

Los Angeles Filmforum presents
**Experimentations: Imag(in)ing Knowledge in Film Program 8:
Beautiful Science: Re-imagining Science Film into Film Art**
Sunday, November 10, 2024, 7:30 pm
At 2220 Arts + Archives

Los Angeles Filmforum is the city's longest running organization dedicated to weekly screenings of experimental film, documentaries, video art, and experimental animation. 2024 is our 49th year. www.lafilmforum.org

Experimentations: Imag(in)ing Knowledge in Film is Filmforum's expansive film series and upcoming publication that investigates the ways that experimental and scientific films produce and question the visualization of the world. Combining artist films utilizing scientific imagery, science and natural history films, and films of indigenous and traditional knowledge, the series examines how science, nature, and technology films shape our understanding of humans, nature, gender, knowledge, and progress. The multi-venue public screening series presents analog and digital time-based media incorporating diverse scientific and experimental film traditions from across the globe. The series will include eighteen screenings between September 2024 and February 2025, with films and digital works from 1874 to today from around the world, multiple guests, panels and wonderful collaborations that will reveal the possibilities and circumstances of cinema in this realm.

Experimentations: Imag(in)ing Knowledge in Film is among more than 70 exhibitions and programs presented as part of PST ART. Returning in September 2024 with its latest edition, PST ART: Art & Science Collide, this landmark regional event explores the intersections of art and science, both past and present. PST ART is presented by Getty. For more information about PST ART: Art & Science Collide, please visit: pst.art.

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DEPARTMENT OF CULTURAL AFFAIRS
City of Los Angeles

Experimentations: Imag(in)ing Knowledge in Film, Program 8

Beautiful Science: Re-imagining Science Film into Film Art

The utilization of prior footage, recontextualized, is a common practice in experimental filmmaking. This program highlights two supreme examples, both drawing on earlier “science” films utilizing remarkable photographic techniques to create new art, one utilizes cine-radiography to examine the interior of the human body in action; the other a meditative tribute to one of the primary pioneers of microscopic and time-lapse photography. In a research visit at the George Eastman Museum in Rochester, Barbara Hammer came upon some of the reels of x-ray films, or cinefluorography, by Dr. James Sibley Watson, also known in the film world for his films *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1928) and *Lot in Sodom* (1933). Watson was also a doctor who developed a method of filming the innards of people by x-rays (most likely unhealthy large doses). There are over 233 x-ray films at the George Eastman Museum, most of which are not preserved, digitized, or available for viewing. Hammer utilized the available footage, tinting, layering, and more, to create one of her masterworks, a humorous and pensive meditation on the human body, its fragility and resilience.

F. Percy Smith, working with Mary Field, was a key innovator in microcinematography and time-lapse photography, creating phenomenal close-up images of plants, insects, molds, and more, used in educational films distributed in the United Kingdom in the first half of the 20th century. *Minute Bodies: The Intimate World of F. Percy Smith*, made by Stuart A. Staples of the band tindersticks (who also scored the film with Christine Ott) removes the wry educational narration of Smith’s original films and combines excerpts in new ways to create a sense of wonder at the camerawork while also rendering the living things in the films into near abstract yet fantastic forms.

Notes and program by Adam Hyman

Screening:

Studies in Diagnostic Cinefluorography

By Dr. James Sibley Watson

1947-1955, b&w transferred to digital, silent, 6 min.

World premiere of newly preserved and scanned copy, from the George Eastman Museum

“The film is a compilation of a number of Watson's X-ray films which were shot between 1947-1955. There are a total of 23 shots of various x-rays plus 13 intertitles for a total of 36 shots.” – Beth Rennie, Head of Information, Research and Access, George Eastman Museum

There are 233 additional reels of Watson’s x-ray films in storage at the George Eastman Museum, mostly nitrate, unopened in many years awaiting funds for proper preservation. As you will see, Barbara Hammer made use of multiple shots that are on this reel, but also accessed additional material.

James Sibley Watson (1894-1982) is a remarkable figure: filmmaker, philanthropist, medical doctor, publisher, editor, photographer. Born into wealth (the Western Union telegraph fortune), his filmic achievements were with Melville Webber. Most well-known is their classic avant-garde work *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1928) which was highly successful. It was later followed by *Lot in Sodom* (1934). They also made the industrial film “The Eyes of Science” (1930) for Bausch & Lomb. From the 1940s to 1960s he worked primarily as a doctor but also developed on his x-ray, or cinefluorographic, motion pictures. He was deeply involved in the modernist literary movement in the United States, first as an editorial reader, then as co-owner and co-editor of the magazine *The Dial* in the 1920s.

Barbara Hammer made a second film regarding him, a more standard documentary called *Dr. Watson's X-Rays* (1991), but her more beautiful reworking of some of his films came in her optically-printed film...

Sanctus

By Barbara Hammer

1990, 16mm, color/b&w, sound, 19 min. 16mm print from Canyon Cinema

Sound composition by Neil B. Rolnick.

“...Hammer’s 16mm film *Sanctus* (1990) is the result of an archival chance encounter. Upon her arrival at the George Eastman House in Rochester, New York, housing one of the oldest photography museums and the film archives, with a group of filmmakers, Hammer noticed an unopened 35 mm film can labeled “Watson’s X-Rays”. Her characteristic curiosity and boldness led her to sidestep the tour and open the can. Holding the nitrate strip to the sunlight, she was immediately struck by the images of moving skeletons. To her surprise, these were the footages of a series of cinefluorography (moving X-ray images) experiments conducted by the radiologist, physician and an obscure avant-garde filmmaker Dr. James Sibley Watson and his colleagues in the 1950s. 19-minute *Sanctus* ended up being the reworking of these found footages.

“Although cinefluorography was a recent technology in the 1950s, X-ray has been a popular and well-used technology since its discovery by Wilhelm Conrad Roentgen in 1895, which coincided with the emergence of two other phenomena, namely psychoanalysis and cinema (Akira Lippit, *Atomic Light (Shadow Optics)*, p. 5). Especially in the USA, there was a great interest in X-ray and X-ray related research due to the increase in tuberculosis cases in the first half of the twentieth century, and breast cancer starting from the 1950s (Lisa Cartwright, “Women, X-rays, and the Public Culture of Prophylactic Imaging.” *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies* 10 (2), 1992, 18-54.). X-rays, on the other hand, have been inseparable from cultural imagination as well. Many New York women had their hand X-rays taken with jewelry on their finger following the X-ray of Bertha Roentgen with her wedding ring on. Only one year after its introduction, the avant-garde Ottoman journal *Servet-i Fünun* (The Wealth of Knowledge) covered an X-ray experiment took place in Istanbul, which includes a purse (1896), and as a memorable example, Thomas Mann depicted the patients of The Berghof Sanatorium carrying their pulmonary X-ray cards in their pockets and using them as love token in his novel *Magic Mountain* (1924).

“Although the experiments in the found footage were for medical purposes, it is significant that Watson and his associates’ experiments were subjective, curious, and even fun rather than being objective, precise, serious. Moving X-ray images show skeletons turning around, shaving, hand shaking, putting lipstick on while the experiment itself oscillates between medical research and moving picture spectacle. Although the gender aspect and medical gaze in the footage are clear, Hammer refuses any objectification. Earlier in *Sanctus*, a woman’s body, especially her breasts, catches our attention. However, Hammer’s camera flickers, shakes, and the film is punctured by Hammer herself, any fixation or a possessive gaze is diverted. Even the close-up of a chest prevents the audience’s gaze from contemplating and penetrating the body, which turns into a recurrent gesture throughout the film. As Ara Osterweil argues Hammer’s interference with the footage not only “obscure the anatomical ‘truth’ that the X-ray footage attempts to reveal,” but also underscores a way “the woman’s body can resist yielding its corporeal secrets to the male gaze that has been authorized to interpret them” (Ara Osterweil. (2010). “A Body Is Not a Metaphor: Barbara Hammer’s X-Ray Vision”. *Journal of lesbian studies*. 14, p. 196) – Merve Sen, “X-ray retouched: medical Visualities in Barbara Hammer’s *Sanctus*”, in *Synopsis*, <https://medicalhealthhumanities.com/2023/12/07/x-ray-retouched-medical-visualities-in-barbara-hammers-sanctus/>

Barbara Hammer (1939-2019) Feminist filmmaker and pioneer of queer cinema, Barbara Hammer made over 90 moving image works as well as performances, installations, photographs, collages and drawings. In the early 1970s Hammer studied film at San Francisco State University. After seeing Maya Deren’s film *Meshes of the Afternoon*, she was inspired to make experimental films about her personal life. After coming out as a lesbian she “took off on a

motorcycle with a super-8 camera” and in 1974 filmed *Dyketactics*, widely considered to be one of the first lesbian films. Hammer sought to deconstruct and disempower the narratives and structures that oppress women in general and lesbians in particular. From her earliest experimental work, her films are playfully and relentlessly challenging of accepted norms and taboos. – from her site <https://barbarahammer.com/>

In addition, Barbara said that her first screening for an experimental film audience, not a lesbian audience, was at Filmforum, when it was in Pasadena in the 1970s, invited by Filmforum’s founder Terry Cannon.

Magic Myxies

By F. Percy Smith and Mary Field

1931, 16mm transferred to digital, B&w, sound, 8:06 Courtesy of the British Film Institute

Made by British Instructional Films for the series *The Secrets of Nature*, the film uses time-lapse and micro-cinematography to present the life cycle of slime molds with a factually dubious narration.

“The Monthly Film Bulletin's Science Committee was outraged by this film - not for its photography, which it admits is beautiful, but for its commentary. Its review, although very seriously lacking a sense of humour, has a point. The film, released in 1931 (thus the early days of sound), is perhaps inappropriately jolly, and it certainly lacks that sober scientific tone that we expect of British wildlife film. It is much more reminiscent of the gung-ho voice of the newsreel. Worse still, it is inaccurate. As the reviewer fumes "'Myxie' is not too objectionable a shortening of the ugly term myxomycete [did the editor know they already had a non-Latin name, 'slime fungi'?] but the suggestion that a myxie is an animal at one point and a vegetable at another is absurd... Further we should like to know how a myxie can be said to be bad tempered, and why accelerated photography should confer on it the power to 'quiver with delight'."

“Anthropomorphising the natural world has always been frowned on by British wildlife filmmakers (not least Sir David Attenborough) and while we may enjoy the ebullient commentary - which certainly helps to sell a difficult subject - in the end, we probably have to agree with the verdict of the Science Committee.” – Bryony Dixon, British Film Institute

Minute Bodies: The Intimate World of F. Percy Smith

Directed by Stuart A. Staples; Co-producer and editor Dave Reeve

2016, digital b&w, sound, 55 min. From Icarus Films

This meditative, immersive film by tindersticks' Stuart A. Staples is a tribute to the astonishing work and achievements of naturalist, inventor and pioneering British filmmaker F. Percy Smith (1880-1945).

Based in a studio in north London in the early years of the 20th century, Percy Smith developed the use of time-lapse, animation and micro-photographic techniques to capture nature's secrets in action. He worked in a number of public roles, including the Royal Navy and British Instructional Films, Smith was prolific and driven, often directing several films simultaneously, apparently on a mission to explore and capture nature's hidden terrains.

Minute Bodies: The Intimate World of F. Percy Smith is an interpretative work that combines Smith's original film footage - preserved within the BFI National Archive - with a new contemporary score by tindersticks with Thomas Belhom and Christine Ott. It creates a hypnotic, alien yet familiar dreamscape that connects us to the sense of wonder Smith must have felt as he peered through his own lenses and saw these micro-worlds for the first time.

"The humanising of this utterly unfamiliar world is the film's subtle masterstroke: the retro-fitted score by tindersticks and Christine Ott is a joy, and gives the unapproachable strangeness of what we're watching a human, emotional dimension. In one section, eerie antique organ sounds and ponderous vibraphones evoke the brave new

world of mid-20th century sci-fi, an association that seems apt – after all, these were alien worlds being discovered by the technology of the atomic age too – wondrous, not a little monstrous, weirdly fantastical. In another section, the grainy, fuzzy analogue bass notes of an early synth somehow perfectly describe the completely alien throb of a pulsating, liquid mould that branches out and flows along vein-like paths looking for new food. Later, a multitude of tiny tadpole-like forms riggle round exuberantly to a jazzy score, evoking the energy of the will-to-life at its most abstract; it made me imagine Mondrian’s “Broadway Boogie-Woogie” for some reason, and my toddler pointed at them excitedly and shouted “fish!”” - Michael Smith, Caught By the River, <https://www.caughtbytheriver.net/2017/07/natural-history-bfi-tindersticks-stuart-a-staples-the-intimate-world-of-f-percy-smith/>

Here's a post-show conversation about it from Austin Film Society as part of their “Science on Screen” series, with Dr. Alex Wild. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SPkuJN6vFpU>

Los Angeles Filmforum screenings are supported by the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors through the Los Angeles County Department of Arts & Culture, the Department of Cultural Affairs, City of Los Angeles. We also depend on our members, ticket buyers, and individual donors.

Coming soon to Los Angeles Filmforum:

Nov 15 – Co-presenting Seeing Is Not Believing: *Tribulation 99 / Save the Green Planet!* at the UCLA Film & Television Archive

Nov 17 - Then<·>Now: Taiwan Experimental Film and Video Arts, Part 1, at 222- Arts + Archives

Nov 20 – Co-presenting Cecilia Condit at the Philosophical Research Society

Nov 24 - Experimentations 8.33 and 8.67 - Co-presenting David Lebrun: *Proteus*, and *Transfigurations: Reanimating the Past* (2018–2024), at the UCLA Film & Television Archive

Memberships available, \$40 Student \$75 Individual, \$125 Dual, or \$225 Silver Nitrate

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