

KEN JACOBS,
ALCHEMIST
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Review of *Optic Antics: The Cinema of Ken Jacobs* edited by Michele Pierson, David E. James, and Paul Arthur. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. Pp. 312; 48 photographs. \$99.00 cloth, \$39.95 paper, 26.99 E-book.

Ken Jacobs may be the most important cinema magician since George Méliès. Though he remains most famous for his groundbreaking 1969 found-footage film *Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son*, and for the vital leadership role he played in the formally experimental and sexually permissive Underground cinema that flourished in New York City in the early 1960s, Jacobs has been a consistent innovator for six decades. Stretching and dilating the capacity of the projected image to enable new ways of seeing, Jacobs is one of the most important American artists—working in any medium—of the postwar period. The fact that his work is not more widely known to the public testifies not only to the continued marginalization of non-industrial cinema practices, but to Jacobs's own uncompromising and relentlessly anticommmercial vision.

Optic Antics is the first complete volume to be dedicated to an exploration of Jacobs's career. This eagerly awaited, richly illustrated monograph promises to expand our understanding of this indispensable artist and make his work more accessible for future generations of media students. *Optic Antics* is a revelation from front to back. Starting with the magnificent cover image—a photographic *mise-en-abyme* of Ken Jacobs and his wife, and lifelong collaborator Flo, taken by fellow avant-garde filmmaker Michael Snow—the book promises to reflect Jacobs from a variety of

angles. The volume benefits from the editorship of three leading scholars in the field of avant-garde cinema studies: David James, Michele Pierson, and the late Paul Arthur. They have done an excellent job of bringing together film scholars, filmmakers, visual artists, playwrights, fellow instructors, friends, and former students to meditate on the different aspects of Jacobs's long career.

Jacobs's contributions to film culture have included vital roles as artist, teacher, and organizer. An early champion of experimental cinema, Jacobs debuted many now classic experimental films, including the work of George and Mike Kuchar, at his loft. In 1963, he was arrested, along with Florence Karpf and Jonas Mekas, for showing Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures* (1963); the trial that ensued has become the stuff of Underground legend. Founder of the still extant Millennium Film Workshop, Jacobs helped to create a utopian, nonhierarchical space of independent, low-budget filmmaking in stark contrast to the profit-driven excesses of corporate cinema. As a professor at Binghamton University from 1969 to 2002, Jacobs's unconventional pedagogy had a profound influence on generations of students, many of whom went on to become internationally renowned filmmakers, critics, scholars, and curators. Well balanced in its focus, *Optic Antics* pays homage

to all of these incarnations, giving a more realistic sense of the integration of these roles in the life of the artist.

The essays are remarkably diverse in tone. Ranging from rigorous interpretations of Jacobs's work to personal remembrances by friends, fellow filmmakers, and colleagues, the book fuses criticism with intimacy, making for a wonderfully readable volume. The book benefits from its contemporary perspective; with the exception of a fragment of Paul Arthur's posthumously published piece, none of the essays have been printed before. Many of the artificial distinctions that marked the original reception of Jacobs's work have collapsed, allowing for a fuller recognition of his contributions. As an artist who routinely explodes the boundaries between high and low, the present and the past, performance and cinema, Jacobs's work demands to be thought outside of the box or, in his case, the frame. Mapping the artist's intertexts from Busby Berkeley to Henri Bergson, *Optic Antics* contextualizes Jacobs's simultaneous orientation as a constructivist, materialist, postmodern historiographer, cine-mystic, and alchemist of the moving image.

As any teacher who has shown Jacobs's films in a classroom knows, they are remarkable pedagogical tools. Jacobs's relentless, sensuous manipulation of the image doesn't illustrate, but *performs*, complex

theoretical arguments. Jacobs is also, as evidenced by the rich variety of scholarly essays collected in this volume, a critic's dream. Defying the limits of their own medium, Jacobs's films inspire innovation in their analysis. It is no wonder that some of the most important contemporary voices in film criticism, like David James and Nicole Brenez, are represented here. Fortunately, interpretations of *Tom, Tom* are not the centerpiece of the volume; considerations of Jacobs's massive oeuvre include significant attention to his work before and after this masterpiece. Nonetheless, analysis of *Tom, Tom* proves an understandable temptation for many of the contributors, including Eivind Rossaak, whose lucid, concise interpretation of the tension between stillness and motion in the film's acts of delay makes his essay an excellent choice for classroom use.

Jacobs's unique contributions to the art of the moving image have spanned and redefined many eras. A student of abstract expressionist painter Hans Hofmann, Jacobs adapted his teacher's "push and pull" theory to motion pictures. In the same way that the dialectical tensions between space, depth, and movement could be created through the nonrepresentational use of color, line, and form on a canvas, the moving image could be riffed on, deconstructed, three-dimensionalized, and abstracted

through the hands-on manipulation of camera and projector. Hofmann's influence on Jacobs surfaces throughout the volume in the many critical gestures towards the filmmaker as painterly abstractionist, as well as in Federico Windhausen's informed essay about their shared investment in contingent vision.

By the mid-1950s, Jacobs had pioneered a form of filmed street theater with fellow City University of New York student Jack Smith. Jacobs's conspicuously homemade, improvisatory films of their antics on the Lower East Side—*Little Cobra Dance* (1957), *Saturday Afternoon Blood Sacrifice* (1956), *Little Stabs at Happiness* (1958–60), *Blonde Cobra* (1959–63)—were among the first of the New American Cinema to merit the Underground moniker. These ragged glimpses of urban ennui put Jacobs's deliberately honed junk aesthetic in dialogue with a melancholia borne of continual alienation from the idiot happiness of the American dream.

Since their notorious falling out in the early 1960s, Jacobs has played down the Underground film diaries he made with Jack Smith, even as he continues to edit them. (*Star Spangled to Death*, an epic work Jacobs began in 1957 but didn't finish until 2004, intersperses images of the pre-*Flaming Creatures* Smith with massive amounts of found footage.) Thankfully, critics have not followed the artist's opinions on this matter. Smith, a fellow misfit

visionary adrift in the Eisenhower era, was Jacobs's first significant artistic collaborator. In individual contributions, Branden Joseph and Tony Pipolo reconsider a handful of the films Jacobs and Smith made together in order to argue for the undertheorized importance of this early body of work. Perhaps it is poetic justice that after years of separation—first by rancor and then by Smith's death—Jacobs and Smith are reunited here.

With the appearance of *Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son*, Jacobs was recognized as one of the luminaries of structural film, a form of experimental film that explored the ontology and materiality of cinema by emphasizing specific characteristics of the moving image, including duration, camera movement, rephotography, and flicker. Using a 1905 Billy Bitzer film then recently restored by the Library of Congress as his primary material, Jacobs illuminated what at first glance seemed like a throwaway example of "primitive" cinema. Through meticulous dissection of the film image—including repetition, close-up, and dilation of the original footage—Jacobs revealed the kinetic and pictorial splendors imbedded in this time capsule. *Tom, Tom* was a landmark in the evolution of motion pictures. Not only did it pioneer a new way of making movies from the dross of the old, but it also represented a new way of telling history through images.

Like Walter Benjamin's prophetic "Theses on the Philosophy of History,"¹ *Tom, Tom* is a lesson in historiography. Not only does it labor at the archival excavation of early cinema in the hopes of blasting open the past in order to redeem the present, but it actually enacts the impossibility of ever grasping the historical artifact as it really was. Flushed with archive fever, Jacob strives not to preserve the past in the sense of embalming it, but to reanimate and transform it through the inspired manipulation of its cinematic record. Jacobs exploded the original Bitzer film, making it into what Benjamin called a *monad*—a crystallized unit of meaning that could be seized as a "revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past."²

Once regarded as the epitome of structural film, *Tom, Tom* has proved to be much more than that. So has its maker. In 1975, Jacobs began his Nervous System performances, in which he uses two analytic projectors, as well as an exterior shutter in the form of a spinning propeller, to create a stuttering, stereoscopic experience in three-dimensional perception for audiences. The Nervous System performances further explore Jacobs's Benjaminian approach to the past. Simultaneously mourning what has been lost to the Angel of History and delighting in what can be created amidst the ruins, Jacobs's work merges old and new sensibilities. Exploring archival

footage as a Kabbalah scholar pores over religious cryptograms, Jacobs searches for moments of hidden meaning. No wonder the word “ecstatic” recurs so frequently in this diverse body of essays: Jacobs’s reanimations merge the pathos inspired by encounters with the dead with the awe of cinematic resurrection. Pulsing images of what-has-been through the very flesh of our body, the Nervous System projections shatter us into enlightened consciousness.

Haunted by the suffering of the Holocaust, and forever resistant to America’s imperialist, capitalist war machine, Jacobs uses the history of cinema to show what it means to be “star spangled” to death. But if Jacobs’s techniques of historical materialism yield spiritual insight about human suffering and the possibility for redemption, as David James and Paul Arthur so eloquently argue, then they are equally kindred with attractions of the fairground. Jacobs is, as Abigail Child and Adrian Martin remind us, a populist at heart—in spite of how unpopular his methods of enlightenment may be. Insisting upon the political relevance of Jacobs’s work—however averse the artist may be to the reigning “ism” of the day—*Optic Antics* reveals the urgent stakes that have always animated the practices of the artist’s everyday life.

What is so refreshing is the book’s recognition of the inextricability of

art and life. Considering the community ethos of postwar experimental film culture, it is fitting that nearly all of the included writers have a personal, as well as professional, relationship with Jacobs. The volume’s affective proximity to the artist yields insights about Jacobs’s practice not usually found in academic volumes. Critic and longtime friend Amy Taubin’s interview with Florence Karpf honors the central but critically underappreciated role she has played in the evolution of Ken’s vision and the maintenance of his voluminous personal archive. Jonas Mekas’s collection of texts affords a glimpse of the everyday communiqués exchanged between two artists who recognized cinema as their means of personal and political salvation. While Michelle Pierson’s essay illuminates the Bergsonian bent of Jacobs’s experiential engagement with the real, Phil Solomon’s gorgeously written testament provides the most authentic sense that I have ever read of what it *feels* like to experience Jacobs’s work.

Such poignant offerings by Jacobs’s peers and collaborators remind us that *Optic Antics* is, like the work it analyzes, a labor of love. But, to its credit, the book’s lenses are not all rose-colored. Ever the contentious critic, Jacobs himself couldn’t stand too much sentimentality. In its acknowledgment of the more difficult aspects of Jacobs’s work and personality, *Optic Antics*

provides a vital sense of the battles and tensions that have animated the history of American experimental cinema. In his essay, fellow filmmaker and Binghamton professor Larry Gottheim recalls the university's decision to hire famed auteur Nicholas Ray (*Rebel Without a Cause*, 1955; *In a Lonely Place*, 1950; *They Live by Night*, 1948) to join the cinema faculty. Though both Ray and Jacobs offered visions of rebellion against 1950s America, it is hard to imagine the energy of these two wild-haired cinemaniacs contained in the same room. But if the collision of Hollywood and the avant-garde was predictably messy, then *Optic Antics* reminds us that the experimental film community was itself hardly a unified front. Scott MacDonald's essay on the incendiary reception of Jacobs's pornographic work *XCX-HXEXRXXIXEXSX* (1980) at the 1992 Flaherty Seminar, a venue for alternative film since the mid-1950s, provides a compelling example of how even the boundaries of so-called expanded cinema have had to be renegotiated again and again to accommodate the unpredictability of the screen's bodies, as well as our own.

Like the phantasmagorias so popular in the nineteenth century, Jacobs's works is full of ghosts. Reanimated through Jacobs's magic

cinema, Jack Smith and Bob Fleischer cavort again on the same Lower East Side streets where turn-of-the-century Jewish immigrants once bustled. Restoring to resplendent motion all that has been lost, Jacobs fulfills the great wish of cinema. To the many wrenching departures chronicled and disavowed in Jacobs's oeuvre, we must add critic and long-time champion of experimental film Paul Arthur, whose joint editorship of the book was interrupted by his untimely death. It is some comfort that his spirit will live on in the tremendous critical influence *Optic Antics* is bound to have on experimental film scholars, students, filmmakers, and fans. After years of searching for the perfect text to accompany Jacob's films, I simply can't wait to share this treasure with my students.

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NOTES

1. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 253–64.
2. *Ibid.*, 263.