

Shivers Down Your Spine: Cinema, Museums, and the Immersive View.* Alison Griffiths. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008. 392 pp.

Reviewed by Randolph Lewis

Shivers Down Your Spine: Cinema, Museums, and the Immersive View is an ambitious, well-researched expansion of the film studies canon into the terrain of museum studies. Taking as its starting point the “immersive,” often mobile experience of certain quasi-cinematic spaces, Alison Griffiths shoots for “a more fluid model of spectatorship” (p. 2) that takes into account the richer engagement of body and mind produced in a planetarium, IMAX theater, or interactive exhibit, where she maintains that “shivers” are more likely to occur than in traditional viewing spaces. In addition to these panoramas and IMAX theaters, her primary examples include the medieval cathedral, planetariums, and interactive exhibit spaces, all of which she traces through themes that include travel, vision, science, wonder, sobriety, and death (p. 5). These are lofty themes indeed, but as the late night television commercial says, *that’s not all*.

As becomes clear in an introduction brimming over with questions and caveats, *Shivers* is overflowing with ambition—almost to a fault. Griffiths is wrestling a hydra-headed monster that requires her to do battle with gigantism, sociality, the politics of public space, the organization of vision, collapsing distinctions between sacred and profane, simulation and transportation, cultural memory, and the “discursive origins of religious iconography” (p. 15), not to mention another list of subjects that she provides on the following page: “spectatorship, immersion, the reenactment, virtual travel, visual excess, mimesis, the uncanny and death” (p. 16). Given this wild welter of objectives, it is extraordinary that the book holds together so well, especially in the latter two thirds, where her originality and depth of research are most apparent.

The first chapter, “Immersive Viewing and the ‘Revered Gaze,’” is the least effective. Employing postmodern theory in a medieval context, it explores a possible predecessor to the intense viewing experience of IMAX, although the author concedes that we cannot deduce much about earlier ways of seeing from the available evidence. This is admirably honest, if a little frustrating, to readers hopping across her vast archipelago of topics ranging from Florentine painting to Mel Gibson’s billion-dollar passion play, none of which are given sustained attention (a disappointment because she has written brilliantly about Gibson’s *Passion of the Christ* elsewhere [Griffiths 2007]).¹ The result is an opening chapter that feels too distantly prefatory, if not a bit desultory, leaving the impression of an article on a related topic that does not quite fit the book.

Things pick up in the second chapter, which provides a more deliberate walk-through of 19th century panoramas in the United States and Europe (like all of the examples in the book). Here the author’s flair for vivid description supersedes the theoretical huffing and puffing that hazes over parts of the introduction and first chapter. Strong historical narratives, based on solid

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archival research, are also at the heart of the ensuing chapters on IMAX and planetariums, two subjects that have rarely received such thoughtful attention.

Beginning in chapter 5, Griffiths shifts focus from immersion to interactivity, suggesting that the ballyhooed newness of “new media” might be old hat to someone familiar with, for instance, 19th century science museums. Readers in the field of museum studies will find this chapter of great interest, as well as chapters 6 and 7, which deal with the Smithsonian Institution’s use of IMAX and interactive media in places such as the American Museum of Natural History, respectively. The book ends with a brief concluding essay that touches on some tantalizing areas of investigation (the psychology of the “revered gaze,” the relevance of “virtual reality,” etc.) that I wish had been explored earlier in the book. Of course, even an ambitious book can only do so much.

While I admire this book’s originality, I have some puzzlement about its structure. The author’s “eclectic, though indubitably linked, case studies” (p. 159) do not always cohere as well as they might have in a more linear narrative. Moreover, I found myself wondering about the “immersive” as a category of analysis. Are panoramas really more “immersive” than art installations, gardens, cities, avant-garde theater, drug-inspired hallucinations, books, or even conventional cinema? What is really distinct about the experiences that Griffiths describes? This remains a little unclear to me. Perhaps I would be certain if I heard more human voices in this volume. The question of spectatorship invites some engagement with the reception studies that have long occupied film scholars, especially those that rely on first-hand accounts from viewers. How else can we demonstrate that shivers are indeed running down collective spines in extraordinary ways? I would assume that such accounts would be relatively rare in 19th century archives, but contemporary visitors to IMAX theaters and planetariums could easily be surveyed or interviewed. In this regard, media ethnography, part of an emerging subfield of anthropology, would have added an important perspective that would have helped this reader, at least, really feel what the author is saying about this very visceral form of experience.

Despite some need for pruning back the dense thicket of theory that obscures her tale in a few places, *Shivers* is an exciting book that will resonate in museum studies, film studies, cultural studies, anthropology, and art history. Although more research is needed on the phenomenology of illusionism than what Griffiths provides here (it’s the unacknowledged elephant in the room throughout the book), she does much more than address the mental experience of immersive spaces. Indeed, her emphasis is equally somatic as she explores the embodiment of visual stimuli in ways that have often gone unnoticed.

With this volume, Griffiths has established herself as one of the most ambitious scholars now straddling the various fields that comprise visual studies. I would send kudos also to Columbia University Press for producing one of the most handsome books in recent years. Despite a creepy eye-covered face on a lurid cover that is far more unnerving than anything inside, *Shivers* is a pleasure to hold and peruse.

Note

1. I also recommend Griffiths' (1995) article, "Science and Spectacle: Discourses of Authenticity in Early Ethnographic Film."

References Cited

Griffiths, Allison

- 1995 Science and Spectacle: Discourses of Authenticity in Early Ethnographic Film. *In* Dressing in Feathers: The Construction of the Indian in American Popular Culture. Elizabeth Bird, ed. Pp. 79-95. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- 2007 The Revered Gaze: The Medieval Imaginary of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*. *Cinema Journal* 46(2):3-39.

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