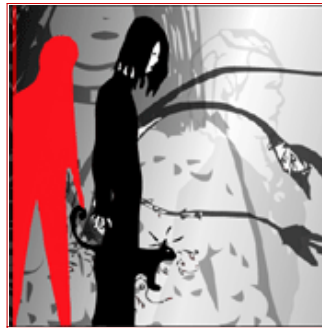


webwork 4

SHADOWS OF COMPUTERS,
by Julien DEMEUZOIS and Karen LE NINAN (France), 2003

Shadows of Computers

evokes a time caught between the heights of contemporary technology, the vast potential for its future realizations, and the origins of this future in the time when electricity first began to flow through the veins of human consciousness. My use of a corporeal analogy when discussing the evolution of technology is very deliberate here, for there is a long history of trying to come to terms with our electrical machines by drawing relationships between them and what we observe in ourselves¹. Indeed, the birth of cinema itself evokes a time when anxieties concerning the replication of human likenesses went hand in hand with the notion that these replication devices involved a mimicry suggesting artificial intelligence, as well as offering a gateway to the paranormal through their unnatural removal of human functions from the confines of the body². We have learnt much about our own conditions through the study of the tools we create, just as these tools are necessarily created out of an awareness of our own physical limitations. The space between our human bodies and the technological extensions we create is one inhabited by many ghosts, the shadows of ourselves cast by our machines, the differences between the organic and the machinic blurred in the amorphous meeting ground between the two. We are still very far from becoming completely enmeshed with our technologies and so we exist ever on the threshold of two worlds, constantly negotiating our relationships between them. We are the shadows of our computers, and Demeuzois and Le Ninan's 8 episode Flash animation serial explores the negotiation between the worlds of the human and the machine with interesting results.



The series is loosely structured around a narrative concerning an MIT professor's research into artificial intelligence robotics and her suspected involvement in the disappearance of a valuable privately-owned statuette. Yet this intrigue serves more as a backdrop for an exploration of the very notion of cinema itself, its relationship to media both old and new, and the relationship of these media to humanity. Above all, the notion of cinema is posited in the context of humankind's ongoing quest for an understanding of self through the creation of extensions of that self, epitomized by the authors placing questions concerning artificial intelligence in an environment where magic lantern shows are still common, an environment caught between progress and regression.

Of crucial importance in the serial is the way the the authors

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establishe a netherworld between past and present. The structure of the serial alternates between episodes set in the "real" world and those depicting a beautifully rendered "other" world where people travel along flowing streams amidst forests of strangely familiar organic shapes reaching out as though in a desire to push through the barrier of reality. There is a timeless quality to the images of this other world, an ancient feeling that still exists along-side us in modernity and beyond. These other world sequences also set up a visual theme involving swashes of bright orange, a colour associated throughout the real world sequences with mysterious shadow spirits emerging at key points of interaction between human and machine: first as an A.I. robot escapes from the lab, then as the robots are displayed at an art exhibition, and again as the very shadows of the magic lantern projection itself at the series' apex.

The role of the magic lantern projection in the series is also crucial. We are first informed about it through a newspaper ad read by the owner of the missing statuette off of a ceiling-mounted flat-screen monitor while bathing in an antique stand-alone tub. This ad presents the magic lantern projection as "interactive cinema". This co-mingling of things both ancient and futuristic occurs again at the projection itself when the commissioner confronts the MIT professor about her weak alibi for the time when the statuette was stolen. Again, this narrative serves as a backdrop for the more important visual treatment of this scene. The commissioner and the professor are shown standing in the midst of the orange shadows swirling around them suggesting the relationship of these projections to the very idea of the human soul. Interactivity becomes a mark of the relationship we have with our technology, a relationship that can exist in something as simple as the magic lantern, or as complex as the development of artificial intelligence.

The authors have tapped into the nebulous territory involved in defining cinema in the digital age, hovering somewhere between the purism of the so-called silent era and the progressive thinkers riding the digital train. But beyond these two poles there exist the ghosts of poles long past and as yet unfulfilled, delineated by pre-cinematic mediums such as the magic lantern, and on the other end by the promise of fully immersive virtual-reality machines epitomized by Star Trek's holodeck. The increasing prevalence of Flash animations as a medium of expression begs the question of whether or not they should be included under the auspices of cinema, or even as a new medium in and of themselves.

For some, the idea of interactivity is where a good line might be drawn between cinema and more immersive technologies. Cinema seems dependent upon the passivity of the necessary distance between the audience and the screen. However, as the magic lantern projection in *Shadows of Computers* suggests, even the oldest of all moving picture technologies can be understood as being inherently interactive, a function of the human qualities invested in the technology. Interactivity is the hallmark concept behind the internet, and it would seem that the potential for an internet-based cinema based on principles of interactive hypertext is what is alluded to by the authors here. Yet *Shadows of Computers* follows the norms of traditional cinema. It makes no use of the hypertextual environment of the internet beyond its capabilities of furnishing easy access. In the end, the series is itself caught between the worlds of the past and the future, a state befitting its subject matter.

Shadows of Computers, finally, is an exploration of relationships between the body and its external world, the netherworld

sequences ultimately being posited as the inner workings of the body trying to find their way into the outer world through the creation of technologies based on the human form. In episode 6, "Fluides," we see a woman with a cat floating by amidst various organic forms including another representation of herself in the distance, much as the signature form of the Mandelbrot set replicates itself throughout its infinite fractalizations. In the final episode, "Le Polype étrange," a zoom-out from the netherworld reveals its existence within a plant seated atop a desk next to a dancing shadow in a jar and beside which the professor stands. This dancing shadow turns out to be the missing statuette, and in this context it becomes the emblem of the shadow cast by contemporary technology, a modern expression of the ancient fear that technologies of human representation rob us of our vital essence. The professor, as creator of artificial intelligence, is the modern-day equivalent of a soul stealer, looking deep within human functioning to find the form of her robotic creations. Interestingly, just as the computer-based Mandelbrot set is treated as art by many who hang its images on their walls, so too are the professor's A.I. robots displayed for their aesthetic qualities. In the end, why not? They are patterned after the most represented of all forms within the realm of art: the human being. We see our shadows everywhere and admire them. And as we admire, we learn, and cast new shadows back out into the world to be studied and appreciated all over again. We must not hide in the shadows of our technology, but embrace their likeness with our own form in order to push ever further into the realm of our own self-consciousness.

Notes

1 : See Kittler, Friedrich A. *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz, trans. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999.

and

Sconce, Jefferey. *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2000. ↗

2 : Gunning, Tom. "Doing for the Eye What the Phonograph Does for the Ear" in *The Sounds of Early Cinema*, Richard Abel and Rick Altman, eds. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001, pp: 16-30. ↗

Randolph Jordan

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