



# Ken Jacobs New York Times October 11, 2009

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## Deconstructing Cinema in Order to Reveal It

By MANOHLA DARGIS  
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ONE Sunday last month, I visited the avant-garde filmmaker [Ken Jacobs](#) and his wife, Flo, in the top-floor loft they rent on Chambers Street in Manhattan. The plan was for Mr. Jacobs to show some work he will present during a weeklong series of programs in Los Angeles that starts Monday. As I neared the top of my four-flight climb, the walls became more cluttered and lived in, as if announcing the residency of the last bohemians in TriBeCa.

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Museum of the Moving Image

Among films by Ken Jacobs, a longtime standard bearer for the avant-garde, are "Star Spangled to Death."

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Ken Jacobs

Florence Jacobs

That evening, after some conversation and homemade sorbet, I watched a world of wonders unfold on a screen hanging from the ceiling. As the recorded sounds of city traffic and a distant voice filled the air, sharply etched black-and-white geometric shapes of undecipherable provenance begin to rotate on screen first right, then left and back, creating what looked like shifting whirlpools. Parts of the image pulsed and eased in and out of focus. I thought I was looking at oil on water, flowing lava, lichen, dying embers or a reference to 9/11, which had happened five blocks away. My eyes searched for something familiar. I tried to grasp the story. My eyes started watering, less from emotion than strain.

"I have no idea what I'm watching," I scribbled into my notebook. I was more right than I knew.

What I watched was beautiful, hypnotic, mysterious and as close to a representation of three-dimensional imagery as I've ever seen without wearing funny glasses. It was pure cinema. As it happens, it was so pure that no celluloid had threaded its way through a projector. I hadn't been watching a film, after all, or digital images, only light and shadow. Using an illusion machine of his own invention that he calls the Nervous Magic Lantern — an apparatus containing a spinning shutter, a light and lenses that he hides behind a black curtain when he isn't performing what he calls "live cinema" — he had taken the experience of watching moving images back to its origins. We weren't watching shadows on the cave wall, but we were close.

The Nervous Magic Lantern is a variation on a proto-cinematic machine, dating from the Renaissance or earlier, called the magic lantern, a device for projecting images. By the mid-17th century, it was popular enough that the diarist Samuel Pepys bought one "to make strange things on a wall." Mr. Jacobs, a leading figure in American avant-garde cinema, has been making strange things shudder and writhe on screens for more than half a century. The germ for the Nervous Magic Lantern dates back to his earlier device, the Nervous System, a machine with two 16-millimeter projectors and a rotating shutter, on which he showed identical strips of film and with which he created optical effects, including an illusion of depth.

These manipulations were a continuation of a long preoccupation with cinema's material properties as well as its effect on our heads and bodies. Born in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, in 1933, Mr. Jacobs watched movies like "Greed" at the Museum of Modern Art with a high school pass, studied painting with Hans Hoffman and bought a camera with the idea of doing "combat cinematography in the streets of New York." With Jack Smith, a film and performance artist, he did just that, shooting Smith frolicking in shorts like "Little Stabs at Happiness" (1958-60). Mr. Jacobs once described another of these films, "Blonde Cobra" (1959-63), edited from footage shot by Bob Fleischner, as a "look in on an exploding life, on a man of imagination suffering prefashionable Lower East Side deprivation and consumed with American 1950s, '40s, '30s disgust."

With Smith in front of the camera, Mr. Jacobs also began shooting "Star Spangled to Death," a 440-minute epic of passion and political rage created from an astonishment of found footage and live-action material filmed in a long, now almost unrecognizable Lost New York of mom-and-pop shops, shadowy back alleys and grubby streets free of corporate brands. "We were picking up on this culture of spontaneity in the arts," Mr. Jacobs said. In a sense, Smith was the embodiment of this spirit, as liberated as a jazz riff or an Abstract Expressionist brush stroke. Mr. Jacobs, a relentless tinkerer, started making the movie in 1957, shot for a few years and presented it in different iterations; he finished it (or so he says) in 2003 and 2004.

He and Smith eventually went their own ways. Smith made "Flaming Creatures" (1963), a plot-free bacchanal and object of scrutiny in Susan Sontag's 1966 collection, "Against Interpretation." In 1964, Flo and Ken Jacob and the filmmaker [Jonas Mekas](#) were arrested for showing "Flaming Creatures," which had been found obscene. Both men were given six months in a workhouse, but the charges were dropped. Mr. Jacobs went on to help start both the Millennium Film Workshop in New York and the film program at the State University at Binghamton, N.Y., where his students included the cartoonist [Art Spiegelman](#). One inspiration for Mr. Spiegelman's graphic novel about the Holocaust, "Maus," in which Jews are represented as mice, came from Mr. Jacobs's observation that in early cartoons mice and African Americans were often depicted similarly.

"It was ecstatic," another student, J. Hoberman, the senior film critic for The Village Voice, said of Mr. Jacobs's teaching. "It was like a volcano." Mr. Jacobs would show students movies as they had never seen them, slowing them down through a special projector — sometimes frame by frame — for intense close scrutiny, much as he was doing with "Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son," a film he was working on around the time. "We'd crawl through these movies," Mr. Hoberman said of this slow-cinema approach, as Mr. Jacobs held forth in sterile lecture halls, showing a range of movies and discoursing on his loves ("The Bicycle Thief," "They Live by Night") and hates (most of Godard, Hitchcock). "His powers of analysis were phenomenal."

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For "Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son" (1969), a landmark of avant-garde cinema, Mr. Jacobs re-photographed (or, in his words, "reverently examined") a 1905 one-reeler, stretching the original into a 115-minute deconstruction that was at once a work of art and of criticism. "I wanted," Mr. Jacobs wrote in a film-rental catalog, "to 'bring to the surface' that multirhythmic collision-contesting of dark and light two-dimensional force-areas struggling edge to edge for identity of shape ... to get into the amoebic grain pattern itself — a chemical dispersion pattern unique to each frame, each cold still ... stirred to life by a successive 16-24 f.p.s. pattering on our retinas, the teeming energies elicited (the grains! the grains!) then collaborating, unknowingly and ironically, to form the always-poignant-because-always-past illusion."

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In other words, he was using a single movie to show us everything that the movies, a deceptive art, often try to obscure: to look at the swirls of grain rather than just faces and to see the stillness of the images before they are run together to simulate continuous motion. By slowing down

this realist short, he wasn't showing us a solitary work of art but what is behind its illusions. When the image slips (or seems to) and you see the bottom of one frame, as if the print had become stuck in the projector gate, you are reminded that you watching a movie, not a slice of life, though, as Mr. Jacobs would readily explain, movies are also always slices of life.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Mr. Jacobs rummaged through the detritus of pop culture and, with little money and a limitless imagination, became a prime force in the underground film movement. Later, with work like "Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son," he was part of a vanguard who, through rigorous experimentation, made films about the form, materiality and, importantly, the experience of cinema. With his Nervous System shows, Mr. Jacobs literally inserted himself into the moviegoing exchange, becoming a mediating, searching, palpable presence between the work and the audience. Now, with the Nervous Magic Lantern, he is re-asking one of the fundamental questions about the art: What is cinema? Is it celluloid? Digital? Movement? Light and shadow?

"There wasn't a lot of thinking," Mr. Jacobs said when asked about the analytical turn he took with "Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son." The inspiration came from "just loving this stuff," he said. "Wow, look at that, wow! The film proceeded from wow." Wow continues to inform his work, which now includes digital and, movingly, the way he talks about his wife, Flo, an artist. Together, they have raised two other artists, a daughter, Nisi, and a son, Azazel, who cast his parents as versions of themselves in the 2008 movie "Momma's Man." That's Ken and Flo on the cover of the DVD box, propped up in the same bed I sat next to while I watched him perform with the Nervous Magic Lantern that Sunday night.

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As anyone who's seen "Momma's Man" knows, the Jacobs loft is a revelation, an impossibly crowded storeroom of books, audio and motion picture paraphernalia, Mexican masks, antique toys, family photographs and bursts of colorful art. Sitting amid this walk-in assemblage, you feel as if you are in a Renaissance cabinet of curiosities in which exotic and marvelous objects from art and nature were gathered for display. By calling, filmmakers collect faces and gestures, light and shadow, fragments of the past. Most movies just make the time pass. Mr. Jacobs suspends time. He holds it up to the light so you can see it, letting it flicker for us a little longer. Finally, you see everything you have been missing.

Ken Jacobs's public shows in Los Angeles will take place at Redcat on Oct. 12 (213-237-2800, [redcat.org](http://redcat.org)); UCLA Film & Television Archive on Oct. 15 (310-206-8013, [cinema.ucla.edu/index.html](http://cinema.ucla.edu/index.html)); and Los Angeles Filmforum on Oct. 17 (with [Azazel Jacobs](http://AzazelJacobs.com)) and Oct. 18 ([lafilmforum.wordpress.com](http://lafilmforum.wordpress.com)).

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