

The School of Experimental Viewing

By Richard Herskowitz (1991)

Look at the touring schedule of the Black Maria Film + Video Festival, and you'll find that it is carrying experimental films and video art to a surprising variety of remote locales. Among these are quite a few pit stops in Central/Western New York. In this not-so-sleepy region, as it happens, over twenty alternative media presenters have recently created a Central New York Programmers Group to arrange tours of experimental artists and works throughout the year.

Having studied and programmed films in upstate New York, off and on, since 1971, I am aware that the vitality of alternative film exhibition here has its roots in the region's large (and largely unacknowledged) role in the history of experimental film and video art. The Owego Experimental TV Center, Portable Channel in Rochester, the Ithaca Video Project, Media Study/Buffalo, and numerous other nearby media centers were among the first institutional supporters of experimental film and media art.

One local institution which has had an incalculable influence on alternative film in the seventies and eighties has just turned twenty. Along with other academic programs with avant-garde orientations like SUNY Buffalo, Bard College, the art institutes of San Francisco, Philadelphia, and Chicago, and Brown University, the Cinema Department of SUNY Binghamton has had its own particular aesthetic and political sensibility, whose diffusion in the filmmaking and exhibition practices of today bears tracing. As a graduate of its Cinema Department, I am intimately aware of SUNY Binghamton's impact, which I will examine here; I hope to hear more in the future about the unknown influence of other schools.

Binghamton alumni have helped construct and populate the infrastructure of the alternative film scene since the seventies, from the Collective for Living Cinema and the San Francisco Cinematheque to the Village Voice film section. As I keep stumbling across other Binghamton alumni making, writing about, teaching, and programming avant-garde films, I notice that most of us share a disinclination to limit ourselves to just these works. Experimental film is frequently a springboard for reviewing and, emancipating images from the dominant culture. I think I know where this habit comes from.

In Ken Jacobs' classes in the early seventies, my classmates and I had to take in, alongside the Stan Brakhage, Maya Deren and Jacobs works, movies like *The Big Sleep* and *The Wizard of Oz*, TV shows and commercials, and "found" industrial films.[1] We did not watch experimental films. We learned to watch films experimentally.

Movies which constrained their (and our) signifying capacities with linear, narrative designs could be toyed with and transformed. Continuity lapses were

liberating moments to be celebrated; however, if a movie didn't oblige us by messing up its straightforward perfection, it could be projected on the ceiling and the floor to loosen it up. Every Nicholas Ray movie (including *Rebel Without a Cause* , and even *King of Kings*) had moments of reflexive formal play which catapulted the spectator out of the story's confines. Ray himself, teaching in the same department at SUNY Binghamton, grumbled about Jacobs' effort to turn him into an experimental filmmaker, and started filming *We Can't Go Home Again* , his most adventurous work.

Movies by black film pioneer Oscar Micheaux and "bad" film auteur Edward D. Wood, Jr. (*Plan 9 From Outer Space* , *Glen or Glenda*) were great works to be reclaimed by the avant-garde. While they aspired to Hollywood seamlessness, this ambition was gloriously deflected by the vitality of inexperienced actors, flimsy equipment, urban settings, and psychohistorical demons which refused to be repressed. Among the true masterpieces were the films of Jack Smith, which ran the "B" movies of Maria Montez through a Dionysian blender and liberated Hollywood's repressed erotic drives.

Experimental viewing, I learned from Jacobs classes, meant watching movies from the standpoint of an editor . No movie came to us "finished." They all required -- although only some invited -- re-editing. Films were to be watched with an exploratory and (though the term wasn't in fashion in the early 70s) deconstructive outlook which made one attuned to the environment of visual, aural, and experiential possibilities both captured and displaced by the work onscreen.

This lesson reached audiences beyond Binghamton through Jacobs' *Tom Tom the Piper's Son* , in which the spectator was placed alongside the filmmaker as he rephotographed and reedited a 1905 silent film. Jacobs investigations uncovered new narratives, a documentary on the original film and its submerged sexual undercurrents, and rhythmic, purely formal plays of light and shadow. In class, we discovered that the reediting of *Tom Tom* was a process without end, as Jacobs would tamper with the projection and proclaim the necessity of a sequel (realized in future "Nervous System" 3D performances with the original *Tom Tom* material).

Jacobs' film continued the work of another movie we saw repeatedly, Dziga Vertov's *Man With a Movie Camera* . Both functioned as "metafilms" which dislodged our tendencies to categorize them (or any other films we confronted) as fundamentally "narrative" "documentary" or "experimental." Vertov's film sat the spectator on the editing bench and invited her/him to regard film as "footage" which could be manipulated and recreated. The film's formally reflexive moments were designed by Vertov to liberate the spectator from the film's monologue and begin a participatory dialogue, to begin re-editing the reality the film recorded. Even more than *Tom Tom* , *Man With a Movie Camera* reminds us that reflexivity (when the medium becomes the message) is not merely an attribute of

experimental films, but a gateway through which the experimental viewer can break a film's frame and become critically and playfully reflective on its purposes and potential uses.

Not only in the avant-garde films, but in every single piece of realist filmmaking Ken Jacobs placed before us in Binghamton, there were moments of self-reflexivity that opened the work to our criticism and fantasy. No manufactured image can avoid manifesting its construction and displacements, despite realistic codes and closures which attempt to expel all Otherness; none can eradicate every spectator's need to experiment with images, sounds, and social and symbolic relations in the course of viewing a film. The widespread distortion of this need can be treated with the therapy of experimental film making, teaching, and viewing -- learning to watch realist films and TV experimentally in Ken Jacobs' class has been a permanently liberating experience for me, and for other alumni.

Since my Binghamton school days, I have applied an experimental outlook to all kinds of films. I retain, however, a passion for those media works which are avowedly "experimental." These films, I believe, expressly aim to heighten our reflexive viewing skills, our capacity to reflect on film form and the social realities it supports and transforms. Reflexivity about cinematic form alone has always seemed to me an important activity -- the structural films which dominated experimental filmmaking during my Binghamton years were training viewers to reflect simultaneously on medium and message, and be less susceptible to voyeuristic viewing and realist persuasion. In the eighties, however, the formalist reflexivity of experimental film has broadened to address the sexual, racial, and international relations in which films are made and viewed (for example, such recent extraordinary films and tapes as *The Ties that Bind* , *Decodings* , and *Spy in the House that Ruth Built*).

While I prefer the formal and political adventurousness of these films, I still find that, seen from a viewpoint determined to make trouble, any film can be equally subversive. It is the role of critics, teachers, and programmers, as I see it, to instigate radically reflexive readings where they might otherwise not emerge. My Binghamton-altered consciousness always leads me to assume that whatever experimentation the film lacks or suppresses, my mind, and the audience I try to influence, should unleash.

Footnotes

[1] While enrolled in the Cinema Department, some students were influenced most deeply by Ken Jacobs, others by Larry Gottheim, Maureen Turim, or Ralph Hocking -- I swear I can detect the dominant influence in the voices of graduates I meet. Jacobs had the strongest impact on me, and this article will reflect that,

neglecting the great influence of other faculty and visiting filmmakers like Peter Kubelka and Ernie Gehr.