

# One Work

## Jeremy Shaw's *Liminals* (2017)

From microdosing to shamanic retreats to a resurgence of religion, there is more and more evidence of a hunger to reject what used to be consensus reality. It's surprising how rarely art is a channel for this, rather than thematising it from a distance. The second film in Berlin-based artist Jeremy Shaw's *Quantification Trilogy* does both, as it takes us three generations into the future, where would-be cyborgs are implanting machine DNA and dancing their way out of their bodies. *By Dean Kissick*

"A sense of doubt," says the narrator of Jeremy Shaw's 2017 film *Liminals*, speaking from the future but remembering our present, "compelled us to believe." This is also how most art functions today: it offers a space of ambiguity in which we hope to experience something profound. Decades of critique, cultural analysis, and research-based practices have not stopped us from being haunted by the old idea that art, like ritual, promises a kind of transcendence into another realm. *Liminals* starts as a mock documentary set in a near future in which extinction looms large (the video leaves it unclear how this will happen; we know only that it's imminent and that most people feel apathetic about that) and our bodies have degenerated to the point where we're no longer biologically capable of having spiritual experiences. A future, in other words, much like our present.

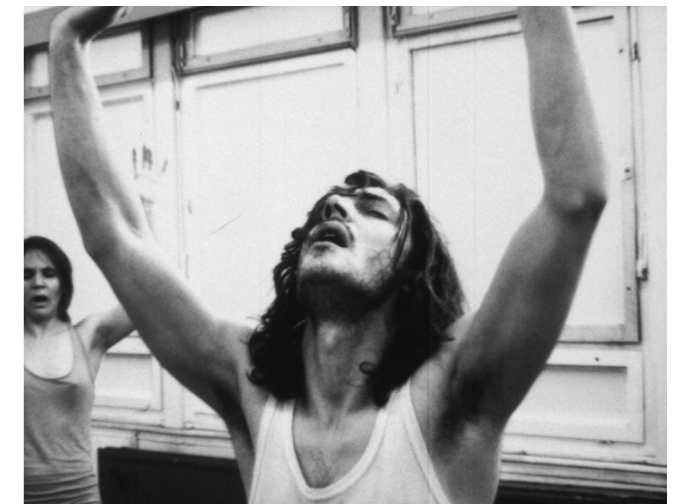
Black-and-white 16mm footage accompanies a voiceover that introduces us to a leaderless, rather sexless cult, a "periphery altruist culture" whose followers spend their days dancing together, performing long-abandoned rituals, and augmenting one another's brains with machine DNA, all to artificially induce spiritual experiences and so evolve and hopefully survive. It's a vision of an alternate future in which the utopian promises of 1960s counterculture – of experiments in communal living, and the roles technology and psychedelics might play in catalysing new feelings of empathy and closeness – are brought back together in a grand transhumanist fantasy of

cultural catharsis. What these "Liminals" – as the members of the cult are called – are attempting is to shift reality into a kind of bardo: a "paraspace" somewhere between the physical and virtual realms in which they hope to grow into a higher kind of being and so avoid a certain doom. But they also want to experience the apocalyptic redemption of rapture.

Many today (myself, my friends, my family) have lost our religion and replaced it with art. We share a desperate need for meaning and don't know where else to look. Sometimes I look in my friends' eyes, or the mirror, and see pure desperation. But can contemporary art induce a feeling of rapture? In *Liminals*, Shaw tells us the story of his cult, draws us in closer, and then throws us into the disorientating ceremony in the hope that it might: the narrative falls away into flashing, strobing dance scenes with everybody whirling like dervishes and headbanging. A blindfolded man lies on the floor screaming. With cool sleight of hand, the film slides from telling us about dream machines and how they emit alpha waves that lull us into a state of relaxation to turning the projector-dream machine back upon the audience – and bathing us, I think, I hope, in alpha waves ourselves. Then it bursts into acid technicolour and the dancers are digitised, data-moshing into one another's bodies and becoming an abstract, ritualistic, hypnotic portal to another place.

What Shaw is playing with here is art's ability to not only symbolise but also direct human emotion; to reach

Courtesy of the artist and KÖNIG GALERIE



down inside of us and induce a sort of ecstasy, and so help us slip the surly bonds of Earth. Modern and contemporary art generally promotes – and more than that, is a fundamental part of the project of – the cult of self-expression, authorship, and individualism that has come to rule society, but here we're offered something radically different: a third space that, in the film's telling, collapses time, reality, and any sense of a separate self. In other words, it brings about a collective ego death, which may be just what society needs.

But while Shaw shows us one path towards an altered state of consciousness, he doesn't really take us down it. The representation of extreme experiences can only pale in comparison to actually living through them; particularly when

it's condensed down to just ten minutes or so. Projecting Shaw's film in a dark room didn't raise me into a Bacchanalian frenzy or fill me with ecstasy rushes. Not yet. But the stage has rarely been so well set as now for an artist to genuinely start a cult, to really attempt something like the story told in *Liminals*, for all us lost souls that feel disillusioned with the shared culture we've contributed to, to try one last time to satisfy our craving for more raw and at the same time more spiritual experiences.

*JEREMY SHAW was born 1977 in North Vancouver and lives in Berlin.*

*DEAN KISSICK is Spike's New York editor.*



Stills from Jeremy Shaw, *Liminals*, 2007