

THE LONG AND THE SHORT OF IT: CENTURIES OF PROJECTING SHADOWS, FROM NATURAL MAGIC TO THE AVANT-GARDE

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AN OPTICAL EXHIBITION: ILLUSIONS, SPECTERS, AND DEMYSTIFICATION

First, imagine darkness.¹ Although it does not come first, its effect remains primary and overwhelming. That projections mostly take place in a dark environment, or at least in shadow, radically distinguishes it from most Western traditions of theater. Until the end of the nineteenth century, both the stage and the auditorium were brightly lit, since the audience formed as much a part of the spectacle as the performance itself (the plebeian “Gods” in the balcony giving signs of approval or contempt; the aristocrats in their boxes wanting to be seen as much as they wanted to see). Only at the end of the century did the darkened theater appear, first in Wagner’s Bayreuth (with audience sinking into a dream-like obscurity), then in Antoine’s Theatre Libre (a dark auditorium increasing the naturalism of the “fourth wall”), and later in the cinema. In all of these cases, having the audience sit in blackness caused something of a scandal.

Imagine, then, this unaccustomed gloom, its velvety eclipse of space, its obscuring of orientation. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty said of night, “it is pure depth without foreground or background, without surface and without any distance separating it from me. All space for the reflecting mind is sustained by thinking which relates its parts to each other, but in this case, the thinking starts from nowhere.”² What happens in the dark? How does light structure and create its own world? Projection indicates a throwing forward, in this case of light, but also of shadow, with a collision occurring between light, shadow, and a surface or screen. There is a space in front of a screen that seems to be canceled out by darkness, the “throw” of the beam of projection. If darkness cancels out this space, the screen or projection surface opens up another space, a space of illusion perhaps, or representation, or simply of the play of light. As Maya Deren described the walls of her apartment when she first projected her film *Meshes of the Afternoon*: