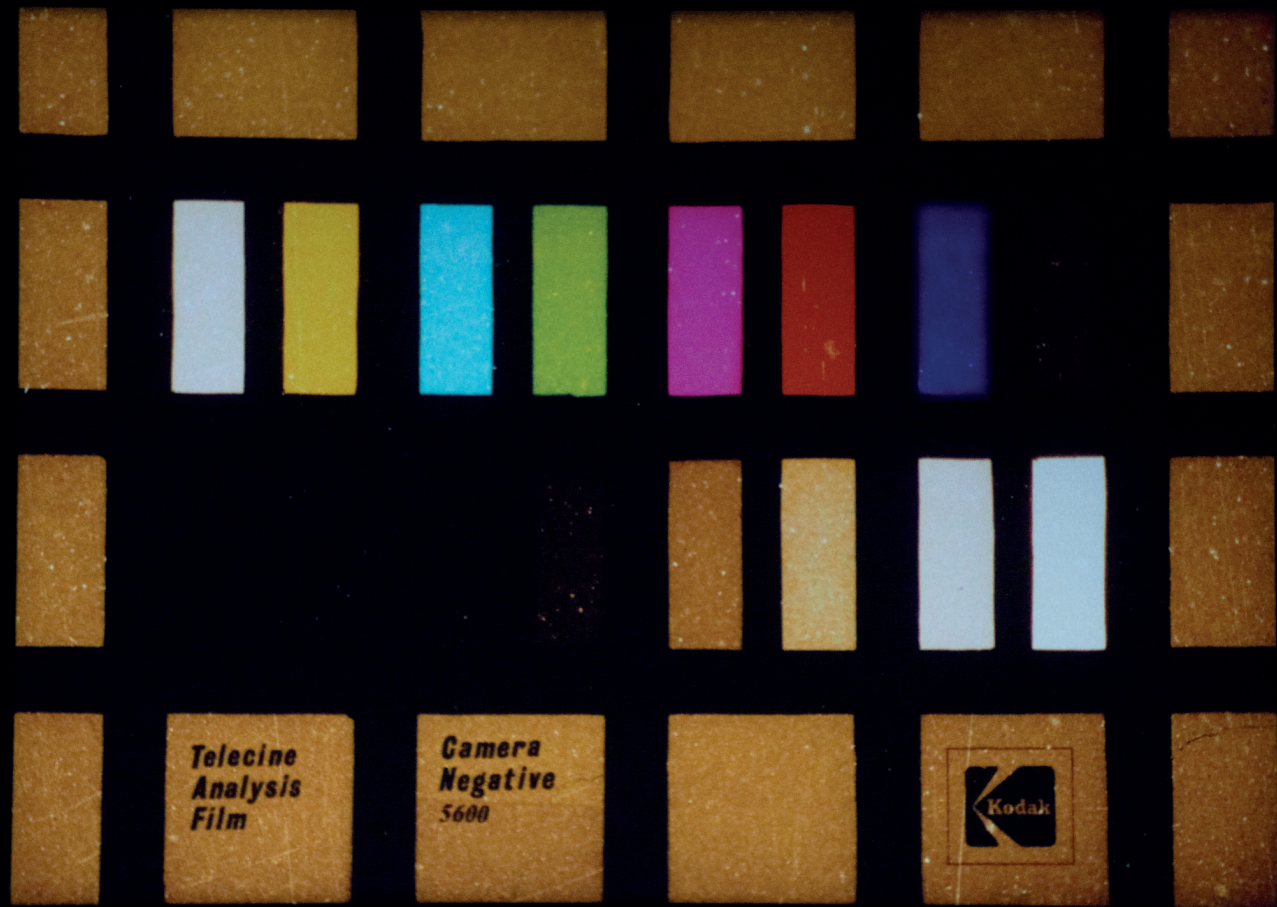
HD video, color, sound, 13:36 min



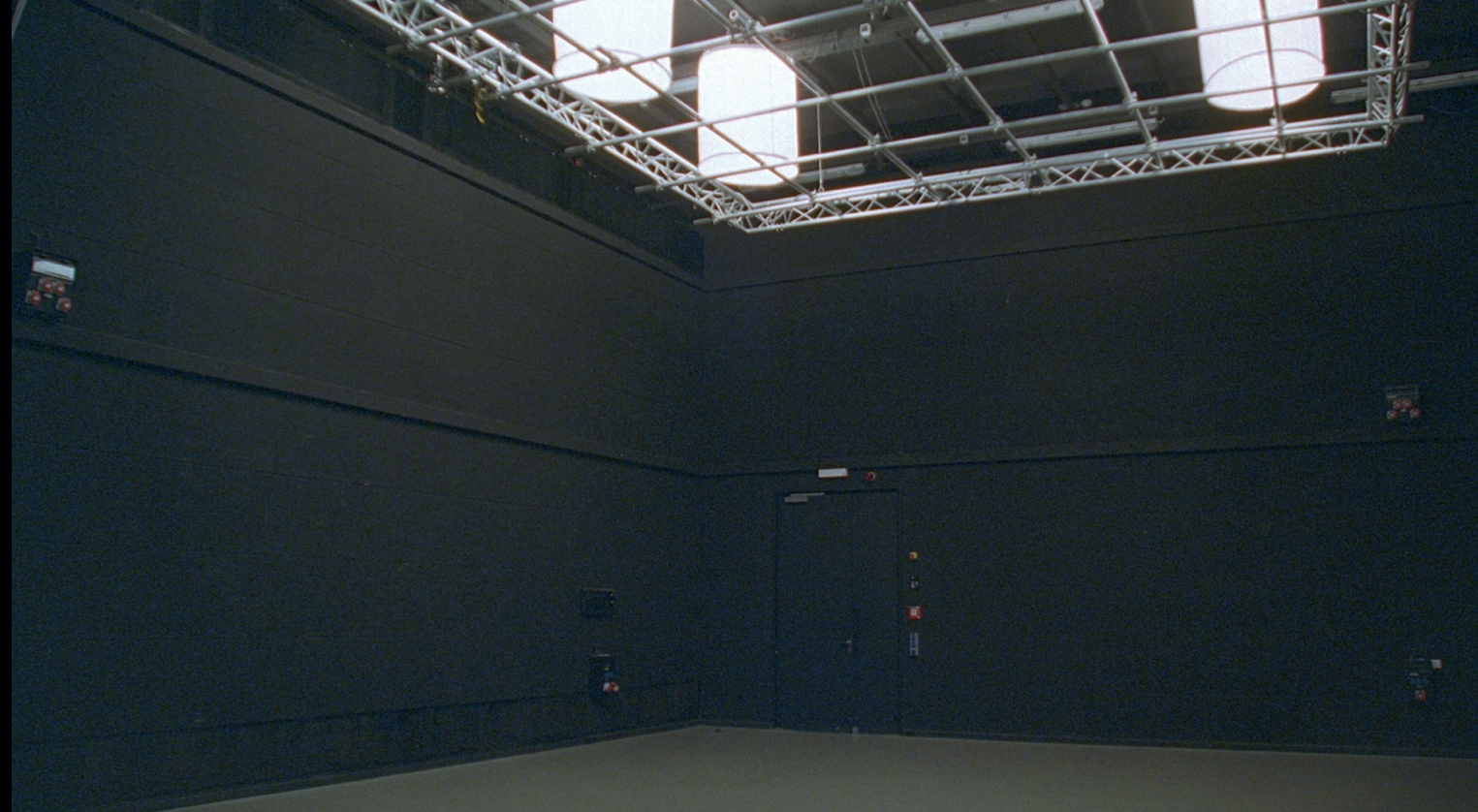
(Fig.02)

Andrew Norman Wilson, *Kodak*, 2019

HD Video, Colour, Stereo, 33 min



(Fig.03) Lucy Raven, *RP31*, 2012 35mm film, color, 4:48 min



(Fig.04) Paul Spengemann, *Untitled*, 2015 Video, 35mm, 2 Channel Sound, 4:30 min



(Fig.08) Paul Spengemann, *spin jump crawl climb dream bite hunt*, 2024 Lasershow, 20 min (Loop)



(Fig.05)

Viktoria Schmid, *W O W (Kodak)*, 2018

Video, 35mm, 2min



(Fig.06)

Nadim Vardag, *Opening Shot (Schindler House)*, 2016

Video, 3:20 Min.



(Fig.09)

Nadim Vardag, *Zoetrop (1)*, 2009

2 sec (Loop)



(Fig.07)

Dara Birnbaum, *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman*, 1978-79

Video, color, sound, 5:50 min

... if my first encounter with an illusion took place during swimming lessons as a child. I was given a so-called magic (swimming) ring, which at first was filled with a lot of air and, with increasing practice, with less and less. This belief, along with physics, made it possible to stay on the surface of the water. Much later, I saw in photographs that I had been swimming with an empty ring, firmly believing at the time that an external force kept me afloat. Since then, when I think of illusions, I see how inseparably they are linked to a certain goal that is achieved or almost scripted through them.

In the history of early cinema, a distinction is made between the realists, those concerned with documenting the world and with the representational qualities of film, and those who invoke the illusionistic power of film. The latter work with transformative processes and the manipulability of the cinematic image, that is, visual effects. This early, somewhat exaggerated division of cinema into the actuality films of the Lumière brothers versus the fantastic, narrative cinema of special effects, embodied by Georges Méliès, has often been cited. What is interesting is less the fact that this division was established at the very beginning of cinema, and more the fact that the medium of film seems inherently bound to an obsession with the question: what is our access to reality?

Meshes of the Afternoon (1943, 14 min) by Maya Deren and Alexander Hammid is a surreal black-and-white film in which an unnamed protagonist, played by Deren herself, experiences recurring dreamlike episodes that culminate in her suicide. *Mashes of the Afternoon* (2018, 14 min) by Loretta Fahrenholz is a shot-by-shot remake of the original. The clips that compose this work are sourced from YouTube videos by Fahrenholz featuring teenagers reenacting the iconic motifs: the flower, the bread knife, the telephone, the key, and the gesture of touching the window frame. The original film, known for its stop-motion and split-screen effects, serves as a template for the recreation taking place in various urban settings. The focus shifts from an individual psychological narrative to a more performative engagement: self-appointed protagonists adopt the surreal symbols as a shared pose.

Film cannot be neatly divided into realism and illusion, since all images are partly documentary, partly manipulative. There are also cinematic phenomena that, as by-products of optics or projection devices, influence perception more strongly than intended tricks or visual effects. Early silent films, for example, produced unexpectedly loud sounds due to the mechanics of the projectors, which in turn affected the social dynamics of

filmgoing. In the darkness of the cinema, people from different backgrounds could meet, hold conversations,

or conduct secret encounters. In this sense, a screening or the cinema experience itself is always more than just the presentation of planned projections.



(Fig.10) Installation view of Dara Birnbaum: *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* at SoHo H-Hair Salon de Coiffure, New York, 1980. (© Estate of Dara Birnbaum; courtesy Estate of Dara Birnbaum, Marian Goodman Gallery and Electronic Arts Intermix, New York).

One of the original installations of Dara Birnbaum's *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* (1978–79, 5:50 min) was shown at the SoHo H-Hair Salon de Coiffure in New York in 1980. Its storefront setting reflects the work's use of appropriated television footage. A detail that has received less attention, probably because of its more serious connotations, is that Birnbaum also transferred the video to 16mm to present it as a film during a festival at The Kitchen.¹ In *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman*, action scenes, rapid cuts, and explosive special effects depict the secretary Diana Prince transforming into her alter ego "Wonder Woman." Birnbaum removed all dialogue and instead only shows the dramatic transformation from routine organizational tasks to moments of spectacle. Everything in between, "is really the reality we need to live in" (Dara Birnbaum), is left out. The transformation becomes more and more exaggerated, until only the explosion continues to loop. The video concludes with a karaoke-style sing-along, displaying the lyrics in contrast to the highly sexualized Wonder Woman soundtrack.

The internal split within the phenomena of film may not only be part of the cinematic image, but also part of perception² itself, and therefore part of what moving images, or images in general, can evoke in us.

If all images are composite phenomena, then what is special about visual effects?

Visual effects are understood as a combination of different technologies. Special effects (physically constructed models or analog tricks), visual effects (manipulations

within filmed images or animations), and computer-generated imagery (CGI) are commonly distinguished. A VFX supervisor is responsible for determining how the effects described in the script can be realized. *Space Jam* (1996), in which Michael Jordan joins Bugs Bunny to play basketball against aliens, exemplifies the combination of different spaces and techniques, including models, animation, camera movement, and live-action.

There are absolutely no visual effects in Paul Spengemann's *UNTITLED* (2015, 5 min), where the film studio itself is the protagonist. Inspired by historical camera movements, he applies these techniques to an empty space, without actors, props, or narration. Only the conventions of the space, along with the movements and internal functions of the optical devices, come together. The sparse setup encourages the viewer's own cinematic experience.

Next to technical classifications of visual effects, there is a historiography of special effects that traces their origins to various inventions. From this view, the topic looks like an endless chain of entanglements between physics and technology, for example, how clockmaking connects to early special effects and illusion machines. Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin (1805–1871) came from a family of clockmakers. One of his early builds was the "Triple Mystery" Pendulum, a glass clock that hid all visible parts of its clockwork. What appears is almost a form of hypervisuality that is created by obscuring the visual traces of how it works.

In *Zoetrop (1)* (2009, 2-second loop), Nadim Vardag edits a historical photograph of the Zoetrope by Étienne-Jules Marey. This early device showed a bird in flight using ten plaster models inside a drum-shaped cylinder. When viewed through a narrow slit, the bird would appear to fly. The original photograph shows the Zoetrope from a slightly elevated angle, so all ten birds are visible. Vardag creates ten digital versions of the image, each showing one bird at a different stage of flight. When looped, they create the impression of a flying bird, without using the machine.

What makes visual effects special might come from their link to technology and history, and the tension between control and the strong wish to relinquish or literally explode.

Viktoria Schmid's *W O W (Kodak)* (2018, 2 min) compiles YouTube footage recorded on July 1, 2007, during the demolition of several Eastman Kodak Company buildings in Rochester. At the bottom of the frame, some viewers, including former Kodak employees, document the demolition with digital cameras. In the video, the demolition clips run backward, making the building complex reassemble itself from the dust cloud. "Wow," the spectators' exclamation, remains "Wow" even in reverse.

1 Piper Marshall: Dara Birnbaum, <https://www.e-flux.com/notes/673498/dara-birnbaum>
2 In *Technic and Magic: The Reconstruction of Reality* (2018), Federico Campagna defines reality as emerging between two poles: essence ("what something is") and existence ("that something is"). These opposing yet interrelated "limit-concepts" form the boundaries of reality, within which experience takes place. Reality thus arises between pure contemplation (essence) and total activity (existence). See "Intermission: What is Reality," pp. 103–105.

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Loretta Fahrenholz, from: *Mashes of the Afternoon*, 2018, © Loretta Fahrenholz, mumok – Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien

Lucy Raven, from: *RP31*, 2012, © Lucy Raven, mumok – Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien

Dara Birnbaum, from: *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman*, 1978-1979, © Estate of Dara Birnbaum. Courtesy the Estate of Dara Birnbaum and Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York.

Paul Spengemann, from: *spin jump crawl climb dream bite hunt*, 2024, and *Untitled*, 2015, Courtesy Paul Spengemann & Produzentengalerie Hamburg, © Paul Spengemann
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