

**NEGOTIATING RUPTURE:
THE AVANT-GARDE FILMS OF KEN JACOBS**

by

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Negotiating Rupture: The Avant-garde Films of Ken Jacobs

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Experimental filmmaker Ken Jacobs is a man with a foot firmly in two historically divergent avant-gardes: the early European and the post-war American. Accomplished primarily through a reconceptualization of earlier notions of shock, Jacobs' inheritance of the Dadaists' and Surrealists' tactics as well as the development of his own semiotics of rupture have allowed him to explore both film form and film content through a series of Frankenstein-like creations or filmformances. By exploring three of his major film works from three different periods of his life, *Blonde Cobra*, *Two Wrenching Departures* and *Star Spangled to Death*, the evolution of his own methodology of rupture is examined: shock as performance, shock as perceptual therapy and finally, shock as politics.

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER

I.	SHOCKING TRUTHS.....	1
	Defining Shock.....	2
	Pre-Shocks: Building Toward the Great-Quake.....	6
	A Heap of Broken Images: What's Left of the Avant-garde?.....	15
	Ken Jacobs.....	20
II.	SHOCK AS PERFORMANCE: <i>Blonde Cobra</i> (1958-63).....	24
	Influences, Illicit or Otherwise.....	25
	Shock of the Nude: Jack Smith & <i>Flaming Creatures</i>	29
	<i>Blonde Cobra</i> : Unwinding at 24/Scales a Second.....	31
	After the Taboos: An Aesthetics of Failing.....	40
III.	SHOCK AS PERCEPTION: <i>Two Wrenching Departures</i> (2006).....	45
	Enter the Age of Railroads & Nervousness.....	46
	Perceiving the Age of Nervousness Through Jacobs.....	50
	The Nuts & Bolts of <i>Two Wrenching Departures</i>	57
	AfterEffectsAfterWards.....	64
IV.	SHOCK AS POLITICS: <i>Star Spangled to Death</i> (1956-2004).....	65
	A Short Psychohistory of 9/11.....	66
	Guernica, Greed & Star Spangled to Death.....	72
	Weapons of Mass Distraction.....	75
	Ken, Ken, the Cosmic Fool.....	84
V.	FUTURE SHOCK: WHERE THE HELL DO WE GO FROM HERE !?!.....	88
	Future Shock.....	89
	The Shock of the Now (2011).....	91
	ENDNOTES.....	94
	BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	111

CHAPTER ONE:

SHOCKING TRUTHS – WHY SHOCK HEALS

WHY THE AVANT-GARDE WAS CONSERVATIVE

WHY KEN JACOBS MATTERS

Shock (noun)

1. A sudden upsetting or surprising event or experience: *it was a shock to face such hostile attitudes when I arrived*

2. A feeling of disturbed surprise resulting from an upsetting event: *her death gave us all a terrible shock; her eyes opened wide in shock*

2. An acute medical condition associated with a fall in blood pressure, caused by such events as loss of blood, severe burns, bacterial infection, allergic reaction, or sudden emotional stress, and marked by cold, pallid skin, irregular breathing, rapid pulse, and dilated pupils: *he died of shock due to massive abdominal hemorrhage*

3. A disturbance causing instability in an economy: *trading imbalances caused by the two oil shocks*

5. Short for Electric Shock
6. A violent shaking movement caused by an impact, explosion, or tremor: *earthquake shocks; rackets today don't bend or absorb shock the way wooden rackets do*

Shock

Shock refuses to sit still on the page. Distinctly antithetical, even antonymic to ideas such as static, firm, established and secure, it is perhaps easiest to see ‘shock’ simply as that state which exists as an intermediary between two stable states. The earthquake which deconstructs the familiar, stable terrain of the Earth, leaving a gap of land, or a sudden gap of meaning, is an all-too prominent example. Shock resists a stability of meaning simply due to its inherent nature of surprise, rapidity or collision. But that refusal of definition rumbles even deeper: in fact, one can view shock as a type of safety-catch mechanism within processes of change or metamorphosis similar to the way that wonder serves as a form of protection when confronting the absolute devastation of the Sublime. ¹

But in examining ‘shock’ in medical terms, which refers to a “life-threatening state associated with circulatory collapse brought about by a drop in blood pressure to a level too low to maintain an adequate blood supply to tissues,” shock allows the physical body (though largely unresponsive) to effectively process through the trauma of a physical/mental distress or disruption, protecting the body from further stimulations and also allowing the individual to manage intense amounts of pain or physical agony.² Shock, therefore, is both cause and effect, both instigator and repressor, both symptom and response. Not simply a “violent” rupture, shock allows one to both EXPERIENCE the initial shock (the violence) as well as NEGOTIATE the displacement and management of trauma – an aftershock.

A similar recapitulation occurs in the etymology of the word. Shock first appears in language in the 1560s as a military term meaning a “sudden blow” originally derived from

Middle French for “violent attack” or even Old French from *choquer* as to “strike against”. Denotatively, this martial quality inherent in the definition disappears until the eventual appearance of both Shocktroops and the numerous cases of neurological Shellshock during World War I. In the 1690s, the military context is supplemented for that of the realm of public opinion: “to offend, to displease.” And in 1705, the word shock gains its primary physiological origin: a sudden and disturbing impression on the mind as in “to give (something) an electric shock”.³ In 1804, it receives the ‘medical treatment’ – psychiatric electroshock therapy was “developed in Rome in 1938; insulin shock therapy, which puts the body in a comatose state, was developed in Vienna in 1933.”⁴ Lastly, conjoining both the public and physiological spheres, “shocker” emerges in 1824 as an event or object which “shocks or excites.”⁵ Within the transformation of the word’s meaning, there lies both a blow [choquer] as well as its reconciliation, again—both the EXPERIENCE of and the NEGOTIATION through.

And while no dictionary, etymological or otherwise, can predict the philosophical trajectory that a concept might undertake, shock became a principal, even definitive, term within the context of Late Modernism (approx. 1914-1989) discourse during the interwar/war period throughout Europe. In practically every sociological study, medical document, intellectual discourse or artistic manifesto, ‘shock’ is an ever-present, evolving and evocative concept. It makes perfect sense: taking shock at its original meaning – “sudden blow” – Early Modernism was certainly an abrupt, radical displacement. And, as will be discussed, Late Modernity [and eventually the American Avant-garde] was the reconciliation

of this displacement, using tactics and semiotics of shock to negotiate the original wound, the original trauma.

Modernism as primal scene. Here is one succinct but eloquent description of that reckoning by cultural theorists Laura Salisbury and Andrew Shail in their introduction to Neurology and Modernity: A Cultural History of Nervous Systems.

Modernity can be understood as a historical moment initially determined and then perpetuated by the effects of violent revolutions, secularization, the ascendancy of monopoly capitalism and bourgeois capitalist concepts of public and private, railway and then automotive transportation, the development of economies reliant on the industrialization of labor and the consequent rise of political structures for representing organized labor, and commercial dependence on long-distance instantaneous communication (via the telegraph).⁶

The French Revolution had provided the ground –liberalism and rise of the individual— for a re-assessment of political and economic practices. Time had changed, been split: no longer between night and day (due to electricity) but between commodified time and wasted time, between work/public and imaginative/private spaces. Space, too: distances were halved or even quartered by train and automobile. So while Whitman was writing odes to the Body Electric in America, Europe was physically being wired and electrified, metaphorically electrocuted into a new state of consciousness.

But just as significant to modernity as these material changes is the sense, persistently found in a broad range of discourses, of a common yet subjective experience of oneself *as* modern, as separated from the past to a degree not possible for one's ancestors. Modernity was persistently described and determined by a general sense of recent temporal rupture, accompanied by a consequent and self-conscious interest in new experiences, possibilities,

technologies, dimensions, ways of sensing the world, and forms of representing it.⁷

Modernity exists not only as a certain cultural, material or teleological reformation but also as a means for a re-education of the ontology of human “being”.⁸ Challenging historicity if not history itself by placing inherited dogmas of Enlightenment secular progress and Church-ordered redemptive practice into question, thereby freeing the individual to endlessly “become”, Modernity created a vast schism within both the total social order as well as the hereto ossified concept of the individual itself. Origin, identity, solid ground, foundation were all ready to be re-made. As historian Pericles Lewis writes, “Modernist writers and artists were often keenly aware of living in a world that was utterly different from that of their parents, whether because of new religious and scientific beliefs, of industrialization, of changing attitudes to sex and gender, or of transformative political events.”⁹ Late Modernity, through its tactics and semiotics of shock, attempted to transform things further.

Pre-Shocks: Building Toward the Great Quake

But before exploring the phenomenon of Late Modernity, one needs to understand its ideological and historical foundation. After all, there is a danger to historical isolation. A refusal to accept the idea that our age is but a dwarf standing upon the shoulder of giants is not only fallacious but also ignorant. But often Late Modernity is discussed, not as dialectic, but as a unique event in history, walled off and examined for its unique properties, pinned down and dissected for its unusual color. Like a second Renaissance bursting from the Dark

Ages of Ignorance, Late Modernity's concern with historical relativism was also an attempt to discard or at least hide its origins, to step into a new light – to be ex nihilo truly enlightened. The shocking tactics, aesthetics and semiotics of Late Modernity, however, cannot be seen in isolation: not only do they serve as cogent affects from the instability of Early Modernism (post-Darwin, Marx) but they also provide a coherent narrative effect that projects into the American avant-garde, particularly in the work of filmmaker Ken Jacobs.

And perhaps the first shock in the long progression toward Jacobs is an evolution in the very structural development of rational thinking. Until Early Modernism, thinkers were logocentric. They believed there was an ultimate meaning, deriving (or arising) from the logos, from an absolute origin (i.e. Plato's forms, Hegel's Idea, etc.). There are always certain expressions of this logos that find material, sensuous incarnations. The best art, apropos this logic, was that which realized the logos by encapsulating a "truth" which was eternally valid and unbound to a specific historical period. The transcendent, the Sublime, the Absolute. Logocentrism expresses itself through binaries: the first term, closer to the logos, is privileged over the second, inferior term: being/becoming, truth/lie, soul/body, logos/praxis, essence/existence, rational/emotional, divine/corporeal. Then in the 19th century, Nietzsche wrote the pronouncement that "God is Dead", a method to philosophically murder all notions of a transcendent existence, be they metaphysical, aesthetic or poetic.¹⁰

Those words were beyond shocking for the time. Just as Nietzsche himself wrote that human beings had yet to accept the Copernican status of a de-centered Earth, his assertion of divinity's absence/demise forced individuals to reassess their place in the universe. Early

Modernity, in one scenario, was humanity's attempt to come to terms with its teleological isolation, to fill a possibly infinite vacancy that God's sudden departure left behind. If there was no God, and thus no soul, then what is left but the dust and the ashes to smear on the walls of the void, to make art on the prison walls of existence? Discourses emerged, of course. But each attempt at reifying the spiritual (with Science, Art, Philosophy, Economics etc.) was nothing more than a distinct shock to further man from the obtainment of immutable truths.

Prominent SHOCKS abound throughout the beginning of post-Romantic Modernity:

1859: Charles Darwin, who developed a theory of evolution based on the notion of natural selection, not only eroded the classical Christian view of the Great Chain of Being [which separated the domain of animal and the human] but also stressed that humans were nothing but dynamically evolved creatures. No Adam in the garden formed ex deus, humans were but well-adapted, well-suited animals. As the demarcation was elided between man and animal, the sphere of divinity was also encroached: if man was but an evolved ape, spurious commentary attested, then was God but an evolved human.¹¹

1867: Karl Marx, refusing to accept the animal-like or alienated condition of Industrial workers as natural law, crafted both a dialectical model of economic Capitalism as well as offered an alternative through the system known as Socialism, later Communism. Unlike Feuerbach's assertion that history was human projection through religion, Marx believed it was social relations shaped by economics.¹² No transcendence, no spiritual component, suddenly the divinely-inspired King of the Middle Ages was but a feudal

autocrat whose power lay in society's irrational belief, any contemporary rich man but a totalitarian in guise of sociologically-constructed idol.

1871: Arthur Rimbaud, at the age of fifteen, wrote the infamous Letter of the Seer or *Voyant*. Challenging rationality and reason itself, he stressed the spiritual components of human experience, making art into a kind of religion. Rejecting positivist claims that truth arose from objective descriptions of the external world, he celebrated inner subjectivity and indeed even made headway into what he termed a universal language of the senses, contributed to and understandable by all. But in the end, his language project for the inner life/the inner vision was so intimate and singular that it eroded the universal completely. In a search for the cosmos, he instead proved the solipsism of man.¹³

1890: James George Frazer, in attempting to locate shared elements of religious belief, ended up creating a twelve-volume book called The Golden Bough. Instead of a theological perspective, Frazer examined religious rites as proto-anthropological and culture-determined products determining that most Christian rituals were in actuality absorbed pagan beliefs by the early Catholic Church. Like Darwin and Marx, Frazer's work eroded the idea of the miraculous singularities the Church/Society preached: no more was the Christian religion unique but was itself a collection of fragmented, misunderstood beliefs from previous (pagan) ages.

1897: Sigmund Freud, developing a science that described "the human mind," wrote The Interpretation of Dreams in which he speaks about the great power of the unconscious mind to shape psychological problems out of certain frustrations or blocked (or repressed)

desires. Examining the pure unconsciousness that is the dream, he instituted a new line of thought which displaced reason further, foregrounding the rise of total stream of consciousness. Man, no longer a being of rational choice, was but a bundle of uncontained impulses and childhood neuroses. There was no longer a dichotomy between normality and abnormal but instead a continuum: there was no longer a unified self but a chaotic duality. [Later, he also claimed that society itself suffered similar macrocosmic returns of the repressed which led to wars, destruction, death, meaning that even the thereto stable whole of society was itself an atomistic, discontented construction of the unconscious.]¹⁴

1905: Known as Albert Einstein's annus mirabilis, in which he published four articles which fundamentally changed previous views on space, time and matter. Writing about the photoelectric effect, Brownian motion, Special Relativity and matter/energy equivalence, Einstein re-invented the physical world, calling into question such prominent ideas as the Newtonian clockwork Universe. The known universe, no longer knowable under principles of generalized measurements, was suddenly as mysterious and dangerous as the human mind.

Once-stable beliefs or models disintegrated beneath the penetrating insights of these individuals.¹⁵ The binaries of the logocentric mind no longer stood: if anything, they were all turned backwards. Nothing was stable. Like the theory of plate tectonics, in which continental/oceanic plates create or release pressure due to divergent or convergent motion, each shock to the foundation of the known only served to destabilize *everything* further. It was a series of shocks and counter-shocks, as one discovery applied to the dismantling of another truth elsewhere in the system, priming the land for even larger, more devastating,

tremors.¹⁶ One shock after another, one abrupt jolt of consciousness to the next – the petrified worldview of Europe had not only cracked, but liquefied. Science fed into economics fed into religion fed into aesthetics fed into medicine, ad nauseum, until the early Modernist European psyche was completely shaken to its foundation in the summer of 1914. Tearing bodies asunder, the land into pieces, that war, the Great War, was even said to have split Modernism in half.¹⁷

But unlike Pericles Lewis, Frederic Jameson or even Giddens' studies on late modernity, I disagree with the *artificial* dividing line of World War I.¹⁸ Again, historical isolation is bad faith and mostly serves ideological ends. So aside from a further assertion of Nietzschean nihilism and will-to-power, World War I was not a break, but simply a shock so large it actually created a reactionary politics and aesthetics disguised (through historical reinvention) as the transformative and fundamental period known as the European avant-garde.¹⁹ And while there have been countless essays touting the radical quality of the avant-garde movement, they tend to study the works within a vacuum, often disregarding the major theoretical or philosophical advancements of pre-WWI Modernity.²⁰ [A notable exception is Clement Greenberg in his seminal article, "Avant-garde and Kitsch" when he writes that "the birth of the avant-garde coincided chronologically – and geographically too – with the first bold development of scientific revolutionary thought in Europe."²¹ But there is another interpretation which the concept of shock not only allows but, paradoxically, grounds.

Here's a shock, in itself, throwing away much of what History teaches. The tactics

and semiotics of shock found in the European avant-garde are absolutely reactionary. Unlike the discoveries of Early Modernism, what I deem the EXPERIENCE of shock, the so-called revolutionary aestheticians of post-WWI were simply the NEGOTIATORS. In fact, one can view the art and written works as examples of the most conservative form of aesthetics: mimesis. Instead of revolutionary practice, what they provided was a precise (often haunting) articulation of a suddenly defamiliarized world. Discussed in Stephen Halliwell's recent book The Aesthetics of Mimesis: Ancient Texts and Modern Problems, mimesis does not simply describe the 'mirror-like copy that Plato envisioned but it applies to a wide variety of artistic styles, ranging from realism all the way to idealism.'²² Or to quote art historian Robert Farris, there is a "midpoint mimesis" – between absolute abstraction and absolute likeness.²³ Even Ayn Rand, in an early essay on art and cognition, called mimesis the "selective re-creation of reality."²⁴

Even though Modernists gathered under the banner of Pound's dictum to 'make it new', they were simply 'making the Modern age representable' by selectively recreating aspects of their new reality. And while this line of thought (especially to a lover of the avant-garde) seems off-putting or even fight-worthy, the evidence bears out. Taking ideas from Darwin's evolution as well as the social implications spurned from his discoveries, primitivism was in vogue: welcoming critiques that their art looked the work of children's scrawling, they sought authenticity in a self-expression derived from open, primitive cultures.²⁵ Marx led Marinetti's Futurists to force Capitalist industrialization to its aesthetic end-game, but also led artists to ideologically self-correct forms of mass production, indeed

leading to such concepts as Dadaist readymades (such as DuChamp's *Fountain*) and Constructivist *zaum*, thereby critiquing the sanctity of everyday and museum space, of art versus utility, of "aura" itself.²⁶ Freud perhaps most profoundly created what we know as Surrealism. As Breton writes in the movement's manifesto, "Freud very rightly brought his critical faculties to bear upon the dream. It is, in fact, inadmissible that this considerable portion of psychic activity has still been so grossly neglected."²⁷ And what would "realistic" painting resemble after Einstein (and other scientists such as Heisenberg or Bohr)?²⁸ Cubism. Vorticism.²⁹ In all senses, it appears that the avant-garde was a case of radical description, not political or aesthetic refutation. Simply put, Mimesis by any other name is still mimesis.

At the center, of this new mimetic practice was the implementation of shock. Not as ontologically hinged as the Early Modernist breakthroughs, shock was rhetorically moved to the margins – into the act/art itself (to morally shock others). Like the definition of medical shock, these new "shockers" were being used to respond to the initial psychic wounds from Early Modernism. For instance, Antonin Artaud, theorizing on the Grand Guignol tradition of theatre, utilized the concept of rupture as core to his new Theater of Cruelty – shock would purge the audiences similar to Grecian dramatic catharsis. Breton calls for 'shocking events' such as bringing a loaded gun to a cinema house in order to defamiliarize the standard bourgeois world. Brecht, in his Expressionist theatre, seeks alienating effects to shock his viewer into awareness of political theatre. For critic Peter Burger, Russian formalism was a movement in which "shocking the recipient becomes the dominant principle of artistic intent."³⁰ Even filmmaker and theoretician Eisenstein wanted to wire

viewers to their seats, shock devices placed beneath, even going as far as relating the editing in film to a systematic deployment of shocks.

Even European avant-garde films were combinations of Early Modernist shocks: Luis Bunuel's seminal 1929 film *Un Chien Andalou*, for instance, combines the dreamwork of Freud with the displaced temporality/spatiality of Einstein's physics. Jean Cocteau's *Blood of the Poet* opens with a buckling chimney and ends with that same chimney clattering fully to the ground – in other words, fifty-four minutes pass within the space of an action which would normally take but a few seconds – again, Freud rears his head with the hypnagogic architecture of dreams and Einstein's revelation of space-time accounts for the chimney. Time and space had already been halved or quartered: here, in dramatic fashion, they were cut into 24 frames a second. If the eternal qualities had been dealt sudden blows by Early Modernism, these filmmakers and artists began to shape and negotiate them, to splice and project them.

The collective artists of the European avant-garde, thus, were not making “radical” art per se but they were beautifully compositing a sketch of the new world, a world built high on relativity, chance, trauma and shock. When Ezra Pound wrote shortly after the publishing of T.S. Eliot's epic *Waste Land* that it was “the justification of the ‘movement,’ of our modern experiment...” he was beyond prescient: modern life was a wasteland in the sense that it was nothing but a shifting assemblage serving the purpose of mimesis but in a form more adequate to this ‘modern reality.’³¹ And there is no better assessment of that Modern world than the following words:

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
 Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
 You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
 A heap of broken images...³²

A Heap of Broken Images: What's Left of the Avant-garde?

Does the realization of the European avant-garde as less radical than previously assessed truly remove its potential or power as transformative cultural juggernaut? Does positing a categorical pronouncement of mimetic representation upon self-described non-representational works make them any less important? And does it mean that the word has overflowed its banks to become shorthand for anything vaguely politicized or slightly risqué, that the word avant-garde has become cliché? Like the realizations that emerged while examining the definition of shock, perhaps an exploration of the phrase 'avant-garde' will also reveal a submerged or hidden meaning.

Emerging in the early 19th century from a political milieu of utopian socialists (such as Henri de Saint-Simon and Charles Fourier), the original meaning conceived of an escape from 'art for art's sake' to art "as a means to the end of social progress."³³ Toward the end of Saint-Simon's 1825 book, he writes:

Let us unite. To achieve our one single goal, a separate task will fall to each of us. We, the artists, will serve as the avant-garde: for amongst all the arms at our disposal, the power of the Arts is the swiftest and most expeditious. When we wish to spread new ideas amongst men, we use in turn, the lyre, ode or song, story or novel; we inscribe those ideas on marble or canvas... We aim for the heart and imagination, and hence our effect is the most vivid and the most decisive."³⁴

An 1825 call-to-arms for artists, long before the ‘isms’ in Europe erupted. But unlike the labels of Surrealism, Dadaism, Futurism, et al, Saint-Simon did not distinguish one approach to art from others.³⁵ As long as the art created a condition of utopian socialism, it was effective. In truth, it lacked the immensity of the ego evident in the European avant-garde.

But along with that ego came a switch of purpose: no longer political, avant-garde came to mean aesthetic. When and by whom that happened is under much debate. Paul Wood claims its emergence with Rimbaud’s poems of the French Commune; others ascribe Apollinaire’s lending of the phrase to the Cubists as evidence of the switch. But wherever or however it may have occurred, Saint-Simon’s view of the artist shifted from political back to what Shelley called “unacknowledged legislators” and even further back to “art for art’s sake.” Yet while the European avant-garde preached a line of thought such as Ionesco’s – note the political underpinnings--

I prefer to define the avant-garde in terms of opposition and rupture. While most writers, artists, and thinkers believe they belong to their time, the revolutionary playwright feels he is running counter to his time...An avant-garde man is like an enemy inside a city he is bent on destroying, against which he rebels; for like any system of government, an established form of expression is also a form of oppression. The avant-garde man is the opponent of an existing system.³⁶

it was already bound to fail through its own political/aesthetic system. As dealt with by Hans Enzensberger in “The Aporias of the Avant-Garde”, there was a discipline attached to such tactics or semiotics of rupture or shock, a discipline which eventually undermined the entire project.

“Only the word freedom can still fill me with enthusiasm. I consider it suited to keep the old human fanaticism upright for an indefinite time yet to come.” With these words, Andre Breton, in the year 1924, opens the first *Surrealist Manifesto*. The new doctrine crystallizes, as always, around its yearning for absolute freedom. The word *fanaticism* is already an indication that this freedom can be acquired only at the price of absolute discipline: within a few years, the guard spins itself into a cocoon of regulations.³⁷

Somehow rule and Surrealism or order and Dadaism seem polar opposites but the act of issuing a manifesto itself is a prescription for a certain attitude, a set of behaviors. If one does or does not do this, then they can be labeled or rejected from a certain category. That is the very opposite of freedom, in fact. Furthermore, if we “admit that Dada’s nihilism expresses an ‘archetypal’ trait of the avant-garde, we can say that any true avant-garde movement has a profound built-in tendency to negate itself.”³⁸ No wonder Surrealism had such a dark fascination with suicide, an aesthetic thanatophilia. Noted art critic Hal Foster continues the list of other paradoxes within the avant-garde: “the ideology of progress, the presumption of originality, the elite hermeticism...the appropriation by the culture industry, and so on.”³⁹ In fact, it was only the avant-garde’s political reformation in the 1960’s by theorists such as Poggioli or Burger that continued the smoke screen of a revolutionary epoch.

As the ‘avant-garde’ continued to devolve from political to aesthetic, the term became a catch-all to describe any work which deviated from accepted art practices of the past. As consumer or bourgeois fancy accepted the “revolutionary”, however they too became aura-less products, to be purchased or sold. The ‘shock of the new’ had been

absorbed into the parasitic search for the kitsch.⁴⁰ What had been Modern had become synonymous with the Middle-class, with the commodified. Their cultural vocabularies had been printed in catalogues. While Artaud had screamed of No More Masterpieces, demanding crisis and even failure, the work became masterpieces, the artists became popular, the equivalent of joining the System. In a period of roughly two decades, the 'shock' had become the 'awwww.' European intellectuals of the time recognized its decline. In his essay 'Twilight of the Thirties' published in the 1939 *Partisan Review*, Philip Rahv assesses the situation for a continuance of the avant-garde in Europe.

For more than a hundred years literature [and art], on a world scale, was in the throes of constant inner revolution, was the arena of uninterrupted rebellions and counter rebellions, was incessantly renewing itself both in substance and in form. But at present it seems as if this magnificent process is drawing to a close... There are still remnants, but no avant-garde movement to speak of exists any longer... I do not believe that a new avant-garde movement, in the proper historical sense of the term, can be formed in this pre-war situation."⁴¹

Cicero said that in times of war, the muses fall silent. That was indeed the case for World War II. The Enemy had changed from the bourgeoisie to the lock-stepping Nazis. Aesthetic, disruptive practices intended to question society were traded for physically destructive ones intended to save it. In Europe, the fight for freedom was no longer on the canvas or with the pen – the gun and mortar had long replaced those. But unlike the 'ism' fallout after WWI, Europe after the second war had to rebuild. That shock was too large, the rupture too sudden, the violence too real – aestheticized tactics of shock were simply child's

play in comparison to lives lost, beaches stormed, or the Holocaust.

But the tactics of shock and subversion within the European avant-garde did not simply vanish, transplanting themselves as foot-note to a larger history. In the United States, an anarchistic trend based around ‘shocking’ the conservative values of post-war America had begun. They, furthermore, met head-on all of Foster’s complaints about the original avant-garde’s self-contradictory movement.⁴² The Beat Generation, with its cast of Zen-tinged Dada-inspired figures, turned the idea of progress into absurdity, circling the United States in an endless loop in a search for enlightenment. Andy Warhol turned consumer assembly-line products into serialized art, effacing any notion of “original” as well as showing that if one cannot escape the culture industry, one dives in or even runs it, hence *The Factory*. Pioneering filmmaker Stan Brakhage, like Rimbaud before him, demanded a new way of seeing: when Rimbaud asked for a rational disengagement of the senses, Brakhage restlessly hunted for the “untutored eye.” And even a Hollywood icon like James Dean allowed these countercultural motifs to infect even the straightest kid in the smallest theater in the dinkiest of Midwest towns.

It was also the crucible of the avant-garde filmmakers who were attempting to examine the potential of the medium of cinema, not simply wishing to recapitulate the mystifying practices of Hollywood narrative. Their self-reflexive films (variously termed “formal,” “structural,” “structuralist,” “structural-material,” or “materialist”)⁴³ are figured as heir to Greenberg’s self-reflexive avant-garde painting: as Eric de Bruyn writes, “in fact, formalist film could be seen as having saved modernism from total shipwreck, since the

avant-garde of the 1950s had already abandoned a modernist concern with the formal purity of the medium.”⁴⁴ The gradual abstraction of consciousness into structuralist reflexivity is even formulated as *the* grand narrative of American avant-garde film in P. Adams Sitney’s canonical history of it:

it would seem that the great unacknowledged aspiration of the American avant-garde cinema has been the mimesis of the human mind in a cinematic structure. Beginning with an attempt to translate dreams and other revelations of the personal unconscious in trance film, through the imitation of the act of seeing in the lyric film and the collective unconscious of the mythopoeic film, this cinema attempted to define consciousness and the imagination. Its latest formal constructions have approached the form of meditation—the structural film—in order to evoke more directly states of consciousness and reflexes of the imagination in the viewer. The participatory film follows the direction established by the structural film in finding corollaries for the conscious mind.⁴⁵

And that radical move, from the absolute belief in purity of the medium, into a testing of its outermost limits (to define consciousness) both shows the ironic awareness of the failings of Modernist practice by the American avant-garde film movement as well as providing the emphasis for most of the works of **Ken Jacobs** throughout his entire career. Working within the medium of experimental film for well over half a century now, Jacobs has “crafted a body of work that focuses less on storytelling than on the mechanics of film itself – “mining,” he says, the way images on the frames interact in the hopes of revealing a hidden truth. Hoping to alter, too, the way people look at the world.”⁴⁶ From the seminal “structuralist” deconstruction of narrative and early cinema, *Tom, Tom, the Piper’s Son* (1969), the “wondrous” exploration of the nitroglycerin compost of cinematic history, *The Opening of the 19th Century* (1991), the landscape-as-orgasmic voyage in *The Georgetown*

Loop (1996), the numerous paracinematic experiments of live shadowplays and film-performance mysticism in his *Nervous System/Nervous Magic Lantern* works, Jacobs is a practitioner of muscular-eye cinema, slowly but surely revising the perspectives and viewing-practice of the normal, trained eye.⁴⁷ To be fair, though, Jacobs' own biography's first entry after birth is working with Hans Hofmann.

A man with a foot in both avant-gardes, having studied under German-born Hans Hofmann, one of the originators of the Abstract Expressionist movement, as well as creating his own Department of Cinema at Binghamton (from which a number of remarkable artists graduated under his aegis including our own Phil Solomon), Ken Jacobs knew both the historical context as well as the aesthetic importance of subversion. So it is also through Jacobs that the political and aesthetic once again reunite through precise, but different articulations of 'shock.' Whether with made films, found footage, Beat-style narratives, penetrating studies, shadow plays or even projector performances via the Nervous System [see Chapter 2], Jacobs' agitations of cinematic form throughout his career are a "war against ignorance," a struggle against perception and full-on political guerilla tactics. But they are all, in their own incarnations, 'shocking.'

In his films from the early 60s such as *Blonde Cobra*, mostly psycho-dramas starring the shock-contour Jack Smith, he relied on startling behavior ("shockers") in order to show the discrepancy between normal and the artistic sides of society, between hetero and homosexuality, and between the down-and-out and the up-and-coming. Utilizing avant-

garde reincarnations from the Surrealist and Dadaist movement, the performance itself served to shock. Using, furthermore, the form of cinema to defamiliarize conventions of anticipation, *Blonde Cobra* serves as a classic example of non-narrative, experimental film. In Chapter Two, *Blonde Cobra* will be thoroughly dissected (scene analysis, etc.) in order to demonstrate how in the electrolysis between practitioner and spectator and between actor and behavior, he absolutely would have 'shocked' the Fifties.

After breaking with Jack Smith, Jacobs turned to the phenomenological in order to provoke once again. Like the late Modernist goal of foregrounding materials in order to shock individuals into an awareness of the aesthetic process, Jacobs turns directly to the form and function of the cinematic medium itself in order to physically "shock" an individual into new states of awareness. Like Artaud's 'shock treatments' or Eisenstein's montage theories, Jacobs' film *Two Wrenching Departures* (utilizing the Nervous System) is both a continuation of the political (as it stars Jack Smith) as well as a rupture of the purely physical. Utilizing flicker, blur and other ontological aspersions in the film, Jacobs even goes on to dismantle the stability of identity and spectatorship. [See included DVD for evidence.] In Chapter Three, the film will be explored as truly haptic cinema, as perceptual electro-shock therapy.

Lastly, in Chapter Four, we will examine how Ken Jacobs' dealt with the Post-9/11 World in his seven-and-a-half-hour opus *Star-Spangled to Death*. Searching for resolute meaning as did Eliot in the Waste Land through a "heap of broken images" (mainly found footage), Jacobs' outrage is balanced by a muted sense of 'shock.' Instead of blaring messages

against a Bush regime set on high oil-profits and unjustified war, there are flash-messages (1 frame) which flicker throughout the film, detailing America's horrendous grievances from hundreds of sources. Like an architectural blueprint for the American consciousness of war-making, Jacobs sifts through the detritus of culture to find how we became star-spangled to death. Thus, it is both a political articulation of Marxist notions that revolution erupts through a series of shocks as well as dealing with the trauma of a numinous shock – 9/11.

So, sit back, strap in: it's going to be an electrifying ride...

CHAPTER TWO:

SHOCK AS PERFORMANCE: KEN JACOBS' *BLONDE COBRA* (1958-63)

“Art shouldn’t leave you alone. I value an art that doesn’t fit all into place, tell you everything is all right in the world, but keeps aggravating, creates consternation in you. Activates--conscience, all kinds of things.” – Ken Jacobs

Influences, Illicit or Otherwise

In an interview by John Maturri with Ken Jacobs on the “Theater of Embarrassment”, Jacobs describes his first brush with drama called The Human Wreckage Review in 1961. Basically, it was a play [including such shocking acts as] “the Doge of Venice rising from the flood waters with a turd on his head...and Jack [Smith] exposing himself.”⁴⁸ But despite the dramaturgical pretenses, the Review was always more a “nightclub act” than pure theater.⁴⁹ It was to be, however, quite important, as it was the initial showcase for Jack Smith [see Shock of the Nude section]. Like other theater groups which emerged in the early 1960’s such as The Theater of the Ridiculous, The Playhouse of the Ridiculous, The Cockettes, The Living Theater and the Angels of Light, the Review expressed both nostalgia as well as a playful sense of the artificial as if to express civilization’s exhaustion in the ever-flow of urban stimuli.

This nostalgia, however, was not starry-eyed in the least: as Jacobs recalls, “we suffered from nostalgia already, saw Hollywood as a seedy garbage heap. We saw the waste of some low-budget personalities...”⁵⁰ Along with this (more algia than nostos) nostalgia, foregrounding artifice was a self-aware trend of the new American Avant-garde aesthetics.⁵¹ Like the ennui and angst of the earlier European avant-garde, which was both an acceptance of and reaction to early Modernity’s changes, early 60s theatre used that artificiality to explore the ridiculous. Entirely less existential than the “absurd”, shocking behavior was used to alleviate residual anxiety and combat an overt consumption pattern spawned by the Capitalist post-war era. Jacobs, in the same interview, speaks brilliantly about this new type

of theatrical endeavor: “Some things – the confusion of the real world with theater – like Little Cobra Dance. ...That was about 1956. As I’ve said, the marginal attracts me, the in-between territory of an absolute esthetic form unto itself and the world from which it arises. A kind of semi-risen or half-dissolved state is my idea of drama.”⁵²

But the notion of “semi-risen or half-dissolved” has repercussions elsewhere: in the 1840s, Baudelaire first made the distinction between “contingent” and “universal” art. Contingent, the empty or irrelevant half of art which addresses the contemporary, and universal, the timeless and intransient half of art which addresses the eternal, were at odds: the Baudelarian-styled artist was stuck in the eddy, pulled between a need to describe the current and a desire to also express the infinite. Thus, when early champion of the avant-garde Jonas Mekas claimed Ken Jacobs and Jack Smith as practitioners of a Baudelarian Cinema, it was the friction between *elan vital* and the decay of energy that provoked that claim.⁵³ Of course, there were many factors to this new type of cinema. First, the long-take, static camera technique found in Andy Warhol’s films liberated the subject to interpret the filmed object themselves (just as the photograph originally liberated painting to explore abstraction).⁵⁴ It refused the normative function of cinema – entertainment expectation – and pushed the onus to be “entertained” on to the viewer themselves. Also, the avant-garde theatrical groups [mentioned above] showed the power of impromptu, improbable, or even “bad” performances. Even Jonas Mekas wrote, “Improvisation is the highest form of condensation, it points to the very essence of a thought, an emotion, a movement.”⁵⁵ The steady-state of form and frenetic nature of the content provided that friction, that “semi-

risen or half-dissolved state” which Jacobs executes to perfection in his film *Blonde Cobra*.

This self-annihilation or self-transformation, a state of endless potentiality or terminality, also has obvious resonances with the Surrealists before him. After all, “forced” madness was a tactic of rebellion against the bourgeois sentiments of the European Modern world. They even attempted to simulate madness, to invoke disturbances, trances and atavistic evocations within themselves. As Salvador Dali wrote, “[I have] lived as a brother with madness and can simulate its ecstasies with much greater facility than [I] can imitate the so-called sane.”⁵⁶ It was a deliberate synthesis of reality and imagination, an automatism which was said to free “images in time and space, [so] that the paralogic of images would no longer be subject to rational order.”⁵⁷ Similar to the artistic parody that Surrealism (esp the plays of Alfred Jarry) created within the post WWI environment, Jacobs transformed the over-consumption and artifice of post-war America into a burlesque rendering of film noir, sexual exploration/rejection, and black leader. Taking the idea from Bunuel that the free association of ideas produced near traumatic shocks, Jacobs’ *Blonde Cobra* is New York City Jewish Surrealism, ironic and absolutely controlled.

Along with the Surrealist inspiration was an attempt to enact many of Artaud’s theories of theater, especially the idea that “the spectator is in the center and the spectacle surrounds him.”⁵⁸ Instead of narrative coherency, we are instead offered elements of correspondence: the job of the viewer is not simply to be fed a story but must work to create the story themselves. And if no story exists, the spectacle itself must suffice, must itself be the story. Thus live-radio, disjointed image/sound, cut-aways, black leader and non-fluid

camera movement contribute to a sense of spectacle bordering on anarchy. At any moment, one suspects the film will break or nonsense will invade so thoroughly as to leave nothing but remnants of madhouse dialogues chattering in the subconscious. Quoted in Sitney's famous book Visionary Film, Jacobs says about the making of *Blonde Cobra*: "I was very interested in combustion. There was even a long destruction sequence in which thing after thing was broken... Just watching things breaks, and in their breaking reveal their structure, had the most vibrant moment of life, all the clarity of their being made, like explicitly for their moment of destruction. I was interested in revealing things in their breaking..."⁵⁹

Lastly, Jacobs' film has much in common with the happenings of individuals such as Alan Kaprow, Jim Dine and Claes Oldenberg. When Kaprow says "anarchy now testifies to the healthiest part of us: our fundamental creative powers. It is time that we begin to believe that the philosophy of no man being an island was thought up by an island", he is writing in the register of the manifesto.⁶⁰ Like many of the original intentions of the European avant-garde, there is a public declaration of anti-individualism, pro-*mass* art form. However, Ken Jacobs puts a twist on the logic: indeed, in some ways, the film is nothing but the portrayal of one man's island but the portrayal is so raw, so open, and so damned autobiographical that he allows an all-too vivid portrait of a specific time and place. *Blonde Cobra* is anarchic in the best sense of that word – both personal and public, both transparent and opaque. Again, it makes the viewer think, and then connects the "islands" (viewer/filmmaker) through those bridges of thought.

Taken together as influences, *Blonde Cobra* has all the potential to be so interior that

it would be impossible to enter the film: madness, non-purposeful spectacle, autobiography. But all these varying states of interiority usually designed to hold the viewer at bay or at the very least in frustration, however, all work toward an open, even playful, production. The concept of subjectivity has never been more open to explore than in this film. And perhaps that has mainly to do with the ‘shocking’ semiotics at work, courtesy of Jack Smith, ah, Jack Smith...

Before we continue, let’s introduce him.

Shock of the Nude: Jack Smith & *Flaming Creatures*

Jonas Mekas, one of the earliest proponents of Underground Film, writes in “Jack Smith, or

the End of Civilization” about one of Smith’s happenings.

...at 2 A.M., only Jack Smith was still alive, a madman, the high priest of the ironical burial grounds, administering last services here alone and by himself...

at the moment it all became part of the huge sadness of the burial grounds, the end of civilization sadness, part of the plan, part of the human wreckage, all prearranged by Jack, the Madman of Grand Street... whatever anybody does to destroy his art falls into his art, becomes part of the huge collage, no matter what they do. He prearranged the music and the whole set so that it absorbs everything—exactly like the end of the civilization itself which it seemed to portray—yes, this set became like the culture that seems to absorb everything and everybody—a huge dumping grounds, and open mouths of graveyard—⁶¹

Pioneering underground filmmaker, radical costumer and photographer, shameless performance artist, saint of camp queerness, angel of trash, Jack Smith’s multi-valent influence is evident in the work of Andy Warhol, John Waters, George Kuchar, Robert

Wilson, Cindy Sherman and Richard Foreman. Smith's first film, following just a few years after his performance in *Blonde Cobra*, was called *Flaming Creatures* and was summarily banned everywhere it was to be shown. As Gary Morris writes, "this included, of all places, the halls of Congress, where it was unleashed by the desiccated Strom Thurmond in an anti-porn tirade."⁶² In the film of "creatures" (taken from Baudelaire, later stolen and commodified to become Warhol's superstars) which immortalized drag queens, mermaids, vampires, and naked, cavorting couples in rooftop revelry, Smith put on trial a litany of conservative norms: heterosexuality, forced narrative form, and even psychosexual dynamics. It was orgy as mise-en-scene. It was also the avant-garde reaction to what normal society attempted to hide: that the picket fence and the pearls were all but stylish signifiers which attempted to disguise a substance evacuated of real meaning. Jack Smith foregrounded the low-budget, cardboard aesthetic as to "practically rub our noses in the idea that logic and progress and movement are always secondary to experience and stasis and the tableau, as long as it's beautiful."⁶³

Shot on top of a building in the Lower East Side, using unevenly exposed film and arbitrarily edited, Smith composed montages of turbaned, posturing, hallucinogenic creatures and then filmed their writhing orgies with a mock-Ali Baba soundtrack blaring over the images.⁶⁴ More veiled than seen, more fragmented than whole, they are classic creatures: grotesque beings which have no end or no beginning. Carnal, hungry, mythological, Rabelaisian, it is a world where the monkey wears the crown, the king has been deposed to the fool. Sontag wrote: "The space in which *Flaming Creatures* moves is not the space of

moral ideas, which is where American critics have traditionally located art. What I am urging is that there is not only moral space, by whose laws *Flaming Creatures* would have come off badly; there is only aesthetic space, the space of pleasure.”⁶⁵ And unlike narrative films which seemingly must end within that moral space (through a message or closure), Jack Smith’s film had to end with something as nihilistic as the film was pleasurable: like a *deus ex machina*, the screen begins moving violently. Jack Smith, via the easiest technique possible—shaking the camera—has created an earthquake during the midst of the orgy. It is the snidest commentary on Judgement Day and yet the orgy continues. Even after the final title card states “The End” a man’s hand jiggles a woman’s breast.

To place Jack Smith in a film then is itself shocking: he lived to shake up the world. Jacobs recalls the mutual feeling he and Smith shared: “all life was garbage, hopelessness; we were disgusted by the price of existence, in a puke from suffering. Our joy was dependent on the suffering and sorrows of the world.”⁶⁶ Plunging into the erotic, the garrulous, the trash-culture, and their desperate lives, Jacobs and his friends began to collaborate. Along with *Little Stabs at Happiness*, *Blonde Cobra* represents their attempts to explore their own deranged sensibilities as well as prod the sane-balls out there in the conservative world.

Blonde Cobra: Unwinding at 24/Scales a Second

It is no accident that the film is called *Blonde Cobra*. It unwinds slowly, its scales glitter-shifting by at 24 frames per second. But by the time you realize what you’re watching, you’ve been struck, bitten. The “blonde” quality makes it that much more

alluring, and that much more deadly. Metaphors aside, the film is actually a play on “Siodmak’s *Cobra Woman* (1944) starring Smith’s obsession, Maria Montez, with additional nods to Josef von Sternberg and *Dracula*.”⁶⁷ But instead of a parody on Siodmak’s film, Jacobs and his cronies, through ridiculous juxtaposition and piecemeal technique, offer a post-war interpretation of the Surrealist game, *The Exquisite Corpse*.⁶⁸ Sheldon Renan relates:

In 1960, Bob Fleischner gave Ken Jacobs some unedited footage he had shot of Jack Smith during nine afternoons in 1959. It showed Smith and others picking their way through a life environment of complete desolation. Jacobs edited the footage, added a sound track of Smith monologues and music of the 1930s, occasionally running it over black leader. The result was the horrendous *Blonde Cobra*.⁶⁹

The collective assemblage of *Blonde Cobra*, in which each collaborator was able to view what a previous artist had contributed, brings together strange items and actors, films them in odd locations with absolutely no explication, further confounding narrative logic through a complex, interwoven soundtrack, and edits it all together with an erratic stream-of-consciousness approach. The *Exquisite Corpse* form was even extended to the “performance” of the film: “*Blonde Cobra* comes with instructions – frequently botched by projectionists – for playing a live broadcast during specific sequences.”⁷⁰ It was well constructed chaos, all edited and engineered by Jacobs – from the reel to the real – a type of anti-form formalism. Recalling both group Surrealism and dream automatism (such as insert shots of gravestones or Smith’s monologues), the film’s “devices are used aggressively to rupture continuity and challenge the consciousness of the viewer...”⁷¹ It also represents the

tension between personalities: the flamboyant and the controlled, the waster and the gleaner. But as Blake taught, it is through complementary opposites that movement and energy is achieved.

The “shock” comes, though, not only through these distinct formal idiosyncrasies, but also through the content. [The following analysis/sketch comes from a rather degraded copy of *Blonde Cobra*, included with the DVD.] The film opens with a stretch of diffused plastic, behind which an occluded Jack Smith picks up what appears to be a rock or a plastic organ—representing heart, brain, courage perhaps – inside a run-down set (apartment?). The audio is vastly more complex: with clips sliced from films and radio ads, Jack Smith improves over-top: his monologic rant-question “What was the other one?” is answered by the famous refrain of “Let’s call the whole thing off” from 1937’s *Shall We Dance*.

Directly after, in a quasi-joking fashion, Jacobs splices in about 30 seconds of black leader: even he is calling the whole thing off. Just as the cloud/razor slicing the moon/eye in *Un Chien Andalou*, which announced to the cinema audience ‘OPEN YOUR EYES’, Jacobs’ black leader is a different form of pronouncement. This is a different type of film: expectations will not be met, even down to the visual. The audio may continue, may even strive toward image, but picture will be absent. You, the viewer, must work, as well.

Then the visuals return: three men, one chuffing on a pipe, alternate places within the frame. Like a police line-up gone haywire – shifting figures posing— the camera tends to focus on Jack Smith, even following him as he collapses to the floor. As Smith intones, “We will now start all over again,” a hand reaches out, marker poised and begins to write - ‘B L O

N DE COBR A' with a snake head and tail adorning the opposite sides of the title card. The very reverse of the snake eating its own tail, there is no continuity, no progress, no ouroboros to be found. Screaming in hysteric falsetto, Smith sings over the remainder of the thrown-together credit sequence.

INSERT: GRAVEYARD. A church bell tolls as a radio ad plays: "twelve noon by the century-old chimes in historic City Hall. This is New York, the city of opportunity, where eight million people live in peace and harmony and enjoy the benefits of democracy." With Arabic music static-filled and blaring, Jack Smith smears his face against a mirror. It is, however, in Jacobs' editing that the sarcasm inherent within the radio ad is found: here is a man whose narcissism (in classical sense) is so profound he has been lost to himself or here is a man lost among the incapacity of the image to provide anything more than bitter reflection. Then, as if to give the viewer time to reflect themselves, black leader once again predominates. Thrust into darkness, into silence, the viewer comes up against the so-called inviolate mirror of cinema. Instead of a hero or narrative agent, however, they receive blackness, negative space and absence.

The next sequence, however, becomes yet another aspect of the Exquisite Corpse metaphor as well as a "shocking" breaking of a taboo – corpse defilement. As Smith's monologues switches to a diatribe about "necrophiliac longing" and "necrophiliac fulfillment", punctuated by the staccato of the word "Ravish", the image is quite the antithesis: it simply shows Jack Smith clowning around. With negative/positive intercutting, one realizes that the mirror (from above) has not only been about reflection but about the

second inviolate condition of cinema: immortality of gesture, of words. Thus, Jack Smith may have ravished the body in language...but Jacobs committed necromancy (raising of the dead) through the editing process. As he himself says about *Tom-Tom*, his most famous work from later in his career.

Ghosts! Cine-recordings of the vivacious doings of persons long dead. ... I wanted to “bring to the surface” that multi-rhythmic 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 ... stirred to life by a successive 16-24 fps pattering on our retinas, the teeming energies ... collaborating, unknowingly and ironically, to form the always-poignant because-always-past illusion.⁷²

While he was speaking mostly of the perceptual quality of the cinematic “surface” [for more on this, see Chapter Three] *Blonde Cobra* nonetheless represents a very similar type of “teeming energy” used to resurrect a dead object. Instead of a specially configured apparatus as the Nervous System requires, however, the abstract editing practices in *Blonde Cobra* breathe “life” into Jack’s Fleischner-captured “dead performances” of earlier days.

And again, black leader. Instead of silence, though, Jack assumes a “Little Boy” persona in which, after a series of discordant screams to an absent or abusive “MOTHER”, he tells a story of how, after suffering indignities and sexual abasement at the hands of his parent, he hurts another child.

Then, and there was a little boy that lived upstairs...and one day the little boy found the other little boy that lived upstairs, the family who lived upstairs, in the upstairs floor, and the little boy who was less than seven, the lonely little boy, the lonely little boy was less than seven, I know that because we didn’t leave Columbus (Ohio) until I was seven,

I know it, I was under seven and I took a match and I lit it and pulled out the other little boy's penis and I burnt his penis with a match!

Implying violent revenge, irony and perhaps insular homosexual codes, the Little Boy act allows Jack Smith to explore his own frustrated sexuality in straight early 60s as well as enact an almost Freudian set-up for the next section.⁷³

From castration complex to dream interpretation. Meet Madame Nescience, or Jack Smith in almost black-face make-up, dreaming of “old, musty memories” and dressed in a gown, bandana, shawl and obscenely-large earrings. Nescience, the ignorant clairvoyant, is so assured in their character, however, as to appear paradoxically ‘mindful.’ Laying down on “her” back, the voice-over rambles – “she wanted to be a Nun and her dream, it goes on and on.”

BLACK LEADER. BLACK LEADER. BLACK LEADER.

With Jack screaming “Mother Superior” close to thirty times as if willing himself into a new being: from Madame Nescience to the duo of Sister Dexterity and the Mother. The chant then turns to a long, slightly schizoid tale of Mother Superior lashing a randy nun with a rosary for shoving a “plaster statue of Jesus” up her “cunt” followed by an assortment of impassioned moaning – a mad “disorder of rosaries and little habits and OOOHHHHSSSS.” Like the Little Boy, we view another character’s whose sexuality has been forbidden by society: Jack’s homosexuality, the Little Boy’s own errant wishes and Superior’s anti-clerical lust.⁷⁴ But with each exploration of repressed sexuality within the film, the behavior becomes more vitriolic, even more over-the-top. After a few frames of Jack in drag again,

the black leader resumes: still in the tone of religiosity, Smith updates Nietzsche's assertion for a consumer society – from “God is dead” we hear a very Pop Art assessment that now “God is famous...God is so famous.”

As the visual element reinstates, the soundtrack has a man blowing with savage intensity on a harmonica. With the introduction of another figure, Jack (still in Nescience drag) goes into another trance: almost epileptic, mouth quivering, eyes clenched in REM trance, he begins to speak. But again the viewer is offered nothing: while so much of the soundtrack is his monologue, when we finally see him “speaking”, we get nothing on the soundtrack except the hiss of silence. Again it is the editing that serve to enhance Jack's “portraits”: for what we see “in those early films is a double of the complex ironic persona that Smith portrayed in his performances, but he is now transformed into a creature of Ken's own complex imagination that is ruled by different ironic forces.”⁷⁵ Instead of the overt irony Jack attempts in his comic elements, the frustrations Jacobs provide in the film (via black leader, sound, etc.) transform the comic into a cosmic statement of desolation and autobiographical liberation.

But then in a rare moment, the worlds collide – when meaning is absolutely succinct, Smith says “Why shave when you can't even think of a reason for living? Jack Smith, 1958, 6th Street.” In a film which constantly toys with real versus ambiguous meaning, between artificial and actual personhood, there is sandwiched in a truth. Not only does that line pinpoint Smith within a certain geographical or chronological nexus, but the sadness of the preceding line also secures him within a philosophical and abject frame of thought. Not quite

St. John in the Dark Night of the Soul, Smith nonetheless stands at a crossroad – again, like the Surrealist before, between self-annihilation and self-transformation.

Then Jack begins twirling, dancing – a dervish in the midst of manic ecstasy. Out of body Invocations through Nescience earlier, now Jack is completely out of body through such simple acts of motion. Like in the opening, we again hear “I say either, you say either, etc” as if to both remark on the unstable status of language as well as the instability of image. Only if both parties agree on a consensual meaning of a certain word, then is there a possible understanding. Images, worth a thousand words (as the saying goes), abstract that further. Smith’s disruptive bodily twirling has replaced the obstructive nature of language. It’s a simple device with complex consequences: as if to say that only in regressing to a primacy of word/image are the baroque trappings of Modernity shed, the awful weight of “meaning” pushed to the limits and the freedom of “being” (simple and pure) allowed to be known or shared.

Thus, when Jack quotes “swarms of innocent monsters” while a title card displays the exact same words is the equilibrium of image/audio fully realized. Only through displacing language, only through turning movement into Dionysiac release, only through black leader (and its inherent inquisitive form), really only through delirium, does Jacobs’ *Blonde Cobra* begin to logically unravel. Following an almost Beat-gone-mythology rhetoric of the hero, the post-war figure must die in order to be reborn. Either metaphorically, as Jack’s assortment of madcap characters attest, or literally as--

NOW when Jack is stabbed in the chest with a knife, only to be “reborn” first

through the act of sex, albeit homosexual sex. With a close-up of a knife clenched between his butt-cheeks, Jack rails again: “Sex is a pain in the ass. And sex IS a pain in the ass.” There is the idea that the pain of sex is literal: it actually hurts to have anal intercourse. But there are also the social implications – being a homosexual in a straight world is a painful experience – as well as the purely human pain of being in love and of being loved.⁷⁶

After such an image loaded with pathos and meaning, however, Jack Smith is reborn into irony again. Dressed in a baby bonnet, eyes downcast at the camera, Smith plays a game of peek-a-boo with the camera. With strident sounds of birds/caterwauling cats juxtaposed, it is nature gone tooth-and-nail, vicious and unaware of its own murderous intent. It is also an all-too powerful example of regression within the soundtrack: from music to howls, it is primitivism exposed. So even though Jack has certainly regressed in terms of his story lines and assaults on “acting”, the physical manifestation of his regression is complete here. It is to the face, gestures and language of a child which allow Smith to summarize the entire film: “A mother’s wisdom has driven me to this: a loft, a life of futility, despair.” Instead of a condemnation, there is an innocent acceptance in the words even as he places a toy gun to his temple. At nearly the same moment, Smith burns holes in the gauze between himself and the camera: all of it is so desperate, so self-indulgent and unabashedly aware. Cut to gravestones then to another hand-drawn sign: FIN. Two seconds later, Jack shouts – always gets the last word – “What went wrong? What went wrong?” Was he referring to the film, a moment in his life, the failed suicide attempt?

After the Taboos: An Aesthetics of Failing

There is a list of taboos broken within *Blonde Cobra* that would have shocked any audience viewing the film at the time. Perverse language, sadistic monologues, homosexual allusions, necrophiliac imaginings, anti-clerical ravings, introspective mindfucks, non-narrativity and blank stares all serve to dismantle the conservatism of 1950s America. But it was not simply these shockers which Mekas said made the work “hardly surpassable in perversity, in richness, in beauty, in sadness [and] in tragedy,” but also the way in which these scenarios were put together by Jacobs.

After the film was shown for the first time, Jacobs relates Smith’s reaction to the film.

Jack [Smith] says I made the film too heavy. It was his and Bob’s intention to create light monster movie-comedy. Two comedies, actually two separate stories that were being shot simultaneously until they had a falling out over who should pay for the raw stock destroyed by a fire when Jack’s cat knocked over a candle. Jack claimed it was an act of God. In the winter of ’59 blue Bob showed me the footage. Having no idea of the original story plans I was able to view the material not as exquisite fragments of a failure, of two failures, but as the makings of a new entirety. Bob gave over the footage to me and with it the freedom to develop it as I saw fit... Silly, self-pitying, guilt-strictured and yet triumphing—on one level—over the situation with style, because he’s unapologetically gifted, has a genius for courage, knows that a state of indignity can serve to show his character in sharpest relief. He carries on, states his presence for what it is. Does all he can to draw out our condemnation, testing our love of limits, enticing us into an absurd moral posture the better to dismiss us with a regal “screw off.”⁷⁷

Every sequence, improvisational moment, or word seems to contain its own intrinsic destruction. I, therefore, disagree adamantly with P. Adams Sitney when he writes that “the triumph to which Jacobs alludes is not within the film.”⁷⁸ It is not a triumph in any typical

sense – no hero who challenges the gods and wins out or a rags-to-riches tale about overcoming adversity through mind, mettle and chance. No, this is the triumph removed from man’s petty concerns: it is like grass which winds its way through the harsh concrete in the middle of a city sidewalk, always proving that nature will always emerge. This is a type of triumph in which one realizes hopelessness, delves into failures, even creating an aesthetic from its fractured and bleak content. It is like Artaud’s vision of theater, as outlined in The Theater and Its Double, viscerally skewering a diseased society. But whereas Antonin wished to heal the wounded and raise the dead, Smith and Jacobs simply nod in agreement, watching the chaos swim and swirl until it begins to form its pattern, its own fractal universe of failure.

Blonde Cobra is not the only film from that period to work within that frame. On the West Coast at roughly the same time, Chris Maclaine shot and edited *The End*. With a number of separate stories which woven together “form an inventory of anxieties about the bomb,” *The End* is a speed-fueled, madcap experiment in which film was meant to be a poetic and spiritual force.⁷⁹ In *Blonde Cobra*, a different level of anxiety is present. On one hand, Jack Smith’s constant movement and chattering speak to a man who fears either being himself or falling silent enough to find himself. On the other, there is an anxiety with the “lies” of the moving image. As another avant-garde filmmaker, Hollis Frampton, wrote, “A specter is haunting the cinema: the specter of narrative.” Within the very present tense that cinema offers is the illusion of a constant movement forward in the questionable metaphysics of cinematic progress. Jacobs, in the editing, foregrounds this failure. When black leader

streams by, it is not simply about self-reflection but denial of the self, as well. Beyond even suicide, which calls for a self to kill, this is utter despair, annihilating not only the viewer's expectations entirely but also the lie that true feeling or reality is ever translatable, and that "to express it is to betray it."⁸⁰

Smith and Jacobs were essentially exiles in their own century, their own country, their own city. While the works of exiles (in the classical sense), made while absent from their countries, impinge upon the personal and political by using a sense of absence to invoke a haunted presence, these film artists did the opposite. By being utterly present, including the non-restraint of speaking on taboo subjects and editing the film as to create an ironic dialectic, they made despair into its own figure, a stock-character that meant 'absence.' With Surrealist underpinnings, even such anti-form forms as *The Exquisite Corpse*, Artaud's project within Theater and touches of early avant-garde theatrical experiments, *Blonde Cobra* is a way to agitate and activate – consciousness, all types of things.⁸¹ In an interview with David Shapiro, Ken Jacobs' remarks on what makes a memorable film.

One of the things I've learned is that you notice what obstructs you. You notice what offers you frustration. If you're walking through a crowd of people and everybody does this marvelous act of stepping out of each other's way, but somebody stands in front of you, that's what you remember, that's a confrontation. I've been willing to make some films that get in the way, that impede people's easy progress.⁸²

Through the ridiculous antics of Jack Smith, the elementary camera work of Bob Fleischner, and the masterfully sardonic editing of Ken Jacobs, *Blonde Cobra* is a work that does not allow for easy progress. It gets in the way, coils around the legs, through the mind, and trips

one up [in both senses of that word]. In a world rife with promises of inarticulate savageries of a width and breadth that would make the Marquis himself blush, *Blonde Cobra* no longer is a shocking film – in the classical sense. When Columbine, hip-hop lyrics and video games offer vistas of violence, metered misogyny and do-it-yourself mayhem, *Blonde Cobra* even seems quite tame. The film is dated (even by Jack Smith himself within the film) but allowing oneself to really work through the piece is a shocking experience itself. Not by the tenets of muscular cinema [Chapter Three] or duration [Chapter Four] but simply by chasing a meaning which drifts, Tantalus-like, just a few inches from understanding.

True expression hides beneath the manifest. An image, a frame, or a figure masked often contains more significance than all the well-worked-out narrative constructs available. *Blonde Cobra* is not a film about beautiful and accurate semblances of reality: it is a performance-driven shock exaggerated to well past the point of failure, back into a type of practical aesthetics. Exaggeration, after all, only works one way: only at the point of structural collapse does a different form begin to emerge. Smith's characters, after watching the film over and over, do this: once one of his fantastical creations deconstructs, he builds another from the second, from the third, ad infinitum until he becomes as fragmented as the society he wishes to describe, in fact becomes the perfect descriptor for the society. Jacobs does the same thing with the footage: only in pressing narrative to its illogical end does he create a type of new logic, one built around aesthetics of failure, whose grammar has become beautifully fragmented, whose shock is fully in the awareness of being, in the relationship

between absence and presence or dream and wakefulness, and in the vision of three despairing men with a camera and women's clothes.

While Jacobs eventually moves away from the psychodrama form of cinema in only a few years, he nonetheless retains the lesson that easy shock is easy won. The shock that endures, either through performance or editing, comes at a sacrifice of the creator. *Blonde Cobra*, even with its dated qualities and millions of anti-narrative descendents, retains freshness about it, still able to offer its wisdom a half-century later. It's basically like this: when Dali wrote to Freud for his acknowledgement that he was the greatest of the dream painters, Freud replied that his unconsciousness was far too conscious. *Blonde Cobra* is a posture, yes, but also (and probably without Jacobs and his friend's realization) an actual portrait of the human id. It was the slips between reason, the edited nothingness, and the very glory in Jacobs' *Exquisite Corpse*'s elision between participants that still makes the film so shocking, even today.

CHAPTER TWO:

SHOCK AS PERCEPTION – TWO WRENCHING DEPARTURES (2006)

“My eyes feel swollen and sated, buzzed and dazzled, and I am still quaking from the overwhelming, lunatic beauty, long after the lights come up. Will I ever be able to watch a “normal” film again?” – Phil Solomon (after a Nervous System performance)

Enter the Age of Railroads & Nervousness

In every age, there is a cynosure for the period's anxiety, some bodily effect caused by the changes of society and life. Modernity is no exception. In an essay by Charles Baudelaire (considered by some to be representative of Modernity's origin) on the interconnectivity between modern experience and aesthetics entitled "The Painter of Modern Life" (1859-60), he offers an explanation of Modernity as the condition of exposure to shocks and to a type of evanescence that characterized a sensation of the intensity of being purely in the present moment. "[T]hat indefinable something we may be allowed to call 'modernity'" is described by Baudelaire with the language (flickers and fluctuations) relative to electrical stimulation because the "lover of universal life moves into the crowd as though into an enormous reservoir of electricity."⁸³ And if human experience is that which arbitrates between the external stimuli of the world and the processing interiority of the individual, then for Baudelaire modernity represents a link between the newly electrified world without (through the Edisonian electrification of the night) and a type of new-discovered energy within. To Baudelaire, the modern artist "reflect[s these experiences] at every moment in energies more vivid than life itself, always fleeting" mainly due to a complex process of interpretation and translation of the sensorial world through a body which seems to seismographically transcribe through sympathetic vibrations a portrait of the 'modern world.'⁸⁴ Baudelaire, moreover, believed that the "man of genius" must be possessed of "strong nerves" in order to not only survive the buffet of shocks but to also be able to give form to the intangibility of these reverberations.⁸⁵ That nervous feeling lasted well into the

next century: Eugene Jolas, in the first issue (first sentence even) of infamous avant-garde journal, *transition*, writes the following: “in wandering through Paris, the shimmering city, one’s visual and auditory nerves are constantly ravished, and one has a veritable *embarrass du choix* in trying to absorb the thousand and one things that the kaleidoscope of this city presents.”⁸⁶

The nervous system has indeed been likened to myriad objects: for Baudelaire, electrical stimulation, for Jolas, a kaleidoscope, and like accounts of the brain, each account seems to have been relative to a paradigm change in technology. Even in 1861, American scientist Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote of the nervous system in relation to technological progress.

The whole nation is now penetrated by the ramifications of a network of iron nerves [the telegraph] which flash sensation and volition backward and forward to and from towns and provinces as if they were organs and limbs of a single body...The vast system of iron muscles [the train] move the limbs of the mighty organism one upon another...The perpetual intercommunication, joined to the power of instantaneous action, keeps us always alive with excitement.⁸⁷

But metaphorical layouts of the nervous system were not the only conceptual framework affected by technological progress. The act of perception was also seen to have undergone its own level of transformation. As Wolfgang Schivelbusch explains in his study on panoramic vision, “That is not a picturesque landscape destroyed by the railroad; on the contrary...the railroad creates a new landscape...choreographs the landscape. The motion of the train shrinks space, and thus displays in immediate succession objects and pieces of scenery that in

their original spatiality belonged to separate realm.”⁸⁸ In other words, the train’s velocity created a visual perception diminished by its own speed and its own motion and subsequently “created conditions that also “mechanized” the traveler’s perceptions.”⁸⁹ And this mechanization of the traveler’s perception led to a new totalized system of perceptual understanding throughout aesthetic and social practice: “...all he [the traveler] can do is ignore the objects and portions of the landscape that are closer to him, and to direct his gaze to the more distant objects that seem to pass by more slowly. If he does not modify his old way of observing things while traveling – if he still tries to receive proximity and distance in equal measure – the result...is fatigue.”⁹⁰

The sociologist Georg Simmel called this new type of fatigued thinking or feeling “urban perception” which was characterized as an “*intensification of nervous stimulation* which results from the swift and uninterrupted change of outer and inner stimuli.”⁹¹ It was the original Baudelarian shock which never let up shifted from aesthetics to sociology. With an inability to completely process the objects/pieces of scenery in their totality and instead only having tiny blurred or occluded fragments to piece together perception, the brain had to process information in a vastly different manner. Presumably, it had to work harder; fragments were forced into new patterns of deductive guesswork, and that meant a highly rapid system between exterior object and interior mental configuration had to be implemented. Instead of objects in totality existing outside the train window, they had to be seen as “like pictures on a wall” simply because they no longer existed in a former framework of perceived reality. The speed, the blur and the fragmentation threw the previous “slow

intake of visual information” into severe ontological distress and questioned the validity of representational awareness; with reason, the traveler *knew* the objects outside were real but due to their new phenomenological status they could no longer be *seen* as real. Suddenly, J.M.W. Turner’s 1844 painting *Rain, Steam, and Speed — The Great Western Railway* was not simply an abstracted representation of reality but in actuality a painting much more “aware” in its mimetic realization.⁹² Despite its two-dimensional quality and specificity of medium, the painting actually captured via fictional methods of representation a much more accurate portrayal of a new perceptual framework, and thus a much more accurate view of a new “reality.”

Relative to cinematic practice, with the intermittent mechanism of the steam engine and chemical processes in photography, the panoramic vision was eventually offered to everyone inside the liminal space of the theater. It then is no wonder that the first film of the first film show was called “Train Arriving at the Station” by the French Lumiere Brothers. Furthermore, it was anecdotally reported that the spectators in attendance rushed madly from the theater believing the ‘phantom train’ barreling towards them was about to burst through the back wall and run them down. From the original panoramic vision spoken of in relation to the landscape (via the train window) to the manner by which the cinematic function brought this vision into the aesthetic everyday and (especially considering the all-too real reaction to the fictional train in the first film screening), it can indeed be seen that perception is a fully objectivated dialectic of perception-technology which perpetuates new ways of seeing through the shock of new forms of experience.

Perceiving the Age of Nervousness through Jacobs

Ken Jacobs, in his Nervous System performances [now available on digital approximations through Eternalism™] continues the dialectic tradition between technological and perceptual phenomenology. With a self-built apparatus, Jacob not only inaugurates a new way of seeing but forces the eye itself to become dislodged, disembodied even, by probing the subtle paradoxes of binocular vision and even the bi-temporal lobe's process of image-making. As he says, "Eisenstein said the power of film was to be found between shots. [As we know, Eisenstein called that process of editing a series of shocks]. Peter Kubelka seeks it between frames. I want to get between the eyes, contest the separate halves of the brain. A whole new play of appearances is possible here."⁹³ But he has at least one important antecedent for this type of work: Alfonse Schilling, who recognized that "persistence of vision plus the phi phenomenon could give us the illusion of depth besides giving us the illusion of movement," first made unique stereoscopic slides that confused the parallax between a human being's eyes to create a 3-D image.⁹⁴ Ken Jacobs then added movement. One of Ken's colleagues at Binghamton and filmmaker in his own right, Daniel Barnett explains:

Jacobs added motion to the images by placing two step-frame movie projectors side by side, each containing a print of the same film. Either or both the projectors can be advanced one, or many frames at a time. Between them he mounts the two bladed shutter with the variable speed motor that allows him to modulate a couple of extra-dimensional illusions at once. When frame x from the left projector and right projector are superimposed, we get a variable rate of flicker induced by speed changes of the shutter revolving between the

projectors. When the left projector has frame x in the gate and the right projector has frame $x+1$, the articulation of the shutter between the projectors produces the illusion of oscillating motion.⁹⁵

The oscillation, with its various indexical traces – flicker, blurs, strobes, freezes, fragments – transforms the simple act of watching a film into a type of perceptual shock therapy. Not only to the disembodied eye within the theater, but the body as well: various attendants to the performances have reported ‘headaches’, ‘seizures’ and other bodily manifestations. Like the panoramic vision which the rushing train afforded, Jacobs offers possibly the only localized experience of Simmel’s “urban perception”, allowing contemporary audiences to experience the nervous stimulation and evanescence of early Modernity. Thus, like his film *Opening of the 19th Century*, in which Jacobs salvages a Lumiere film from the nitroglycerin compost of forgotten cinema – essentially a three-minute right-left revision of swarming émigrés, Venetian gondolas and electric street cars shown with a neutral-density filter over one eye as to create illusions of deep space, non-interactive planes, etc— there seems a hidden agenda in much of Jacobs’ Nervous System work. Ken Jacobs intends to not simply ‘shock’ the viewer through optical trickery, but to expand consciousness and perceptual awareness through a set of ruptures in the very mechanism of vision. To, like Artaud, “recover the notion of symbols and archetypes which act like silent blows, rests, leaps of the heart, summons of the lymph, inflammatory images thrust into our abruptly wakened heads.”⁹⁶

Perception, after all, simultaneously constitutes two states: the act of perceiving and

the object perceived. According to perceptual-aesthetic theorists such as Gombrich, perception is divided into the 'matching' and the 'making'; when confronting a new object, the tendency is to gravitate toward the familiar, to 'match', hence landscape paintings of the Lake District by the Dutch would include a figure with clogs or a peaked hat.⁹⁷ The opposite, defamiliarization, is a frictional process, one in which the goal is to 'make' or to construct a new vision of landscape or reality, combustible Gestalts intended to 'shock' their viewers into new ideas of seeing, new methods of acknowledgment. In this mode, Jacobs himself says, "I'm after a counter-hallucination that constantly reminds you that it is hallucination – it's too strange and bizarre to be confused (with) a direct living experience."⁹⁸

His methods for the counter-hallucination truly break down the organized perception of cinema most have taken for granted. For instance, by breaking the 24 frames per second seamless illusion of motion, the films chosen for the Nervous System (usually only 8 to ten minutes in length) are watched in retarded, anti-progressive time over the course of an hour or longer. Not only does the work return film to Marey or Muybridge's original analyses of motion, but also examines our dependence on the constant mechanical speed to create the illusion and fixity of time and space within the film perceiving process.⁹⁹ Beyond the spatial and temporal determinates of 24 f.p.s. film which Jacobs actively resists, this tactic of shock, however, extends beyond the actual film into the haptic itself. As Tom Gunning writes in the opening essay of a 1989 Jacobs Retrospective catalogue called Films That Tell Time, "the Nervous System plays on our nervous system...Our basic ability to perceive figure and ground, movement out of stillness, to synthesize space and time are played with...[by

focusing] our awareness on processes that are usually unconscious.” Or as Phil Solomon succinctly sums up: he makes you deal “with the apperception of now.”¹⁰⁰

Jacobs manipulates that now, that unconsciousness, though a new language, a type of cinematic Rorschach; broken down [as difficult as that may be], the Nervous System can be reduced to be a series of still images, blurs and flickers all dictated by Jacobs’ own hand. In particular, the blur itself plays an important role in the re-education of perception which Jacobs’ Nervous System embodies. Etymologically linked to accidentally smudged sections of freshly-penned ink, a *blur* is a smear which obscures, and also the resultant perceptual confusion.¹⁰¹ Thus blur “may perhaps...[combine] the effect of *blear* and *blot*,”¹⁰² as both a visual malfunction (e.g., to have *bleary* eyes) and a failure of the perceived object to delimit itself (e.g., the failure of the smudged ink *blot* to appropriately cohere into language). These constitutive errors determine blur’s negative aesthetic and moral implications—“to disfigure, befoul, defile, asperse.”¹⁰³ In other words, the blur was coded as a failure of technology to produce ideal forms, offering instead an “obstacle to truth.”¹⁰⁴

By rejecting the notion of photography as inherently transcriptive, individuals such as Victorian matron Julia Margaret Cameron could “rescue” the blur from its negative connotations and capitalize upon its aesthetic value. (Her pictorial evocation of angels and ghosts depended upon the photographic blur to represent “other levels of reality in which a subject might be depicted as existing in two or more places simultaneously.”)¹⁰⁵ This contraction of space is equivalent to the contraction of time, which mechanically produces the blur: as the shutter is held open, light reflections accrue on a photo-sensitive surface,

effectively contracting duration of time into one space. Cubo-Futurist photographers and the Ray-o-graphs would later make a similar appeal to the photograph to capture time, not to imply an otherworldly transcendence, but to explore simultaneity and velocity, or “the shattering of space and time” and thus “enter into” motion.¹⁰⁶

The photographs illustrate that the blur, in pictorial constructions and in the viewer’s perception, is inherently associated with *temporality*. In contrast to the stable and static superimpositions of the blend, the blur produces or records a dynamic morph. This morph is a simultaneous depiction of both the past and the future, between which the present is a blur, whether read “forwards” or “backwards.” [This idea of bitemporality is to have great consequences on the works in the Nervous System.] The blur is therefore the infinitely divisible and bidirectional process of a body becoming in time.

This positing of the *body* as actively *becoming in time* is precisely the condition of consciousness, according to phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Sensation only occurs within temporality, which is the “form taken by our inner sense” and “the most general characteristic of our ‘psychic facts.’”¹⁰⁷ The sensations that structure our inherently temporal consciousness are themselves inherently *bodily*, not purely intellectual reflections of the Cartesian mind. The sensations of the body are synaesthetic as a rule:

Seen in the perspective of the objective world, with its opaque qualities, and the objective body with its separate organs, the phenomenon of synaesthetic experience is paradoxical, SHOCKING [...] *For the subject does not say only that he has the sensation both of a sound and a colour: it is the sound itself that he sees where colours are formed.* [...] Nor are these even exceptional

phenomena. Synaesthetic perception is the rule, and we are unaware of it only because scientific knowledge shifts the centre of gravity of experience...¹⁰⁸

The synaesthetic “unity of the senses cannot be understood in terms of their subsumption under a primary consciousness, but of their never-ending integration into one knowing organism,” an organism which is “a ready-made system of equivalents and transpositions from one sense to another.”¹⁰⁹ The blur, as the representation of a synaesthetic process of becoming in time, is thus a formal analogue of the “never-ending” construction of the self from synaesthetic sensations.

The use of the flicker within the Nervous System also points to a re-interpretation of the filmic medium itself. After all, this incremental continuity is precisely the nature of the filmstrip. As such, the “flicker effect” is native to all filmic projection, but is exaggerated in structuralist film when solid black, white, or chromatic frames are interpolated with each other or with animated or filmed footage, usually in rapidly changing sequences. The use of flicker in this way “emphasizes the nature of the separate frames, the rapid movement of the frames, and—through analogy and by way of hyperbole—the flicker effect of the shutter.”¹¹⁰ The exaggeration of flicker consequently renders a film self-reflexive in Greenberg’s sense: it simultaneously reminds the viewer of the material properties of the medium and denies him or her escape from this materiality through immersion into an illusory filmic reality.

As visual obfuscations, blur and flicker render knowledge problematic from the get-go; with ontological and phenomenological problems thus fore-grounded, the relationship between mind and body can be nuanced. The didactic lesson of these strategies is explicitly

violent towards the body (the nausea induced by blur, the seizures induced by flicker); but they are also violent towards a disembodied eye, the symbol of a self-reflexive mind divorced from its environment. As such, they expand the limits of the media in which they occur and the consciousness of the viewer that perceives them; but perhaps most importantly, they also contribute to the definitions of cinematic ‘shock’, without merely affecting a dialectical reversal or recoding of the term, but by questioning the “coherence of our position as masters of vision.”¹¹¹

In a retrospective from 1989, however, called “Films that Tell Time”, his included Notes on the Nervous System inform his intention is to offer a far less ontological, more poetic approach.

What I’m trying to do is shape a poetry of motion, time/motion studies touched and shifted with a concern for how things feel, to open fresh territory for sentient exploration, creating spectacle from dross...delving and learning beyond the intended message or cover-up, seeing how much history can be salvaged when film is wrested from glib 24 f.p.s. To tell a story in new ways, relating new energy components (words are energy components to a poet) in a system of construction natural to their particularity. To memorialize. To warn.¹¹²

The Nuts and Bolts of *Two Wrenching Departures*

In a 1927 issue of CLOSE-UP, one of the early theoretical magazines in film culture, Dorothy Richardson writes “Swish-whack. Shocks unfortellable. Bangs of exploding fleas. Ceaseless speechless movement, swift leaping, whirling, staggering, light and heavy making strange shapes in the diminished light until the immortals vanished...”¹¹³ In the recently

published scholarly collection on Ken Jacobs, *Optic Antics*, Michele Pierson writes “images taken from a video recording of a performance are blurry and warped, brilliant smears of light and shadow. No sooner do they appear to be about to come into focus than they are transformed, as if by the turn of a kaleidoscope, into a fractal image that all but obliterates everything before it.”¹¹⁴ The amount of similarities between the two descriptions is remarkable: light, shadow, blur, strangeness and the eternal are given equal weight in equal measure.

What this means is that I’m trying to write about the inexpressible in describing his film *Two Wrenching Departures*. But to see it is to be shocked (as in Simmel’s explanation of the radical osmosis between internal/external stimuli); and to be shocked in such a manner is to perceive afresh, if not to become a new type of spectator, radical and aware. The film begins easily enough: opening with the MGM Lion’s familiar roar and the swell of music, *The Barbarian*, a film with Ramon Novarro and Myrna Loy, runs through to the end of the opening credits. With the soundtrack continuing, however, Jacob switches from the artificial soundstage to the teeming streets of deep-focus New York. Here, Bob Fleischner (the individual who ‘shot’ *Blonde Cobra*) begins his galvanic dance: twisting, turning, jumping, leaping, sometimes appearing in duplicate and even triplicate, Bob becomes a physical embodiment of an ellipsis in literature. Fleischner, snapping into background, then foreground, and then hidden behind a street pole, appears like an “immortal being” whose very presence deconstructs and reconstructs all time and space. But behind the image is Jacobs, manipulating the footage from visual cues, perhaps even a simple swing of a tie

stunted by the Nervous System process into shivering sublimity.

After the title, in which Jacobs' accounts for the title of the piece – the shock of both Bob Fleischner and Jack Smith dying a few days apart in late 1989 – the stroboscopic distortions continue: sometimes melting like wax in a cinematic lava-lamp, other times wispy as a wraith, Fleischner appears to slip into the quicksand of the z-axis of the screen. Both the distortion of memory and of departure, are ever-present: while some place petals between book pages to capture what is fleeting, Jacob sandwiches time between film frames. Sometimes, it seems as if we are watching the wilt. As Fleischner continues (haphazardly shocked into place out of time) down the street, he eventually passes a disguised Jack Smith squatting against a tenement building.

That figure takes over the film. In Xeno's Paradox-style, Smith knocks on a door, which appears to swing inward but never opens. Then, through classical editing patterns of montage, when the women (resembling the Bacchae) burst through the door in stuttered frenzy, Jack Smith is also part of the group, precariously (almost hidden) behind the women. Cutting to a long shot of New York with a car yanked back and before in eternal frameless time, the surface of the film is foregrounded. Once the car passes, however, we view Smith leading children and others down the middle of the street, Pied-Piper style, the soundtrack of *The Barbarian* whispering "he's a nasty fellow, popping up all over the place."

THEN SILENCE. While black men sit at shoe-shining boxes on the sidewalk, Jack interrupts stage-right dressed in flamboyant raiment: scarves, ropes, paper, plastic, boas and veils swirl around him like the many arms of Shiva, destruction and creation in a single

being.¹¹⁵ With the intensity of Jacobs' work increasing, all objects are shown in the most complex of relationships: like the symbiosis of alchemical reaction, slowing down time/space reveals hidden moments. [Martin Arnold pushes these semiotics to their hilarious end-game in films such as *Piece Touchee*.] But in the center is Jack, a monstrous circle of energy – and due to the filmic manipulation – whose fabric above his head becomes a curved scimitar. It is a case of street shamanism: children gather, tripping about the sidewalk behind him, freed by the childish intensity and radical enthusiasm of the Trash King, New York Ozymandias. Jacobs simply recapitulates the shamanic extrapolation in the illusion: like an avant-garde interpretation of the Ghost Dance, Smith is here to express the Spirit Not of Life but of Living [as he is known in *Star Spangled to Death*]. The gang of smiling children agree.

In the next sequence, Jack, still trailing numerous appendages of fabric, walks alone toward a Theater marquee as *The Barbarian's* soundtrack resumes. Unlike the energetic Smith before, Jack's walk towards the theater is introspective. Like an avant-garde version of the Friedrich's Wanderer Over the Sea of Fog, Smith perpetually approaches but never reaches the Theater House. Full of dream and promise, like the Absolute to the Romantics, Jacobs' unreachable theater section embodied Smith's own hunt for Shangri-la aka the glamorous insubstantiality of Hollywood. First an oddly gleeful Ozymandias, Jacobs now conjoins Smith to the role of Sisyphus, depleted and hopeful, doomed to chase "the infinite ecstasy of little things."¹¹⁶

The shocking nature of the image then explodes in the next sequence. With Carl Orff's "Invocation of Hymen" from *Triumph of Aphrodite* (continuing the mytho-poetic

construction of Smith) blaring, a “short jaunt along a storefront [becomes] a frenzied performance, part dance, part drunken stumble.”¹¹⁷ While the previous sequences certainly displaced time and space, the level of painting-like abstraction was kept to a minimum. But if figurative painting was never the same after DuChamp’s *Nude Descending a Staircase*, imagine that work in motion. All the shifting pieces of Jack’s wardrobe contribute to the effect as he stumbles to the ground. Indeed, if this is an Invocation of Hymen, the nuptial ceremony of bride and groom, then Jack’s disfigurement in the FALL becomes a hermaphroditic rendering of the wedding night.¹¹⁸ No longer describable as ‘human’, now he is the beast with two backs. Only small peeks alert the spectator as to the actuality of a single man – a hand, a shoe, a quivering clip of cheek. In the last minute, he lies prone on the ground, his “clothes” spilling about him like broken wings. Another myth-motif: Icarus trying to resume a flight after his close encounter with the sun.

Then a broken mirror, still flickering, still ungluing. A hammer and the mold of a cat’s head sit alongside. Not until Smith’s reflection in the mirror shards and then his sudden intrusion in striped pants do we realize the high-angle view which we now see. In mock masturbatory poses, Smith manically grins up toward the camera. The rite of a fragmented Narcissus: we view the thousand-fold personas of Smith (as evidenced especially in *Blonde Cobra*) which created the manic kaleidoscope of the man himself. As the screen distorts further, almost into (my interpretation) parallelograms of frame, the cat head appears as if to begin floating above the screen or at least parallel with Jack’s knee.

Radically different: Jack’s face is freeze-framed behind an iron fence. He then

begins shifting through a series of expressions: anger, confused, sadness, intensity, joy. At almost twenty minutes, the sequence is the longest in *Two Wrenching Departures*. Without the usual accoutrements of wardrobe accompanying Smith, he appears without artifice. But then the expressions begin: starting with a hand held over his face, as if to subdue or thwart what the camera could possibly reveal, he soon shifts into those dramatic facial enactments.¹¹⁹ The flickering/blurring of Jack's face, however, is like electrodes applied to the conscience of the image : as if to imply a further artifice would somehow crack open Smith through rupture, to reveal something of the "real" beneath the carefully-trained image. Divorced of the mythological implications imbedded in the other sequences, we simply have the man.

The next sequence, with Smith again in his fashion, a Time Magazine plastered on his chest (eloquently enough with J. Edgar Hoover on the cover, not so open with his cross dressing), there is almost the feeling of secret privilege surrounding him. Mop held like a Bishop's crosier, paper bag crumpled into Canterbury form atop his head, Smith (in low angle) looms against the sky like an "avant-garde Baconian Pope or Charles Foster Kane."¹²⁰ When the flicker intensifies even further, he becomes ominous, a statue rather than human, the face frozen into a marble sterility. The trees branches above him add a strange patina and emotion, a type of scratching against a heaven that won't give – or won't accept queers.

Just as suddenly, he vanishes, replaced by an abstract painting – no, a bus streaming past in nervousness and also serving as optical wipe – and then a street divider on a city street. From the far background, a lone figure rises from a bench. The Nervous System turns

a simple rising from a bench into a glacially-slow, even divine rise. With Florent Schmitt's *The Tragedy of Salome*, Smith's ascent of repeated, suspended and reversed motion also continues the mythological attributions of Jacobs to Smith. That swirl of detritus/wardrobe around him suddenly becomes as alluring as the "dance of the seven veils" but also allusive to Moreau's own quasi-Nervous painting *Salome and the Apparition of the Baptist's Head*. J.K. Huysman, in describing the painting, even said Salome was "the goddess of immortal Hysteria, the Curse of Beauty supreme above all other beauties by the cataleptic spasm that stirs her flesh and steels her muscles – a monstrous Beast of the Apocalypse, indifferent, irresponsible, insensible, poisoning."¹²¹ United in their hysteria, the growing intensity of the flicker dymorphically turns Smith into Salome, one veil at a time.

The next sequence, again with *The Barbarian* soundtrack playing, shows Smith whispering into the stone ear of a bare-breasted statue. Drinking at the very font of Imagination, is this an approximation for Jack's own epiphanies from the Muses? Then, as he leans into kiss (again retarded almost endlessly by the Nervous treatment), a sudden bugle horn (from the soundtrack) announces a charging cavalry. As Jack's lips finally embrace the statue, a scene from *The Barbarian* returns: a woman strokes a man's head as they lie together in a gondola. The muse, after all, is never revealed to speak: but the returned affection of the woman is more than enough eulogy for Smith, one of Jacobs' own muses.

Or perhaps not. The sound of a train whistle, of departing and arriving trains (with their steam valves emptied), fills the soundtrack – deafeningly loud. Even if Smith has departed the world, the spectator has arrived at a new station of perception via the sprocket

tracks of the Nervous System performance. In the last few minutes, Smith (now in a Roman mask with distended nose and covered in sheets of plastic) alternates between revelation and occlusion: in the surge to whatever exists off-screen, a hand, a mystery of shoulder appear only to be subsumed back under the plastic. As the space is finally revealed, a door hidden behind an outcropping of wall – we see Smith depart for the off-screen of eternity. In a final few frames, we see the massive energetic collection of rags and personas disappear inside a small convex mirror. With a nod to the train's new perception, which turned real objects into but 'pictures on a wall,' the Nervous System turns a cinematic screen into its very own universe, with all the ontological and epistemological problems unsolved.¹²²

Those problems are mainly represented through the philosophical status of repetition: that place where Jacobs divides and confronts historicity and inevitability through the ontological shock of atemporal distortion [THE EXPERIENCE] but where he also establishes wholeness through the aftershock [THE NEGOTIATION] via renewed perception, a centrality of vision and a coming to terms with the fate of all things. The blur and flicker are two methods by which he accomplishes this ontologically-redefining task: lastly, as we will explore in Chapter Four, it also through the numinous, the interstitial, the passages between that Jacobs begins to redefine not the disembodied eye alone but also the disembodied psyche – and possibly save America in the offing.

AFTEREFFECTSAFTERWARDS

Unfortunately, I may not be able to watch most of Ken Jacobs' other Nervous System pieces. While watching the *Two Wrenching Departures* for what was probably the 15th time

in a darkened room, a shock went off in the deepest recesses of my own brain. I was struck by a seizure, a surge of electrical activity which brought me to physical convulsions. While Jacobs assumingly never wished for viewers of his films to experience these types of 'shock', perhaps this is the side-effects, the after-effects, of experimenting on the edge (and beyond) of perception.

CHAPTER THREE:
SHOCK AS POLITICS: STAR-SPANGLED TO DEATH (1956-2004)

[A Note Prior To Reading This Chapter: Like the form of the artwork which I am discussing, Star Spangled to Death, I am going to attempt an essay (in the tradition of essay, from French, to try) involving a method of hyper-text, flash-text, etc. Thus, every end-note may lead to either a cited source or a type of further reading: an association, a clarification, or maybe even a silent connection. Using only still frames from the film, I am trying to get across not only the structure but the affect of the film, to let those who are not going to watch the piece en totem to experience the madness, the majesty and miracle of this frighteningly epic, complex Ken Jacobs' masterwork. Onward, Image, to the front lines!]

A Short Psychohistory of 9/11

“The movies set the pattern, and these people have copied the movies. Nobody would have thought to commit an atrocity like that unless they’d seen it in a movie. How dare we continue to show this kind of mass destruction in movies? I just believe we created this atmosphere and taught them how to do it.”¹²³

-Famed Director Robert Altman

When the World Trade Center erupted into a firestorm and came crashing to the cement below, many spectators (both live and at home due to the constant bombardment of footage) felt that they were witnessing the latest Hollywood action blockbuster.¹²⁴ But the last-second [airplane] plot twist, twisted metal suspense, countless carnage and full-blown media spectacle was not the latest churn-out of a programmatic Hollywood bent on ratings; the passenger planes skyrocketing into the side of the buildings, their subsequent collapse and the choking wave of stumbling people covered in ash was not a take – it was, for all intents and purposes, real life. As author Stephen Prince has noted, this cinematic suicide was a careful “P.R.” move on bin Laden’s part.

Osama bin Laden knew that the airplane attacks of September 11 would be photographed and videotaped and that these images would be broadcast around the world, making the event into a horrifying theater of mass destruction. This symbolic value, achieved by way of modern media and the manner in which they would inevitably collude to emphasize the theatricality of the attacks, was of tremendous importance to al Qaeda. It made bin Laden world famous and elevated the political cachet of al Qaeda in ways that a lesser and less photographed plot could not have achieved.¹²⁵

So while Osama bin Laden's stature as FBI's Most Wanted continued to rise, the American leadership was caught in an anxious maelstrom, Muslim backlash and paranoia not seen since the likes of the Communist Red Scare. While Old Glory flags were strung up like postmodern crosses of blood over the door, patriotic sigils that alerted the horrid specter of Terrorism to pass over and keep those within the home safe, truly the majority of American men and women were in a stupor. One film professor reported that "the iconic power of the images they 'witnessed,' for many in real time, still seemed inexplicable. It was almost as if meaning were suspended or overwhelmed by the spectacle that assaulted their imaginations."¹²⁶

But meaning was not suspended for only America-at-large. And thus, 9/11 became not only a watchword for the worst-case actions of a completely undefined enemy but also a cipher, endlessly malleable for political gains (think Patriot Act), corporate entitlement (Halliburton) and psychological traumas. Even the brilliant composer Karlheinz Stockhausen, realizing the elasticity of meaning within the act, said at a press conference only a few days after the event that 9/11 was

the greatest possible work of art in the entire cosmos. Image what happened there. There are people who are so concentrated on one performance, and then 5000 people are chased into the Afterlife, in one moment....Compared to this, we are nothing as composers...Some artists also try to cross the boundaries of what could ever be possible or imagined, to wake us up, to open another world for us.¹²⁷

In the end, there never seemed to be a single 9/11 – the act became the film became the fall-out became the recapitulation. It became a form of “prosthetic memory,” what theorist Alison Landsberg writes in regard to the process of a social memory encoded in cinematic terms.

Prosthetic memories circulate publically, and although they are not organically based, they are nevertheless experienced with a person’s body as a result of an engagement with a wide range of cultural technologies. Prosthetic memories thus become part of one’s personal archive of experience.¹²⁸

Like a prosthetic, the phantom of America occasionally tingled as if still in working order but alas was only a dull figment of former times, halcyon days. It was also patently obvious that this “personal archive of experience” needed an index, an appendix after the shock.

So the philosophers began to weigh in – exactly one year after the highly coordinated attacks on September 11th, 2001, book publisher Verso circulated three contentious polemics by the de rigueur postmodern philosophers, Jean Baudrillard, Paul Virilio, and Slavoj Zizek. But they did not come armed with a CNN-sociopolitical theory regarding the geopolitics of a regime whose backdoor antics or staged coups in foreign countries (the obvious being the arming and training of the Afghan mujahedeen including bin Laden as a real life “Colonel Kurtz” in a secret plot to be ever-stinging gadflies to the large bear of Mother Russia) had led to a counter insurgent stratagem that also happened to be the greatest act of terrorism on United States soil.¹²⁹ Instead, each deployed strategies or perspectives familiar to their overall

bodies of work.

Baudrillard wrote of 9/11 as a symbolic site for a study of the simulacra and the real in which “the terrorists mirror the violence that western capitalism creates but cannot use, constitute a Diaspora that is produced by and structurally mirrors multinational capitalism, and assimilate and intensify all aspects of power, such as using ‘the banality of everyday American life as cover and camouflage’”.¹³⁰ Referring to the plethora of Hollywood blockbuster disaster pictures, Baudrillard perversely concluded, “at a pinch, we can say that they *did* it, but we *wished* for it.”¹³¹ So not only was the image itself indecipherable as “real” (due to trauma, repression, etc.) but Baudrillard further viewed the Twin Towers as lightning rods of capitalist globalization and American hegemony; in other words, they were bound to be struck eventually.

Virilio saw 9/11 as an object in the techno-scientific progress of image proliferation, regarding the event as a “development within cultural forms that are themselves the product of militarization and the bankrupt logic of liberal democracy. Reality TV, for example, is an ‘image strategy’ that is a ‘direct successor’ to the Gulf and Kosovo wars and a precursor to 9/11.”¹³² For Virilio, it is less about the event itself but ultimately more that “the image and the attack can strike from anywhere at any time.”¹³³ Sudden shock. His conjunction of the image/attack is ingenious: it relates that 9/11 existed not simply as a physical act but also one of phenomenology. While the planes may have vanquished the corporeal human being, the image itself eroded the American psyche. The Image was its own incendiary device. Virilio stated it as such: “many television viewers only believed that the attack in New York was

real once they saw that it was on numerous television channels.”¹³⁴ In the end, the image had to confirm the truthfulness of the act, not the other way around.

Lastly, philosopher-cum-raconteur Zizek, with his usual blend of over-the-top phrases and Lacanian framing, said that “9/11’ was a moment not to consider whether fiction had become reality, but to reflect on the lesson of psychoanalysis, not to mistake reality for fiction.”¹³⁵ Like the concept of the “desert of the real” which perfectly resembles the real world in the 1999 film *The Matrix*, 9/11 represents an act which, like Virilio stated, irrevocably became its image.¹³⁶ And therein is the inherent ethical responsibility: in processing and historicizing such an event, those in positions of power must not create narratives which portray only one ideological perspective. It only leads to easy, often rash, answers: for instance, “if the event is simply condemned, American innocence is enshrined, but if attention is drawn towards sociopolitical underpinnings of ‘Arab extremism’ then it appears as if America got what it deserved.”¹³⁷

It seems that perhaps these philosophers simply raised more questions about 9/11 than they ended up answering. Too abstract perhaps, too blind to their own ideological underpinnings to successfully posit critiques of others’ ideologies (the whole pot-kettle-black argument), or too in their heads to simply call a spade-a-spade or, in this case, an atrocity-an-atrocity. To be bluntly honest, the most stunning representation (explanation?) of 9/11 was in a well-trafficked art show at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art called *Ecstasy: In & About Altered States* (from 10.09.05 – 02.20-06). In a gallery filled with psychedelic

Fred Tomasellis, a small swimming-pool-sized vat of uppers, downers, laughers and screamers, a suspended room of Murakami mushrooms, a mesmeric video installation of the lightshow progenitors Single Wing Turquoise Bird and a large fountain which dispensed LSD-25, tucked away in a small corner (almost unnoticed) was a single wooden post. Ignored for the overt psychotropic “ecstasy” of the other works, I approached it, thinking that it would have some hidden mechanism which would display a Day-Glo explosion of paint or trigger a set of swirling or strobing lights. Nothing. Then I saw it, very tiny, hanging delicately off the side about a quarter of the way down: a passenger plane. From any angle except that one, it was completely invisible.

Now you see it, now you don't – the periphery of the eye, the periphery of the mind – that, to me, is the true essence of the act and aftermath of September 11th. And the event and my own encounter with the representation of the event are eerily similar to what happened to a distressed Rousseau in 1776 when “returning from a walk, [he] was knocked down by a dog [which] miraculously cleared his mind.”¹³⁸ That strange jostle has been referred to as a “numinous shock,”: first, because Rousseau believed the dog as somehow divinely-guided; second, because the bump led him to a secondary order-of-consciousness, one closer to daydream than analytical philosophy. 9/11, to turn a strange event into an even stranger metaphor, was America's own run-in with a charging beast, our own fall to the pavement, our own “numinous shock.”

Afterwards, Rousseau turned to the peripatetic act, penning his last work *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*. Reverie, a state of abstracted musing, was his answer to the sudden

discovery in the unmooring of his mind. After 9/11, America did not engage in any form of passive thought or reflection; instead of following the lesson of the founding fathers and attempting the ideological manifestation of a new democratic utopia, we put out our flags, picked up our guns and took immediate action – we declared war on Terrorism.¹³⁹

In an all-too real sense, that “numinous shock” was going to be left to the artists to reflect upon.¹⁴⁰ Maybe it’s always been that way.

Guernica, Greed and Star Spangled to Death

I come out of a time, a way of thinking, that imagines art as very important. Picasso’s *Guernica* counts for something...These things *do* save us as a human race.¹⁴¹

Von Stroheim’s 1925 epic *Greed*, seen as a teen at NY’s Museum of Modern Art, first showed me the living world could be captured on film. The criminal reduction of this masterpiece to convenient length decided me then and there to bring to film the total creative liberty of the easel painter. *Star Spangled to Death* became this out-size thing because of what was done to *Greed*.¹⁴²

-Ken Jacobs

Found in Adorno’s essay “Commitment” is the following anecdote about Pablo Picasso who was living in Paris in the midst of the Second World War:

“an officer of the Nazi occupation forces visited the painter in his studio and, pointing to *Guernica*, asked: ‘Did you do that?’ Picasso is said to have answered, ‘No you did.’”¹⁴³

With its mute, transfixed agonies, tortured geometries, dismembered perspectives and monochromatic palette, *Guernica* is war as reflected in a Cubist mirror. Above the grotesque hinging of horse and men, in the upper-center of the work, there stares a wide-open cosmic eye, a light bulb replacing the pupil. The eye-dea is two-fold: that the audience is implicated

both artistically (in the very act of witnessing the painting) and morally, as if in the viewer's inert observation of the work, they socially and psychically incriminate themselves to the tragedy that inspired the artistic statement.

Virilio wrongly said in *Guernica* there is no hope. He meant that by the artist simply offering an abstracted “photograph” of an atrocity, the viewer is provided no true catharsis: there is merely the infinite regression in which the art unconsciously identifies with the repressive structures it wishes to vilify.¹⁴⁴ So, how does one make a statement about ‘war’ without using the symbolism, the images, the footage of war? Is true war art concerned with, as Hannah Arendt believes, the “banality of evil”?

“Capitalism implies the banality of evil. Nothing more. [It] makes us all into secret rivals.”¹⁴⁵ In essence, anything which raises and maximizes profit is the end-goal; anything which does not is expendable, including the building block of capitalism – the individual. The 1925 film, *Greed*, by director Erich von Stroheim is not only American capitalism as seen through a German émigré lens but also a veiled condemnation of the lubricant of the system, the desire for more than enough.¹⁴⁶ In fact, both the original text from which the film is based, Frank Norris' *McTeague*, and the film itself deal with the crude banality of evil which this sin of greed engenders in the human sphere. In one rather telling scene, McTeague's wife, having won the lottery, caresses her naked body with myriad gold coins. As Andre Bazin wrote of von Stroheim, “he has one simple rule for direction. Take a close look at the world, keep on doing so, and in the end it will lay bare for you all its cruelty and

its ugliness.”¹⁴⁷ Laying bare her body, she too lays bare the truth of capitalism: it functions like Freudian desire, on lack, on an inability to ever be complete.

Later in the film, capitalism again asserts its special insidious terror, eventually driving McTeague to his death. Found in Jacobs’ *Star Spangled* is the following description of that event:

Two men, former friends but now bitter enemies, in Death Valley with no water, a dead mule and no chance of rescue; the sun a blazing, accusing eye. Marcus, the shrewder of the two, grasps their situation and says to McTeague, “We’re dead men.” And then they fight, to the death, over a bag of stolen gold. Blood spatters on the coins strewn upon the desert sands. The coins reflect the sun, to look at them is blinding. Men had felt powerful holding them in their hands. Mined from the earth, measured and shaped to resemble the sun, now sand will drift over them, over the dead animals and dead men.¹⁴⁸

Taking lessons from both *Guernica* and *Greed*, as well as Hoffman’s abstract-expressionist influence and years of experimentation with the cinematic form, Ken Jacobs’ almost five-decade-long production of *Star Spangled to Death: 1956-2004* is both a war-film which contains only about 5 minutes of actual war/atrocity footage (within the scope of an epic-440 minutes) and a screed against the horrifying machinations of Capitalism as seen through hours upon hours of found footage. Released on the brink of a possibly hopeful transition from Bush to “anyone else,” *Star Spangled* is quite possibly the first film about living in the strangeness of the post-911 world, the only film to NEGOTIATE the

EXPERIENCE of American shock. Yet it sits not only as a document of the “numinous shock” of this time/place, it also is, as Jonas Mekas writes, “the greatest found-footage film...a film that contains some of the most cinematic and grotesque film material from the first 100 years of commercial cinema.”¹⁴⁹

Weapon of Mass Distraction: Finding “America” through Found-Footage, Found-Sound

“For better and for worse, American ambition is boundless. And nothing speaks more conspicuously to a country’s ambition than its imperialism. During the past hundred years or so, our country has sought to paint the world in its image, and though its reach still exceeds its grasp, that gap is shrinking, and might not be around for much longer. The new Age of Empire is here, and America’s shining light has crept into almost every corner of the globe, warming for some, blinding for others.”¹⁵⁰

Like Baudrillard, Jacobs is fascinated in the “image.” For Jacobs, who has been called the “demiurgo of the moving image” and whose work has constantly been an effort to decipher and disinter the image of/from the image, he remains ever suspicious even rage-ful of the ambition of a country to “paint the world in its image.” For Jacobs, who doesn’t believe in the real but only in “illusionary depths, contradictory depths”, utilizing America as “image” only becomes a way to explore its illusions, its contradictions.¹⁵¹ To be blunt: he wants to shock the image back onto the wall.

Like Virilio, Jacobs also understands the concept of the image and the attack, as well as the idea that recapitulating war/atrocities has a tendency for perpetuation, not isolation and eradication. Instead of relying on war-heavy footage, he is always playing in the peripheries: instead of the product (images of the dead, maimed or broken), he leaves the image subdued,

buried or repressed, quite like an Improvised Explosive Device, so that even though war and the politics of war are ever-present (especially within his one-frame harangues; more on this later) they are always in a potential state – only ready to erupt into kinetic potential in the associative power of an active spectator’s mind. To Jacobs, the image is the attack: its resonance is shrapnel. It’s propaganda for the propaganda-savvy.

Finally, like Zizek, Jacobs’, in examining the fringes of historic cinema, is exploring not even the desert but the “wasteland of the real.” Like T.S. Eliot’s long-form poem about the scraps and ravages of a post-industrial, war-ravaged land, Jacobs’ work is nothing less than “a Wilderness Trek” of the image.¹⁵² Furthermore, instead of relying on binary views (us-them logic), all the sacred cows are up for slaughter: instead of portraying an idealized America lost to Bush and his cronies, war and the hunger for consumerism, Jacobs’ shows ideological contradictions present from the countries founding. Like Zinn’s People’s History, *Star Spangled to Death* is Jacobs’ Film’s History of America.

Begun in 1956 as a Beat-styled bohemian New York romp, the project exponentially expanded over the years, being altered primarily due to contemporary American politics. Screened “for the 1976 Bicentennial as *Flop*, heavily Reaganized in 1984” and now reflective of the post-9/11 “numinous shock” Bush-psychosis of the early 2000s, the current incarnation (released as a 4-disc DVD) is a long-form reverie on psychological operations, military imperialism, racism and American war-mongering and money-grubbing.¹⁵³

In the seven-plus hours of the film, the sources are as varied as the following: ethnographic documentary, Bosco and early Mickey Mouse cartoons, Nixon's lugubrious Checkers speech, a paean-ad-doc to Rockefeller, a CBS show exploring the psychological ramifications of human love through animal experimentation, etc. Throughout are strange juxtapositions of sound such as an "Official Film" showing follow-along-song-lyrics of the Star Spangled Banner (complete with images of forts, fields and military triumphal marches) with a man discordantly gargle-sing-screaming in a non-sensical Ur-language. With all of these image-sound/image-image dis(associations) occurring, Jacobs also has occasional intersecting black-frames with white-writing, usually philosophical or political in tone such as, right after a speech by Nixon:

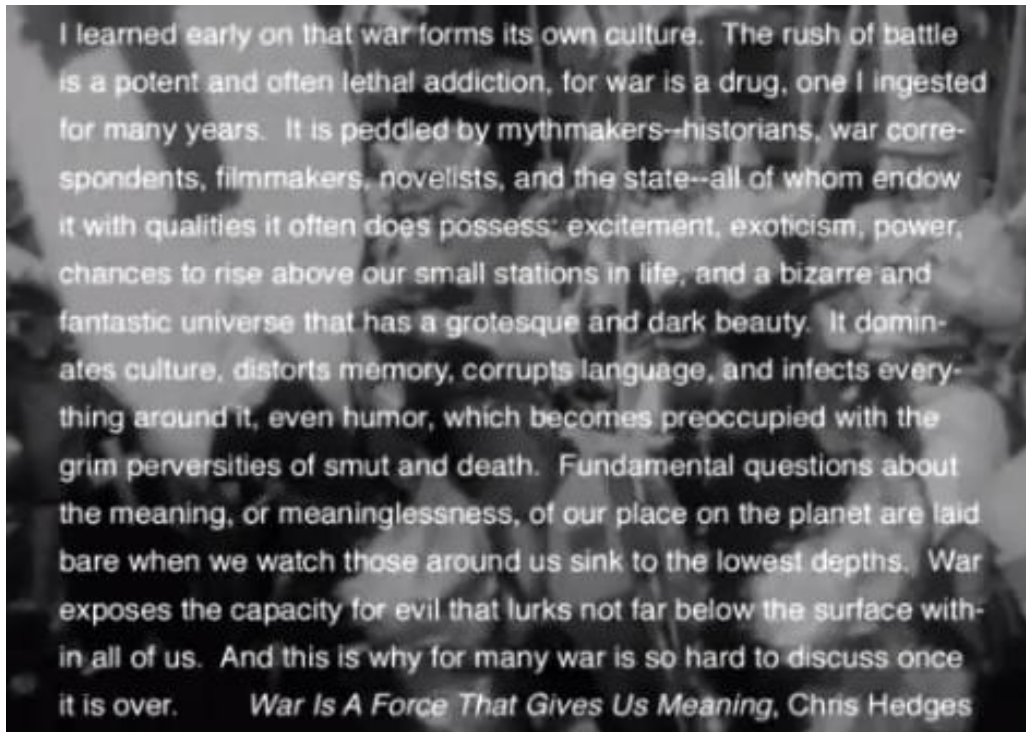
They were comparing the relative merits of carpet bombing to the earlier method of train transports to extermination centers. The music became hard to speak over. Nixon and Kissinger excused themselves. The others stood without speaking as they passed from the room.¹⁵⁴

If that weren't already complex enough, Jacobs moreover implants hundreds (314 by my count) of single-frame flash texts – each lasting less than a 25th of a second. Only with a frame-by-frame video player can one hope to read them: almost like parapraxes (slips of the tongue) from the film, each one is a glimpse into the "political" unconsciousness seething below the surface. SO even if the found-footage Jacobs includes appears to be contradictory, obtuse or unwieldy, these flash harangues (many of which are quotations) are always forward, blunt, straight-to-the-point. Hidden shocks in the editing – Eisenstein would be

proud. For example, during a long sequence from an early Cecil B DeMille film about the First Crusade, the black-frame/white-text reads as follows:

Pope Gregory VII had declared, "Cursed be the man who holds back his sword from shedding blood." The chronicler, Raymond of Aguilers, described the scene when a band of crusaders massacred both Muslims and Jews in Jerusalem in 1099: *Wonderful things were to be seen. Numbers of the Saracens were beheaded...Others were shot with arrows, or forced to jump from the towers; others were tortured for several days, then burned with flames. In the streets were seen piles of heads and hands and feet. One rode about everywhere amid corpses of men and horses. In the temple of Solomon, the horses waded in the blood up to their knees, nay, up to the bridle. It was a just and marvelous judgment of God, that this place should be filled with the blood of unbelievers.*¹⁵⁵

And while that is a direct slice of the atrocity which occurred during the Crusades, a hyper-text afterwards reads even more as a statement of both war-in-general and all war-as-eternally the same:



[This

image is the equivalent of a quote]¹⁵⁶

Indeed, war is hard to discuss, so Ken alludes. Instead of a literalization of the continuation of the madly-destructive Clash of Civilizations as found within the America-Iraqi war context, the East versus the West, Jacobs create an archaeological awareness, showing that just below the shaky architecture of our current predicament (Iraq War) is the foundation of former wars, particularly the Crusades. Furthermore, as the quote says, “war is so hard to discuss once it is over” which is why Jacobs never really discusses it – it’s not over, not by a long way, so all the artist can really do is play in the numinous, the intangible and the “meaningless” to try and grant it some semblance of authenticity. Furthermore, in utilizing the Crusades-as-present, he shows the pathology of the President Bush-mind view: a leader who believes he has a special message from God authorizing their policy in initiating war.

This multi-metaphor-associative mine-field is the spectator's only point of entry into the massively-complex *Star Spangled*— it is much a work of self-creation than a film to simply absorb. But from the first text break after the 30-minute “imperial caricature” opening ethnographic film, which reads “US torture practices outed while more than half the electorate are keeping faith with the proven fictions concocted to justify unproved attack destruction looting privatizing of Iraq”, war is to remain a constant area of association. In what appears only as an innocuous 30-minute episode of a CBS show called *Conquest* detailing Harlow's rhesus monkey experimentation regarding attachment and love, the psychological horrors contained in Guantanamo are only a synaptic connection away. The experiment is as follows: taking away infant monkeys from their real mothers, Harlow replaced the mothers with two constructed models: one made of wire, one of cloth. Noting how similar the baby monkey and infant were composed psychologically, Harlow was questioning/testing the response patterns of an infant to its mother. Deprivation of contact, separation from the mother were utilized in order to learn the boundaries of love formation, thus one wonders if the prisoner (like the monkey) deprived of contact, separated from their motherland is any less a perverse experiment to test the boundaries of love-formation-of-country?¹⁵⁷ Shocking juxtaposition? I'd agree.

In yet another, a World War II-era General Motors ad musically intones propaganda-phrases such as “the army of production fighting for our liberty”, “at machines you're in the trenches”, and “tanks, we'll keep 'em rolling, planes, we'll keep 'em flying, guns, guns, guns,

we'll keep 'em shooting" as if to show how the language of war, when combining with the jargon of the manufacturing plant, (un)intentionally made war synonymous with both economic and technological progress. Out of the Great Depression by the means of a Great War, America had subconsciously turned war into an assembly line which paradoxically produced more war. Meanwhile, the flash-frames quote a behind-the-scenes history which basically asserts the same ideological penchant for war.(Because there are far too many for the body of this essay, I've included some of them within the screen-caps in the end notes).¹⁵⁸

In still another, from a BBC Documentary called "Plague our Children" a scientist is testing certain biological agents on mice, as the voice-over questions: "Now scientists must decide what to infect the mice with? The best place seems to be in the lungs...Biological warfare is ready. It's only real test is its first use on humanity." Situated in the midst of a quasi-religious commentary on the subject of conscience, placed directly after Eisenhower saying, "There is no end to America's growth. She will continue to move forward toward to making a free and prosperous world," the mice being forced to breathe air-borne pathogens is a highly original metaphor about the military-industrial complex: like industry in the WWI GM agit-prop commercial, science is also seen as having been "infected" by the patriotic bug. In conquering these brave new worlds, by exploring these new frontiers, Manifest Destiny is alive and well, in the beakers and agar trays of America. Onward, Christian germs...

Lastly, Jacobs' never disassociates forms of war: class war for him is only physical war by other means. During a long section in which a self-sponsored Rockefeller documentary runs, extolling only the "great things" the Governor had accomplished (industry, job training, etc.), Ken Jacobs' first manipulates the audio of the job training section so as to simply repeat in various ways statements such as "better for a job, a job, jobs, any job, any job but your present job, part time job, permanent job, job for a job for a job" until the idea of certain "jobs" is shown to a quietly deceptive ruse to keep the sheep busy while the rich shear them of their delicately golden fleece. To hammer this home with even more force, the text-on-screen says:

Don't put it past the owners to maybe one day tell us they've sold us to China, in the market for cheap labor and a place to dump industrial waste. "Enough with that stars and stripes bullshit, next week you talk Chinese. Yeah, yeah, well life is full of surprises. Think of it this way, it means jobs. Lots of work for everybody, fifty, sixty hours a week. We've packed, we're going, tat a. Oh, yeah, might as well know now: there *was* a class war, all along, from day one."¹⁵⁹

But in *Star Spangled to Death*, there are only two sections which explicitly deal with either the ravages of war or the topic of 9/11. Directly after Nixon's Checkers speech in which he dealt with allegations of financial impropriety (presaging Watergate), Ken places inserts black-and-white footage of a doctor who "operated a tuberculosis hospital in Vietnam" due to the "gas poisoning similar to those seen by shock veterans in the first World War." With images of soldiers yanking children from "hiding places" in which they had tossed gas-grenades, infirm children and elderly in a ramshackle ward, and the doctor

horrifyingly explaining the symptoms: “pulmonary edema, rattling lungs”, the clip never explicitly shows the atrocity: again, Jacobs is the master allusionist.¹⁶⁰

For 9/11, he lets us re-witness the clown show of the hearings, with rubber-faced pundits and politicians smirking to one another even as they made deadly serious proclamations on the camera and at the microphone. Suddenly, in the middle of Lee Hamilton’s exaltation at Rudy Giuliani’s handling of the entire 9/11 disaster, a pony-tailed man erupts from the crowd: “3,000 murdered does not mean leadership. It means a vacuum of leadership. Let’s ask the real questions. Remember, your government funded and trained Al Qaeda, your government funded and trained Al Qaeda.” Soon after, we hear former President George W Bush (in the audio) as he wise-cracks, feigning to look behind the furniture in the Oval Office: “those weapons of mass destruction have to be somewhere.” By not ever showing the towers or their destruction, Ken Jacobs simply shows the ruptured circus surrounding them: besides, it is not the dead he wishes to commemorate (that has been done) but instead to raise consciousness about the inconsistencies between word and deed, between smirk and furrow, between democracy and fascism. After all, he puts in text just a few minutes later, “Centrist’ Democrats/ you don’t defeat fascism/ if you meet it halfway.”

It should also be noted that Ken Jacobs himself calls for launching war: “There is a war I’m all for. The Cayman Islands, our offshore competitor.”¹⁶¹

Ken, Ken, the Cosmic Fool

The tradition of the fool is that he is often the most truthful being in the kingdom, the one who understands the irony or absurdity within the regime and the only one who is allowed to speak the “truth.” Passed off as ‘foolish’ the words of the jester often carried gorgeously subversive underpinnings. Thus the fool always existed in a highly-liminal state of being: both revealing and ridiculed. Ken Jacobs’ has a knack for picking up the most seismically-powerful images or sounds, ones which cause minor quakes of consciousness and conscience. For instance, a sound piece (pulled from a foreign radio source) elucidates the absolute madness of the post-911 world, proving how “numinous” the “shock” of that event truly was.

Taped from BBC World Radio during the Oscars, we hear the commentators banter back and forth: the content, however, is both borderline-farcical and sardonically horrifying.

Male Commentator: the venerable journalist Peter Jennings did a very down-beat news update on what has been a rather distressing day for the Americans with the news from Iraq, and the news ended and it went back to the next award which was given out by a digitally-created Mickey Mouse who danced on our television screens and the effect was odd, to say the least.

Woman Commentator: Oh dear, difficult gear change. (Pause) It may be subdued as Oscars go, but, we have to talk about what the stars are wearing – my producer’s wildly gesticulating at me that I’ve got to ask you this – I would have asked anyway – What are they wearing? Is it reflecting the somber mood?

Male Commentator: Well, maybe I should tell you that ‘black is the new black.’

Mickey Mouse handing over an Oscar after a death total? Black-tie celebration akin to

Masque of the Red Death? A person hunting through the collected works of Beckett, Sartre

or Ionesco couldn't find a better sense of the absurd. Like the juxtaposition of stock prices, escort services and obituaries in the supposed veracity within any issue of the New York Times, the post 9-11 world is a place of forced assemblage, of catastrophic collisions of meanings which end up creating large reservoirs of seeming meaninglessness. Thus, the real difficulty about 9-11 is that it created a new metaphor: two objects in place of one – two buildings made a cemetery – particularly difficult because an absence suddenly stood in for a presence, an absence which could be suddenly filled-in by any present meaning needed: war in Iraq, Afghanistan, corporate tax cuts, Patriot Act, coffins draped in flags.¹⁶² The image was a blank check cashed in to push through legislation and swiftly remove Constitutional rights, to buy a populace numbed to rigged elections, weapons of mass destruction and corporate-government love-ins.¹⁶³ So what we fatally forgot in the “numinous shock” of 9-11 was to let the artists find our meanings, not our politicians and CEOs. Ken Jacobs gives us a start for the NEGOTIATION:

Cool It With Abstract Art (Nuance Will Save Us)

Sensitizing to art in its more abstract forms is imperative
if we're to survive our own hunger for thrills.

We're hard-wired with a capacity for thrills,
to internal adrenaline flushes,
that can make us crave brutal and shaking events.

Many people, for instance, think back to war as
"when they really lived".

But following even very slight changes of form
from place to place in an artwork can offer equal adventure,
living experience of enormous intensity
when we learn to sensitize to the changes.

I advocate sensitization,
more experience from the subtlest changes
of color and shade and direction and weight and so forth.
Dance is one play on gravity that can satisfy atavistic instincts
that have outlasted their usefulness,
so we don't need to see cities falling.
Abstract art is way out of fashion now, young people
are not learning its languages;
the ferocious computer game is hot,
gangsta rap is what's hot, bloodbath movies.
Arnold Schwarzenegger is Governor of California.
Elected by a landslide, indeed.
Forget the propaganda that sensitivity is sissy.
Only a turn to delicate nuance can save us.

No more shocks to deal with shocks: it is officially time to cool it – nuance will save the day.

Even though over seven hours long and exhausting (at times) to follow, *Star Spangled to Death* is that delicate nuance which can save us, that conscience which always flickers (ever under, deeper, faster), inspiring (what is the opposite of terrorism?) a surgical strike – a coordinated, precise attack with SHOCKING images and DISPLACED sound that does not dis-member but instead causes one to re-member, to re-corporealize, re-imagine that America that was built on real freedoms, not imagined foes, that was given to liberty for the masses, not tyranny of the minority. Like 9/11, Jacobs wants us to see images for what they are: able to be created, able to be destroyed. In that destruction, oddly enough, there is hope. As he said about his former teacher Hans Hofmann, “Hofmann named his book **SEARCH FOR THE REAL**. I think I was answering that the real is ever-elusive, that the search will have to do.”¹⁶⁴ And that idea of search is truly the profoundest of negotiations: Jacobs with found footage, with America and with the resonance of a shock felt even to this day.

CHAPTER FIVE:

FUTURE SHOCK: WHERE THE HELL DO WE GO FROM HERE!?

“The future?” Jack replied, “The future will be worse.” – Ken Jacobs

Future Shock

In a now-forgotten documentary produced by school book publisher McGraw-Hill and narrated by Orson Welles (during his cold shoulder from Hollywood period) called *Future Shock* (1972), Welles relates the following:

Our modern technology has achieved a degree of sophistication beyond our wildest dreams, but this technology has exacted a pretty heavy price. We live in an age of anxiety, a time of stress and with all our sophistication, we are the victims of our own technological strength. We are the victims of shock. Future shock.

The thesis of future shock, a condition coined by Alvin Toffler in the early 1970s, stated that by the end of the millennium, the world would experience an abrupt rupture, a collision with an exponential rate of change too rapid to properly adjust. Similar to Lewis' assessment of Modernity in which the individuals of the time felt a "break with the past," Toffler claimed that the "accelerative thrust" would create a schism of all known previous experience. In the final section, however, Toffler offered solutions to the problem: along with conscious regulation of the technological pace, he proposed 'enclaves of the past' and 'enclaves of the future' – spaces which would allow an individual to adapt through various coping rituals.

But maybe the shock is already here: books have been replaced by e-readers, albums switched out for .mp3s, films for YouTube clips, photographs for cell-phone snaps – the totalizing evanescence of material form. Not to mention the genetic code as corporate patents, innovation outstripping regulation, extremist rhetoric in politics, disaster capitalism and the faith in the Free Market, climate change – a 'now' built on standards of absolute

technological or ideological change. So, then, where are our coping mechanisms, our ‘enclaves of the past’ and ‘enclaves of the future’ in this technocratic time and place?

In Gene Youngblood’s influential study of avant-garde film, Expanded Cinema, he argues that as we live in the condition of future shock, art must expand (as exponentially) in order to fulfill the aesthetic task of representing the transition. As such, new systems need to be designed for old information.¹⁶⁵ At the time, Youngblood placed his faith in a form of singularity: computers, programming themselves, would allow humankind to advance, as he called it, synaesthetically. It was to be a technosphere, a symbiotic harmony between man and machine, as well as a videosphere, in which visual media were to be, via McLuhan’s theories, extensions to man’s central nervous system.¹⁶⁶

Ken has delivered both – sort of. He has given us symbiotic disharmony as well as a ‘real’ example of an extended nervous system. And despite his reliance on “mining” the past, his work also ultimately bridges Baudelaire’s original desire between the contingent and universal: indeed, he has designed new systems (the contingent) for old information (the universal). The aesthetic logos miraculously transferred through by artefactual devices, one being the Nervous System projectors, another Eternalism™. In Plato’s Phaedrus, he told the story of the Egyptian god Thoth who introduced the art of writing to aid the memory of man. The king chided him, asserting that as people would rely on the written, they would forget and neglect the memories living within. We seem to be facing the same crisis, but now of image: constant imprints threaten our ability to experience sensorial impact, to truly

know our visual sense. Only shock can provoke that dead awareness, a galvanic prod to a dormant level of consciousness.

The Shock of the Now (2011)

So...Jack was wrong. The future's not worse. At least, not for Ken. Jacobs is still alive, still working. Just this past April, at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, there was a retrospective (the artist present) of Jacobs' work in which he screened a new piece called *Seeking the Monkey King*.¹⁶⁷ Not to mention the 6-day festival of 3-D at Anthology Film Festivals in May. Even the Tribeca Film Festival has a new short in competition called *The Green Wave*.

Flashing back.

In 1965, after one of Ken's performances, Jonas Mekas wrote quite a hyperbolic accolade.

What I saw with my dazed head was the rebirth of this forgotten art of the past, the art of shadow play that will become, during these few coming years, the controversial challenger of cinema as we know it today, and a new source of inspiration. Not that it will push out the cinema as we know it today – but it will make it seem only one, and perhaps not the largest part of the motion, light, image art.¹⁶⁸

Here is an equally-hyperbolic one: Ken Jacobs not only has created a secondary cinema, a para-cinema equal to the “cinema as we know it today” but has created an arena in which experience has been foregrounded to archaic viewing practice, in which “seeing” has become an art in and of itself, not a passive method of filling time. But to get there (or is it here), it

was down a road with no shock absorbers on the car. A bumpy ride. *Blonde Cobra* rejected narrative convention, developed a systematic aesthetics of failure, all the while displaying myriad taboo subjects set to shock the conservative 1950s. *Two Wrenching Departures* and the Nervous System performances, through Rorshaching and ontological/visual disruption, made demands on both the spectator's legitimacy and sense-of-self, somehow rupturing and securing both simultaneously. Lastly, *Star Spangled to Death* tested epic-structure (both in form of film and ideology), mined the unconscious of America and provided a manual for the adaptation to the post-9/11 world and its sense of "numinous shock."

Jacobs has been more than an apt guide in both an exploration of rupture as well as the rather scattershot world of the American avant-garde. Not only does he link to practices from Europe (via Hans Hoffman), but his influence and teaching has spawned entire generations of avant-garde artists afterward. In a sense, despite the utilization of 'shock' in his aesthetic practice, he stands in the center, unshaken, absorbing and reinterpreting for the rest of us. With an understanding of the failures of previous movements, an uncensored sentimentality checked by ironic knowledge, Ken Jacobs' knows both when to apply the electrodes and when to take them away again. He simply embodies the full articulation of 'shock' – the EXPERIENCE of and the NEGOTIATION through. Because he inscribes so many of his figures with direct or quasi-mythological elements, here's one for Jacobs himself – a psychopomp, delivering messages from the booming divine to the quaking mortals beneath, a Hermetic individual who in shocking us also serves to relax our nerves, an artist of the first right, one who makes us 'aware' – and that, the ability to transmit self-awareness, is

the most 'rupturous' feature, the one requisite that unites all of his films under the category of shock.

In hindsight, the Modernists could have learned something from Jacobs: while it all begins with the experience of 'shock', the negotiation through 'nuance' is what matters. The avant-garde was 'before' for a reason: they provide the lay-out so the rest of us don't trigger landmines or step into spiked pits. They absorb the full shock so that we all might know some part of truth.

¹ For more on the function of Wonder see: “Wonder” by R.W. Hepburn in Wonder and Other Essays: Eight Studies in Aesthetics and Neighboring Fields (Edinburgh: University Press, 1984) 134-137

² Quotation from The New Oxford Book of Food (London: Oxford University Press, 1969). Explanation from The Oxford Companion to the Mind (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987)

³ Definition and etymology from Oxford English Dictionary Online: www.oed.com (Accessed 2-28-2011)

⁴ Caryl Flinn. “Modernism’s Aftershocks: Peer Raben’s Film Music for Fassbinder” in New German Cinema: Music, History and the Matter of Style (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2004) 80

⁵ Oxford English Dictionary Online: www.oed.com (Accessed 3-01-2011)

⁶ Laura Salisbury & Andrew Shail. “Introduction” to Neurology and Modernity: A Cultural History of Nervous Systems, 1800-1950 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) 6

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Phil Solomon (from a lecture in his *Elective Affinities* class) provided the least unobstusive definition of Modernism to be found, however: *photography* (allowed graphic representation to free itself thus abstraction), *atonal music* (Classical systems of harmony in question), *dream-interpretation* (Freud’s deliberate probing of the conscious led to Surrealism and even removed the mental fixity that Cartesian logic had once supplied), *relativity* (in throwing out Newton’s model, Einsteinian physics meant that space and time were no longer bound to simple cause-and-effect relationships; theories of chance emerge), *trains and planes* (perceptual speed shift – panoramic perception), *World War I* (which questioned humanity’s inhumanity and initial ideas of trauma, both bodily and psychologically), and *cinema*, which gave all of these changes and new ideas a public forum, a place appropriate for exhibition and experimentation.

⁹ Pericles Lewis. “Origins” in The Cambridge Introduction to Modernism. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 11

¹⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche. The Gay Science: With a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 117

¹¹ Lloyd Kramer. “Charles Darwin & A New Biology” from 19th-Century Intellectual History: An Audio Survey. The Teaching Company

¹² http://people.bu.edu/wwildman/WeirdWildWeb/courses/wphil/lectures/wphil_theme17.htm - On Karl Marx (Accessed on 3-13-11)

¹³ Arthur Rimbaud. “Lettres du Voyant” in Complete Works. (New York: Harper and Row, 1976) 48

¹⁴ Sigmund Freud. Civilization and Its Discontents. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010)

¹⁵ Other figures included could have been Zamenhof, inventor of Esperanto, Jung, of psychoanalytical fame, Simmel, early anthropo-sociological author,

¹⁶ The foundation for these claims arises from similar intellectual methodologies as the New Historicists Stephen Greenblatt and Jonathan Dollimore who attempt to place phenomenological conditions within ideological constraints in order to develop a historical trajectory. For similar theories, see Greenblatt's "Cultural Mobility: A Manifesto" and Dollimore's "Death, Desire and Loss in Western Culture."

¹⁷ Most studies seem to make a break near/at the onset of WWI. Primarily it seems to serve as a method to discuss the birth of the avant-garde or technological breakthroughs which permitted High Modernism.

¹⁸ See Pericles Lewis' Introduction to Modernism, Frederic Jameson's Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, and Giddens' Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age.

¹⁹ For a history of the term "avant-garde" see Matei Calinsecu's Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987) 93-144

²⁰ For views of the political significance of the avant-garde, see Renato Poggioli, Theory of the Avant-garde, trans. Gerald Fitzgerald (Cambridge, Harvard, 1968); also see Roger Shattuck, The Banquet Years: The Origins of the Avant-garde in France, 1885 to World War I (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1972)

²¹ Clement Greenberg. "Avant-garde and Kitsch" in Kitsch: An Anthology of Bad Taste. (London: Studio Vista, 1969)

²² Stephen Halliwell The Aesthetics of Mimesis: Ancient Texts and Modern Problems. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002) 161

²³ Ibid

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Lewis 71

²⁶ Dadaists believed in particular that they were making anti-art. Previous art had served civilization, their art would undermine or challenge it. In their unreason and violation of syntax, they were paradoxically conforming to the world. [Think about it: in that time to revert to classical perspective and order and anti-individualism would have been a greater shock.]

²⁷ Andre Breton. "First and Second Surrealist Manifesto" in The Routledge Drama Anthology & Sourcebook: From Modernism to Contemporary Performance. edit. Maggie Gale and John Deeney. (New York: Routledge, 2010) In the manifesto, he also writes "For this we must give thanks to the discoveries of Sigmund Freud."

²⁸ For further refutation of the divide between classical Realism and other forms of art, see Roland Barthes "The Reality Effect" in The Novel: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory. edit. by Dorothy J Hale (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006) which he shows that realistic representation is a case of contributive effects designed to provide a trompe-loiel.

²⁹ Even pioneers of abstract painting such as Kandinsky, Mondrian and Malevich were “haunted by fears that, having rejected mimesis, their work would be perceived as merely “decorative”. Found on www.aristos.org/aris-03/art&cog.htm (Accessed 4-01-11)

³⁰ Peter Burger. *The Decline of Modernism*. (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992) 24

³¹ Pericles Lewis. “The Waste Land” at The Modernism Lab (at Yale University): http://modernism.research.yale.edu/wiki/index.php/The_Waste_Land (Accessed on 4-07-11)

³² T.S. Eliot. “The Waste Land” Lines 19-22

³³ Paul Wood. “Modernism & The Idea of the Avant-garde” in *Varieties of Modernism*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004) 215

³⁴ Charles Harrison, Paul Wood & Jason Gaiger. *Art in Theory, 1648-1815: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*. (Oxford, Blackwell, 2000) 37-41

³⁵ Wood 217

³⁶ Quoted in Calinescu 119

³⁷ Hans Enzensberger. “Aporias of the Avant-garde” in *Zig Zag: The Politics of Culture and Vice Versa*. (New York: New Press, 1997) 267

³⁸ Calinescu 124

³⁹ Hal Foster. *The Return of the Real: The Avant-garde at the End of the Century*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996) 5

⁴⁰ See Clement Greenberg’s ‘Avant-Garde and Kitsch’

⁴¹ Philip Rahv. “Twilight of the Thirties” in *Parisian Review*. Volume 1, Number 4 (Summer 1939) 4

⁴² The American avant-garde is typically possessed of the critical Kantian self-reflexivity prescribed by critic Clement Greenberg to cure modernist painting, but also includes the frontrunners of any artistic practice and those canonical appendices to modernism’s legacy. ⁴²Greenberg’s formalist formulation of high modernism as “the use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself— not in order to subvert it, but to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence” is found in his canonical 1960 article “Modernist Painting,” reprinted in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 4*, ed. John O’Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993). Also see the book from Caroline Jones, *Eyesight Alone: Clement Greenberg’s Modernism and the Bureaucratization of the Senses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

⁴³ The debate over Sitney’s naming of “structural” film is protracted, with major clarifications and outright refutations coming from Malcolm LeGrice, Regina Cornwell, and Paul Arthur, among others. While I do not want to dismiss this important debate as mere semantics, for practical purposes I here use the term “structuralist” as a type of contraction of the term “structural” and one of its suggested replacements,

“materialist,” simultaneously indicating its potential distance from the structural projects of Saussure and Levi-Strauss.

⁴⁴ Eric de Bruyn, “The Expanded Field of Cinema, or Exercise on the Perimeter of a Square” in *X-Screen: Film Installations and Actions in the 1960s and 1970s* (Köln: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2004) 153.

⁴⁵ P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde 1943-2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) 306.

⁴⁶ Ibid

⁴⁷ Untutoring refers to Brakhage’s description of what experimental film should do for the eye – untutor it from Renaissance-based perspective, etc. Make it a dumb eye which sees anew, sees afresh.

::Some descriptions of these works are as follows:

Tom, Tom, The Piper’s Son – “Jacobs reveals film as a Frankenstein art. What is a movie but a celluloid corpse brought to life by the electrical spark of the projector? Rephotographing a 1905 Biograph one-reeler, Jacobs penetrates into the image, delving into each shot, zooming in on details, probing deeper and deeper... A journey into the abyss.” - David Schwartz

Opening the 19th Century – Salvages of a Lumiere film from the nitroglycerin compost of cinematic history. Taking the original footage, essentially a three-minute right-left pan of swarming émigrés, Venetian gondolas and electric street cars, Jacobs attempts the impossible, reverting the tutored eye of modern cinephiles back to the ‘wondering’ eye of the early 19th century native. By exploiting what is primarily an optical trick, the Pulfrich effect [placing a neutral-density filter over one eye which retards the rate of light received in said eye], Jacobs regresses cinema through a psychophysical phenomenon back to its origin - a toy, a parlor trick; the objects on the screen (despite its unalterable flat plane) as if by miracle begin to stereoscopically project, creating the illusion of deep space, different non-interactive planes and three-dimensional sleights-of-hand.

Georgetown Loop – “Elegantly reworking some 1906 footage of a train trip through the Colorado Rockies, the dean of radical filmmaking printed the original image and its mirror side by side to produce a stunning widescreen kaleidoscope effect. Did it really take 100 years of cinema for someone to execute this almost ridiculously simple idea? “This landscape film deserves an X-rating”, says Jacobs. “ Jim Hoberman For other descriptions see: <http://freespace.virgin.net/web.star/nsnotes.html> (particularly good selection of Nervous System quotes)

⁴⁸ John Matturri. “Theater of Embarrassment” [From the First Person Cinema Archive at CU-Boulder]

⁴⁹Ellen Goellner. *Bodies of the Text: Dance as Theory, Literature as Dance* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995) 67

⁵⁰ Carel Rowe. *The Baudelairean Cinema: A Trend Within the American Avant-garde*. (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1982) 39

⁵¹ One sees this predilection for artifice in the silkscreen-works of Andy Warhol, especially his series of dollar bills. Money becomes nothing but symbol.

⁵² Matturri

⁵³ Rowe 7

⁵⁴ Peter Gidal. "Introduction to Structural Film" in Structural Film Anthology. edit. by Peter Gidal. (London: British Film Institute, 1976) 19

⁵⁵ Jonas Mekas, "Notes on the New American Cinema," *Film Culture* 24 (Spring 1962) 12

⁵⁶ Julian Levy, *Surrealism*, (NY: Black Sun Press, 1936) 23

⁵⁷ Rowe 59

⁵⁸ Antonin Artaud. The Theater and Its Double. (New York: Grove Press, 1958) 81

⁵⁹ Sitney 373

⁶⁰ Allan Kaprow. Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) 7

⁶¹ Jonas Mekas. Movie Journal: The Rise of the New American Cinema-1959-1971. (New York: Macmillan, 1972) 393-395

⁶² For a detailed expose of Jack Smith, see: www.brightlightfilms.com/29/jacksmith.html (Accessed on 4-07-11)

⁶³ Ibid

⁶⁴ Ibid

⁶⁵ Susan Sontag. Against Interpretation: And Other Essays. (New York: Octagon Books, 1978) 231

⁶⁶ Rowe 39

⁶⁷ Michele Pierson. Optic Antics [Kindle]: The Cinema of Ken Jacobs. edit by Michele Pierson, David E James and Paul Arthur (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011)

⁶⁸ Rowe 39

⁶⁹ Sheldon Renan. An Introduction to the American Underground Film. (New York: Dutton, 1967)

⁷⁰ Paul Arthur. Optic Antics [Kindle]: The Cinema of Ken Jacobs. edit by Michele Pierson, David E James and Paul Arthur (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011)

⁷¹ Rowe 63

⁷² Interview with Ken Jacobs from Anthology Film Archives (New York)

⁷³ One also relates the work, later taken by the counter-culture of the 60s, of Blake in his poetry of Little Boy Lost. A portrait of a child in the streets of London, this is Smith's self-proclamation of his own "lostness" in the streets of New York.

⁷⁴ Rowe 63

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- ⁷⁵ Paul Arthur. *Optic Antics [Kindle]: The Cinema of Ken Jacobs*. edit by Michele Pierson, David E James and Paul Arthur (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011)
- ⁷⁶ Rowe 63
- ⁷⁷ Quoted in Sitney from *Film-Makers Cooperative Fifth catalogue* 371
- ⁷⁸ Sitney 372
- ⁷⁹ James Peterson. *Dreams of Chaos, Visions of Order: Understanding the American Avant-garde Cinema*. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994) 152
- ⁸⁰ Artaud 71
- ⁸¹ To further The Exquisite Corpse metaphor, Ken Jacobs is quoted as saying ...in *Blonde Cobra* and other films there's a very clear idea: I was knocking on someone's door, and they would answer the door and they would find this auto accident on their doorstep, this mangled body...that's what the films were; I was dropping these mangled bodies on peoples' doorsteps and letting them deal with it..." [Interview with Lindley Hanlon – 6/10/12/1979- Filmmakers Filming]
- ⁸² "Interview with Ken Jacobs" in *Millennium Film Journal* 123
- ⁸³ Charles Baudelaire. "The Painter of Modern Life" in *The Painter of Modern Life And Other Essays*. (New York: Phaidon Press, 1996) 5
- ⁸⁴ Ibid
- ⁸⁵ Ibid 3
- ⁸⁶ Eugene Jolas. *Critical Writings. 1924-1951*. Edit. Kiefer & Rumold
- ⁸⁷ Holmes, Oliver Wendell. 'Bread and the Newspaper.' *The Works of OWH: (Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1892)*
- ⁸⁸ Schivelbusch, Wolfgang. "Panoramic Travel" in *Nineteenth-Century Visual Culture Reader* edit. by Vanessa Schwartz (New York: Routledge, 2004) 96-97
- ⁸⁹ Ibid 97
- ⁹⁰ Ibid
- ⁹¹ Georg Simmel. "The Metropolis and Mental Life" found on the website:
[http://www.altruists.org/static/files/The%20Metropolis%20and%20Mental%20Life%20\(Georg%20Simmel\).htm](http://www.altruists.org/static/files/The%20Metropolis%20and%20Mental%20Life%20(Georg%20Simmel).htm)
(accessed 04/16/2011)
- ⁹² When this painting was first exhibited in 1844, a critic wrote: "a train advances towards you, a train that really moves at 50 miles per hour, and that the reader would do well to see before it leaves the picture."
Image/text found at: <http://www.theartwolf.com/masterworks/turner.htm>

⁹³ From the literature for a Jacobs event at Harvard Film Archive: “The Nervous Art of Ken Jacobs” [From FP Cinema Archive]

⁹⁴ Daniel Barnett. Movement as Meaning: In Experimental Film (New York: Rodopi, 2008) 91

⁹⁵ Ibid 92

⁹⁶ Artaud 27

⁹⁷ E.H. Gombrich. Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation. (New York: Pantheon, 1965) 107

⁹⁸ Jay Gluckstern. “On Ken” in *The Colorado Daily* [From FP Cinema Archive]

⁹⁹ “I’m interested in illusion, not delusion – I’m interested in the dream you have while awake. I want the spaces to be apprehended as spaces, not just things in space.” (quoted in Gluckstern, Colorado Daily)

¹⁰⁰ Optic Antics [Kindle]: The Cinema of Ken Jacobs. edit by Michele Pierson, David E James and Paul Arthur (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011)

¹⁰¹ Oxford English Dictionary Online

¹⁰² Adam D. Weinberg, “Vanishing Presence” in *Vanishing Presence* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1989), 64. In noting that blur is “onomatopoeic,” he suggests that the word is itself a blur, bringing together two ideas which are simultaneously retained and effaced from the resultant compound, or blur.

¹⁰³ *Oxford English Dictionary Online*.

¹⁰⁴ Weinberg 64. Within the medium of photography, the negative connotations of blur are historically specific: “blur, from its early conception as an indistinct appearance and an obstacle to truth to its nineteenth-century association with movement in photography, has had negative associations which continue to qualify our thinking about photography today.”

¹⁰⁵ Martin Friedman, “Forward” in *Vanishing Presence*, 6.

¹⁰⁶ Weinberg 70-1.

¹⁰⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (New York: Routledge Press, 2002 [1945]) 476.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 265-66.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 271, 273.

¹¹⁰ Regina Cornwell, “Structural Film: Ten Years Later,” *The Drama Review: TDR* 23 (Structuralist Performance Issue: September 1979): 77-92

¹¹¹ Films That Tell Time: A Retrospective of the Works of Ken Jacobs [The Catalogue – Found in FP Cinema Archive]

¹¹² Ibid

¹¹³ Dorothy Richardson. *Close-Up 1927-1933: Cinema and Modernism*. edit. by James Donald, Anne Friedberg, Laura Marcus. October 1927 (Vol 1/ no 4) 166

¹¹⁴ *Optic Antics [Kindle]: The Cinema of Ken Jacobs*. edit by Michele Pierson, David E James and Paul Arthur (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011)

¹¹⁵ For further references to this type of energetic composition see, Artaud 98. For instance, “all movements will obey a rhythm; and each character being merely a type, his gesticulation, physiognomy, and costume will appear like so many rays of light.”

¹¹⁶ From the soundtrack to the 1933 film *The Barbarian*

¹¹⁷ *Optic Antics [Kindle]: The Cinema of Ken Jacobs*. edit by Michele Pierson, David E James and Paul Arthur (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011)

¹¹⁸ Ibid

¹¹⁹ Ibid

¹²⁰ Ibid

¹²¹ J. K. Huysmans. *Against Nature*. (New York: Dover Press, 1968) 24

¹²² “These “Nervous System” works are unlike anything ever seen on the planet. They fulfill the century-long dream of many artists of different disciplines to uncover a “second reality” behind or between the elements of the world as “seen.” Found in *Optic Antics [Kindle]: The Cinema of Ken Jacobs*. edit by Michele Pierson, David E James and Paul Arthur (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011)

¹²³ “Altman Says Films Inspire Terrorism,” Associated Press Wire Story, Oct. 17, 2001.

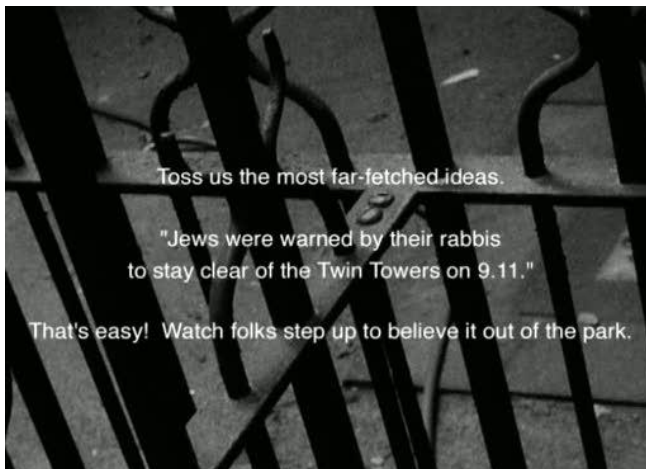
The late Seventies
and prospects for a white world-champ looked bad.
America The Movie* needed to invent Rocky.
In the movie-America many Americans inhabit,
their cheer-up fantasy just this side of Heaven,
the thing that is most taken to heart *is* most real.
Rocky the inarticulate (like GWB, all heart) was a hit.
Rocky would then slide further Right to appear as Rambo,
military killing machine at loose ends, who tears up
a comfortable American town with the audience's approval.

* LIFE THE MOVIE, *How Entertainment Conquered Reality*,
by Neil Gabler

¹²⁴

Still from *Star Spangled To Death*

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- ¹²⁵ Stephen Prince. *Firestorm: American Film in the Age of Terrorism*. (New York, NY: Columbia, 2009) 3
- ¹²⁶ Louis Spence. "Teaching 9/11 And Why I'm Not Doing It Anymore." *Cinema Journal* 43.2 (Winter 2004): 102
- ¹²⁷ Karlheinz Stockhausen. Press Conference.
- ¹²⁸ Alison Landsberg. *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*. (New York: Columbia, 2004) 25-26
- ¹²⁹ Colonel Kurtz refers to the Marlon Brando figure from Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*. Trained by, ordered to commit atrocities, and then subsequently abandoned by the military, Kurtz' exploits in the deep jungles of Vietnam contain many eerie coincidences to Osama bin Laden.
- ¹³⁰ http://www.ubishops.ca/ baudrillardstudies/vol2_2/spencer.htm (accessed 04-26-11)
- ¹³¹ Jean Baudrillard. *The Spirit of Terrorism and Requiem for the Twin Towers*. (New York: Verso, 2002) 5
- ¹³² http://www.ubishops.ca/ baudrillardstudies/vol2_2/spencer.htm (accessed 04-26-11)
- ¹³³ Ibid
- ¹³⁴ Paul Virilio. *Ground Zero*. (New York: Verso, 2002) 38
- ¹³⁵ Slavoj Zizek. *Welcome to the Desert of the Real: Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates*. (New York: Verso, 2002) 19
- ¹³⁶ Ibid 15
- ¹³⁷ Ibid 50
- ¹³⁸ Edward Craig. *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy: Questions to Sociobiology*. (New York: Routledge, 1989) 369
- ¹³⁹ On the other hand, maybe Guy Debord is right: Terrorism is simply a way to define the society - "Such a perfect democracy constructs its own inconceivable foe, terrorism. Its wish is to be judged by its enemies rather than by its results. The story of terrorism is written by the state and it is therefore highly instructive. The spectators must certainly never know everything about terrorism, but they must always know enough to convince them that, compared with terrorism, everything else must be acceptable, or in any case more rational and democratic." found in Guy Debord. *Comments on the Society of Spectacle (1)*. (New York, Verso) 11



140

The Towers loom in memory. But the Pentagon hit was the more extraordinary one. More difficult to pull off not only because of its squat structure but because the amateur pilot *had to have expected interference, expected that it would be protected*. High-speed military aircraft should have intercepted and brought down the off-course passenger plane; yes, with its doomed passengers. But the immeasurable failure to protect the supposed center of national protection is hardly ever mentioned. A non-stop repair-replacement job was done and the pose is that we tossed off the blow. Islam knows better. Near-miracles of precise derring-do, the names of the nineteen that swung Allah's sword that day will be taught to children and celebrated in song until doomsday.

¹⁴¹ Jim Knipfel. "*Movies are All People Know*" *An Interview With Ken Jacobs*.
<http://www.brooklynrail.org/2006/09/express/movies-are-all> (accessed on 4-26-11)

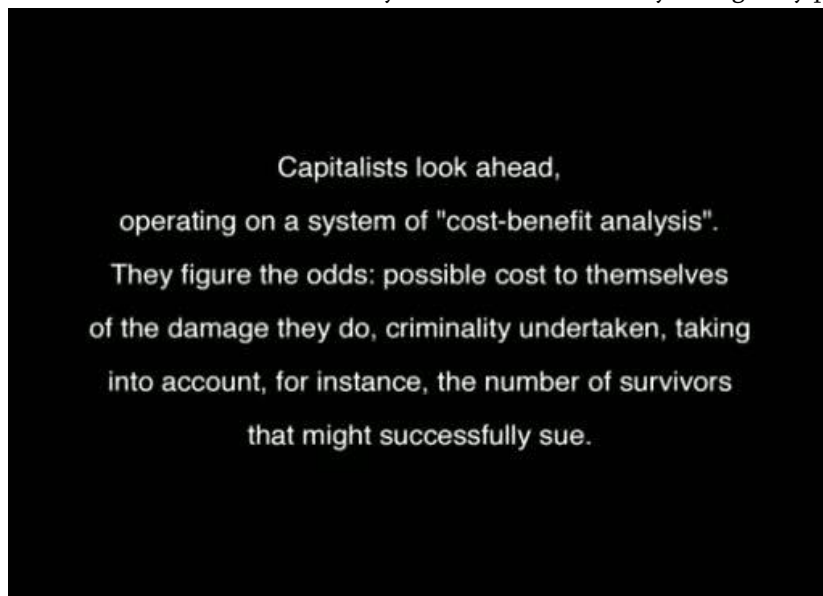
Colin Powell, "black" Secretary Of State,
next to whom I look swarthy,
defending US attack of Iraq before UN
(with bogus charge regarding
Weapons of Mass Destruction),
insisted Picasso's GUERNICA be covered
while he spoke; a confession that he understood
the parallel, the rhyming of atrocities.

¹⁴² From the *Star Spangled to Death* Synopsis – Ken Jacobs

¹⁴³ Theodor Adorno, 'Commitment', *Aesthetics and Politics*. (London: Verso, 1977) 191

¹⁴⁴ He likes to really beat-up on Picasso as being guilty of that old adage – scratch a true liberal and find a fascist beneath: “even in the Cubism of Picasso, who painted his portraits of women ‘ the way you dissect a corpse’ as Apollinaire remarked.” Paul Virilio. *The Information Bomb*. (New York: Verso) 56-57

¹⁴⁵ Friederike Habermann. “History after the End of History.” originally published in *Christ und Sozialist*, 1997



Still from SSTD

¹⁴⁶ But the production story behind *Greed* also reads like a morality tale. Originally ten hours in length, Stroheim cut it down to six, then four, before MGM and Irving Thalberg finally wrested the film from the director’s control, eventually reducing the film to 2.5 hours. It is capitalism as its finest – tear down the artistic value of a work, edit the film until it becomes “marketable” and profit, profit, profit.

¹⁴⁷ Andre Bazin. *What is Cinema? Vol 1*. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005) 36

¹⁴⁸ Ken Jacobs. *Star Spangled to Death: 1954-2004*.

¹⁴⁹ http://www.dvdbeaver.com/film/DVDReviews21/star-spangled_to_death_dvd_review.htm (accessed 04-27-11)

¹⁵⁰ Josh Rosenblatt. “Star Spangled to Death.” *Austin Chronicle* (September, 2004)

¹⁵¹ Alessio Galbiati e Paolo Cato. “Ken Jacobs: The Demiurgo of the Moving Image.” <http://www.digicult.it/digimag/article.asp?id=1155> (accessed on 04-27-11)

¹⁵² From the *Star Spangled to Death* Synopsis – Ken Jacobs



Still from the Film

¹⁵³ J Hoberman. <http://www.villagevoice.com/2003-10-14/film/witnessing-an-underdog-s-personal-uncontrolled-fantasy/1/> (accessed on 04-27-11)

¹⁵⁴ From Star Spangled to Death

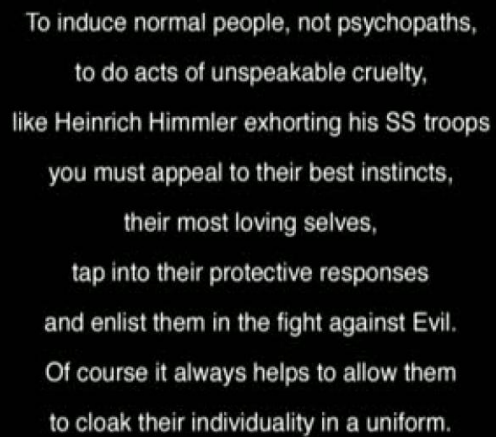
¹⁵⁵ From Star Spangled to Death

¹⁵⁶ From Star Spangled to Death

Doctor Harlow demonstrates the psychological mechanics of love
as they can be seen to operate in the rhesus monkey
and invites us to apply his findings to ourselves, other machine things,
perhaps -only perhaps- with more moving parts.
Advertisers, the military, cult leaders and politicians love this guy.
They're about triggering responses
Do This Now!
and Harlow is showing just where in the pulpy, dreamy substance
of ourselves the triggers may be found.

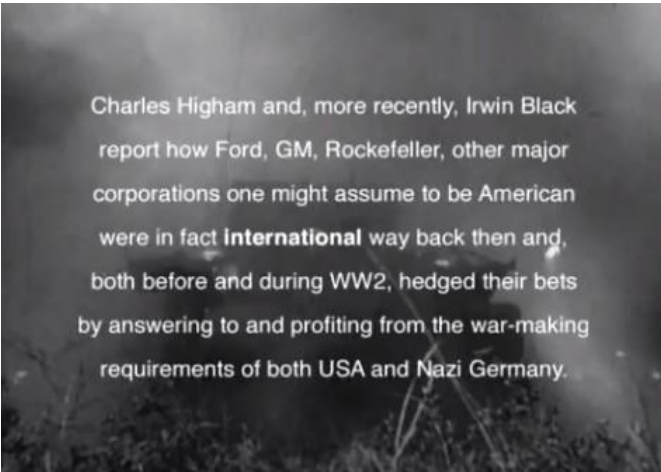
¹⁵⁷

AND



To induce normal people, not psychopaths,
to do acts of unspeakable cruelty,
like Heinrich Himmler exhorting his SS troops
you must appeal to their best instincts,
their most loving selves,
tap into their protective responses
and enlist them in the fight against Evil.
Of course it always helps to allow them
to cloak their individuality in a uniform.

As seen from Harlow and Himmler, responses geared toward “loving selves” are in essence, powerful forms of control. Monkey equals man again and again.



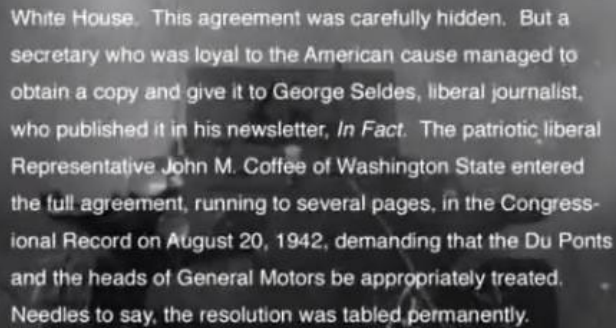
Charles Higham and, more recently, Irwin Black
report how Ford, GM, Rockefeller, other major
corporations one might assume to be American
were in fact **international** way back then and,
both before and during WW2, hedged their bets
by answering to and profiting from the war-making
requirements of both USA and Nazi Germany.

158

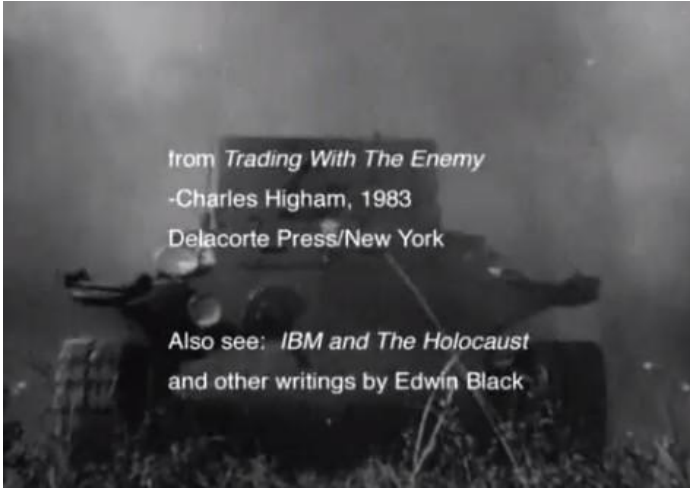
Simultaneously with the rise of Hitler, the Du Ponts in 1933 began financing native fascist groups in America, including the anti-Semitic and antiblack American Liberty League and the organization known as Clark's Crusaders, which had 1,250,000 members in 1933. Pierre, Irénée, and Lamont du Pont and John Jacob Raskob funded the Liberty League, along with Alfred P. Sloan of General Motors. The League smeared Roosevelt as a communist, claimed the President was surrounded by Jews; and despite the fact that they were Jewish, the Du Ponts smeared Semitic organizations.

By the mid-1930's, General Motors was committed to full-scale production of trucks, armored cars, and tanks in Nazi Germany. The GM board could be guaranteed to preserve political, personal, and commercial links to Hitler. Alfred P. Sloan, who rose from president of GM to chairman in 1937, paid for the National Council of Clergymen and Laymen at Asheville, North Carolina, on August 12, 1936, at which John Henry Kirby, millionaire fascist lumberman of Texas, was prominent in the delivery of speeches in favor of Hitler. Others present, delivering equally Hitlerian addresses, were Governor Eugene D. Talmadge of Georgia and the Nazi Reverend Gerald L. K. Smith. Sloan frequently visited Berlin, where he hobnobbed with Göring and Hitler.

On November 23, 1937, representatives of General Motors held a secret meeting in Boston with Baron Manfred von Killinger, who was Fritz Wiedemann's predecessor in charge of West Coast espionage, and Baron von Tippleskirsch, Nazi consul general and Gestapo leader in Boston. This group signed a joint agreement showing total commitment to the Nazi cause for the indefinite future. The agreement stated that in view of Roosevelt's attitude toward Germany, every effort must be made to remove him by defeat at the next election. Jewish influence in the political, cultural, and public life of America must be stamped out. Press and radio must be subsidized to smear the administration, and there must be a führer, preferably Senator Burton K. Wheeler of Montana, in the



White House. This agreement was carefully hidden. But a secretary who was loyal to the American cause managed to obtain a copy and give it to George Seldes, liberal journalist, who published it in his newsletter, *In Fact*. The patriotic liberal Representative John M. Coffee of Washington State entered the full agreement, running to several pages, in the Congressional Record on August 20, 1942, demanding that the Du Ponts and the heads of General Motors be appropriately treated. Needless to say, the resolution was tabled permanently.



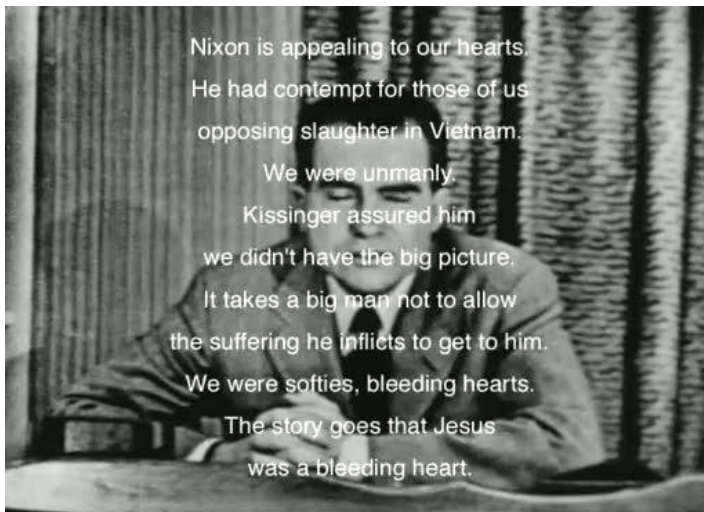
from *Trading With The Enemy*
-Charles Higham, 1983
Delacorte Press/New York

Also see: *IBM and The Holocaust*
and other writings by Edwin Black

All Stills from the GM WWII section of Star

Spangled to Death

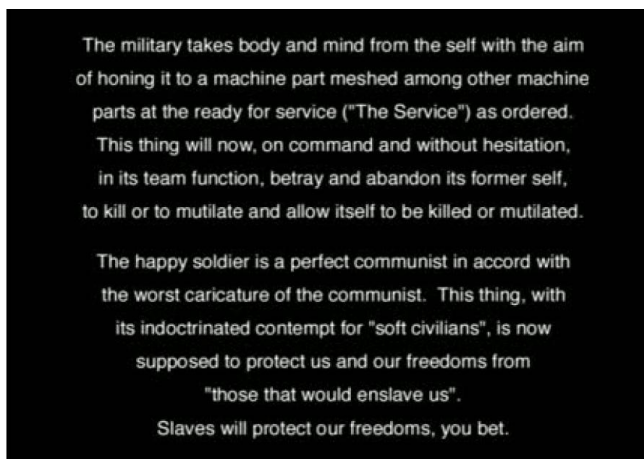
¹⁵⁹ From Star Spangled to Death



160

Still from Checkers in SST'D

¹⁶¹ Tongue obviously firmly in check, the Islands represent an area which seems to exist, like Switzerland, out of the reaches of war. Instead of diplomatic immunity, it's economic immunity.



162

Bush Cheney Rumsfeld Wolfowitz Perle
are dead people, walking talking dead people,
untouched by the misery they bring to living people.
Bad news doesn't faze them, they go on.
Their mission
is a grand sweeping conversion of living to dead.

Really smart bombs
would be troubled bombs, capable of reversing course,
that might object to how they're used
and return with a vengeance, reminding USA
as did Malcolm X, "What goes around comes around."
We can't really object, can we? to getting some of what we give?

163

¹⁶⁴ Alessio Galbiati e Paolo Cato. "Ken Jacobs: The Demiurgo of the Moving Image."

<http://www.digicult.it/digimag/article.asp?id=1155> (accessed on 04-27-11)

¹⁶⁵ Gene Youngblood. Expanded Cinema. (New York: Dutton, 1970) 67-69

¹⁶⁶ Ibid 260-263

¹⁶⁷ <http://altscreen.com/05/12/2011/ken-jacobs-in-3d-at-anthology-film-archives-may-13-19/>

¹⁶⁸ Jonas Mekas. "On the Art of Shadows & Ken Jacobs," Movie Journal. 216.

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