THE MAGIC BEHIND THE PROJECTIONIST BOOTH

Andrew Bracey on stillness and flicker, light and shadow.

Cinema is often talked about as a place that suspends your disbelief; somewhere to suck us away from everyday life and for a few hours believe in something else. Maybe, though, cinema is most magical when it jolts us out from this suspension. As a child I can clearly remember a disrupted screening where the film became trapped, a single frame out of 25 momentarily appeared on the screen and quickly caught fire; the illusion of the movie was burst and a new wonder was created. I believe my love of cinema started then. Perhaps this is also why I am drawn to filmmakers and artists who reveal the normally hidden or suppressed within their work; when the cinematic machine is paused or breaks and new potentials can be glimpsed.

Hollis Frampton’s Nostalgia begins with an image that a voice-over reveals is the first photograph Frampton made ‘with the direct intention of making art’. About 30 seconds into the footage we become aware that the camera has not been recording just an image, but also an event. Smoke starts to appear around the edges of the photograph before catching alight on the hot plate it has been placed on. As we watch other photographs burn, we realise we are hearing the cue dots come from are visible and the downs and scratches of the filmstrip all have an authenticity and sense of history that digital can only fake. The work of artists such as Dean, Sengmüller and others like Gebhard Sengmüller reveal the world behind the roaring power of the projector and the magic potential of filmstrip in the hands of the projectionist. It would appear that it is in the hands of artists that the continued magic of celluloid and the projectionist’s machine rests.

Tacita Dean is increasingly using the potential inherent in early cinematic special effects such as glass matte painting, multiple exposures produced in-camera and masking to create richly layered film-collages in works such as Film and JG. All of these effects take place in the camera or painstakingly by hand back in the studio. Something wonderful and striking happens here, we sense the hand, but the magician’s hand of the artist, as opposed to the silicon chip. Nicholas Cullinan has written (in relation to Dean’s work) that, ‘film has its own distinctive texture and qualities, capturing light, colour, movement and depth in ways that digital cannot. Moreover, it is not only the future of the medium that is under threat, but also its past: when the flickering projected image is transferred to a pixelated screen something unique is lost.’

This flickering has been described as the ‘fire effect’, where there is a stimulation of the viewer’s retina by the light refracted through each frame into the eye creating an after image that the brain rationalises as being movement, as one frame moves into another. Digital has no need for the fire effect and thus suppresses the optical stimulation in the eye. It is one of the main reasons I believe that old films just don’t look the same anymore. The flicker of the projector, the dust and scratches of the filmstrip all have an authenticity and sense of history that digital can only fake. The work of artists such as Dean, Sengmüller and others like Rosa Barba and Emily Wardill reveal...