

Rose Hobart

By Holly Willis

The mysterious, languid, and yet obsessive portrait of actress Rose Hobart in Joseph Cornell's 1936 film "Rose Hobart", created by excerpting clips from a 1931 feature film titled "East of Borneo" directed by George Melford, can be lauded for numerous reasons: It employs collage, appropriation, and remix as specifically filmic techniques long before these methods became popular cultural forms; it makes a powerful and influential contribution to an ever-expanding collection of avant-garde cinema works within the United States while also aiding several young filmmakers in developing their own careers as experimental filmmakers; and it serves as an intriguing example of the extension of an artist's practice across disciplinary forms, in this case, from the Cornell boxes for which the artist is so well-known to a film, which in some ways embodies Cornell's box-making methodology. Like the boxes, the film becomes its own sort of intricate world, plucked from the quotidian and made marvelous through an fervent and visionary act of bracketing, of separating the significant from the insignificant. Indeed, despite the film's many achievements historically and culturally, its most lasting and powerful contribution is at once entirely simple and unfathomably complex: the film is an exquisite evocation of the fundamental desire so much at the heart of cinema as a 20th century art form, namely the craving to look and to love. "Rose Hobart" is desire made visual.

This emphasis is evident from the first moments of the film. "Rose Hobart" opens with a shot of a crowd of people looking up excitedly at something; they appear to be looking at an eclipse, with various filters in hand, and indeed, the film itself is bracketed by the in-between time of the fading light and the growing darkness of the eclipse, with the final images of the film showing one celestial body sliding in front of another. The film hovers, then, suspended in this temporal gap, making the film feel as if it unfolds within an ethereal, dreamy nether world.

After a dissolve to black, the film re-opens, this time with a camera lurching across a long distance toward an illuminated room. A dissolve brings the camera closer, and we see that someone is lying on a bed or couch. As we move even closer, we find ourselves peering at a sleeping figure from behind gauzy curtains as the light undulates across the folds of fabric. The next shot is of a candle in close-up, the huge flame dancing in the breeze. The subsequent shot returns us to the figure, and we are



Frame enlargements from the film, which was preserved by Anthology Film Archive, and is featured on the National Film Preservation Foundation's Treasures from American Film Archives DVD set. Image courtesy Museum of Modern Art.

able to see the delicate features of a woman's face through a narrow slit in the curtains. Her eyes open gently, she looks around, and then she looks directly at the camera, holding us in her gaze for several seconds. Then she slowly sits up, swings her legs out of bed, and rises, parting the curtains, where she again pauses, looking around slowly. She is dressed in a dapper suit and the light illuminates only one side of her face. She looks down toward the right, and steps pensively out of the frame as the camera moves almost as if to follow her.

The sequence is dazzling and – especially if viewed without sound – verges on the erotic. Indeed, it is nearly impossible to view the film without also being keenly aware of Cornell's own gaze and attention. He would have noticed the way the camera lurches unevenly; working frame by frame, he would have contemplated the quiet beauty of Rose Hobart in repose. He would have imagined the significance of her closed eyes, her flickering eyelids, her returned

gaze. In this way, especially in this key sequence, the film beautifully offers an exploration of looking and longing, by layering the intentions of Cornell's perspective over that of the original filmmaking team. While the first film, *East of Borneo*, told an amusingly convoluted story about love, loss, and jungle adventure replete with pythons and crocodiles, "Rose Hobart" dispenses with a silly plot. And whereas the first film contextualized the pleasures of looking at the female character within the points-of-view of the two men who desire her within the story, the gaze in "Rose Hobart" is the filmmaker's. Cornell cuts away plot and character, discarding the extraneous narrative to offer only the pleasures of looking.

The film continues in this way, stringing together sequences of images nearly all of which feature the actress. As a narrative, the film does not make much sense. The changes in time, location, and costume disrupt conventional storytelling. The film joins a history of surrealist films in this regard, and while there is definitely attention to sequence, and viewers will be tempted to discern a story, the film overall is interested not in narrative but in Rose Hobart, her face, her skin, her body, and the mysteries that are forever beyond our knowledge, despite our obsessive scrutiny. Cornell further underscored the act of looking by slowing the frame rate of the original film, from the normal 24 frames per second to the dreamier 16 frames per second, and in the process, created an uncanny sense of movement that in turn produces the feeling that we are within a dream rather than reality.

"Rose Hobart" was not screened widely while Cornell was alive, and when he showed it, he played music to accompany the film, using two jovial Latin music tracks by Nestor Amaral from a 78 record titled "Holiday in Brazil." He also used a blue lens to tint the projection, and subsequent prints of the film were tinted with a rose color. The upbeat tempo of the mu-

sic contributes a sense of atmosphere to the film that may accord with the original and its jungle setting. However, viewing the film silently reveals the quiet power of the visual exploration that makes this film so astounding.

Overall, each of these alterations insists on Cornell's interventions, while at the same time calling attention to the magic of serendipity: a chance alignment of sound and image; a curious mark or even break in the film stock itself that, when repaired, reveals something new, something perhaps even more illuminating. Cornell, like the Surrealists of his generation, appreciated these chance encounters and opportunities to discover the exquisite within the neglected.

"Rose Hobart" was Cornell's first film, and it emerged from his habit of collecting dozens of 16mm films of diverse genres. He also shot and edited original footage, often working in collaboration with other filmmakers. His filmmaking activity continued after the completion of "Rose Hobart" in 1936, through the 1940s, '50s and early '60s, with more than 25 films bearing his name. However, "Rose Hobart" remains his iconic cinematic work, an exquisite evocation of the desire at the heart of cinema.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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