

SCREEN DECADES

DONALD F. LARSSON

Think of “The Roaring Twenties,” “The Sixties,” or “The Me Decade” (as Tom Wolfe labeled the 1970s) and all that those phrases can evoke. As cultural signifiers, those “decades” do not always neatly align with the span of ten calendar years. Did “The Fifties” as recalled in cultural memory begin in 1950 with the Korean War—or with the inception of the Cold War in 1947?—or with Eisenhower’s inauguration in 1953? For many Baby Boomers, “The Sixties” seemed to have begun in 1963, the year of JFK’s assassination, Martin Luther King Jr.’s March on Washington, the overthrow of the Diem regime in South Vietnam, the first major Pop Art exhibit, and the release of The Beatles’ *Please Please Me*, *The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan*, and the first two James Bond movies. The exact end of that “decade” is still a matter of some debate, but it certainly did not screech to a halt on December 31, 1969.

It to be expected, then, that mismatches between calendar time and cultural history arise in each volume of the Rutgers University Press series “Screen Decades: American Culture/American Cinema.” This ambitious project, edited by Lester D. Friedman and Murray Pomerance, consists of one book for each decade of film history, except for the first volume, covering the motion pictures’ formative years from 1890 to 1909. (The final volume, covering 2000–2010, should be released in the near future.) In turn, each book contains one chapter for each year of that decade. These chapters, according to Friedman and Pomerance, attempt to explore “a spectrum of particularly significant motion pictures and the broad range of historical events in one year,” with the overall purpose of conveying “a continuing sense of the decade as it came to be depicted on movie screens across the continent.” The series often accomplishes the former goal, but the latter goal is more elusive.

The editorial introductions to each volume usually offer an overview of that decade’s political, social, and cultural history; note significant changes in the film medium and the motion-picture industry; and sometimes make more specific

BOOK DATA

- American Cinema 1890–1909*, ed. André Gaudreault. 2009. 256 pages.
American Cinema 1910–1919, ed. Charlie Keil and Ben Singer. 2009. 268 pages.
American Cinema of the 1920s, ed. Lucy Fischer. 2009. 264 pages.
American Cinema of the 1930s, ed. Ina Rae Hark. 2007. 288 pages.
American Cinema of the 1940s, ed. Wheeler Winston Dixon. 2005. 272 pages.
American Cinema of the 1950s, ed. Murray Pomerance. 2005. 272 pages.
American Cinema of the 1960s, ed. Barry Keith Grant. 2007. 296 pages.
American Cinema of the 1970s, ed. Lester D. Friedman. 2007. 304 pages.
American Cinema of the 1980s, ed. Stephen Prince. 2007. 260 pages.
American Cinema of the 1990s, ed. Christine Holmlund. 2008. 288 pages.

All volumes are subtitled *Themes and Variations* and published in New Brunswick, NJ by Rutgers University Press. \$70.00 cloth; \$24.95 paper each.

comments about a few “themes” that emerged in that decade. The chapter for each year usually highlights significant events and trends, tied directly or indirectly to notable films, with special emphasis on a handful of movies. The sheer amount of historical and cultural detail and of possible films to work with in even one year’s time means that each chapter has to be highly selective. Even so, chapters still risk ignoring the important for the peripheral, possibly just creating a list of movies for a year that will have no more weight than the “film year in review” columns that pop up in magazines and newspapers every December.

The chronological approach of the series may tempt the reader to look to it for a grand, overarching narrative of the American cinema, as if applying Pudovkin's theory of montage to film books, with each chapter and year a shot, each book and decade a scene, the series forming a whole—"brick by brick, screw by screw," as Eisenstein sarcastically described the theory. The heterogeneous content of these books' chapters, though, confounds this analogy. Being inevitably a mixed bag, the series is rather more conducive to Eisenstein's own theory of montage. A chapter in one of these books can be seen as a unit (like a shot) that relates dialectically to others in the same book and even to chapters in other books in the series. Reviewing all the books published in the series presents an opportunity to infer another set of themes and variations from the way in which chapters connect or even collide.

For example, Paul C. Spehr's chapter, "Movies and the Kinetoscope," on American cinema's first years from 1890 to 1895, suggests that the potential of the motion pictures as a medium for eroticism and the construction of masculine identity could be seen as early as 1894, in W. K. L. Dickson's footage of European muscleman Eugene Sandow. As Spehr remarks, the close-ups of Sandow's rippling muscles, created for Thomas Edison's Kinetoscope, were not filmed for analytic purposes, as in the precinematic photographic experiments of Edward Muybridge and Etienne Marey. These images, like most other Edison-Dickson films, "were produced and staged to display action," leaving "modern viewers to speculate about ... late Victorian taste" (1890-1909, 34).

By 1951, as Kristen Hatch's essay, "Movies and the New Faces of Masculinity," demonstrates, the "iconography of masculinity" had become more complicated (1950s, 45). Hatch's case in point is the emergence in that year of Marlon Brando in *A Streetcar Named Desire* and Montgomery Clift in *A Place in the Sun* as a new breed of male movie star. Comparing these two actors to notable leads in other films—Spencer Tracy in *Father's Little Dividend*, Robert Walker and Farley Granger in *Strangers on a Train*, and Gene Kelly in *An American in Paris*—Hatch concludes that in their performances, "Clift and Brando became emblematic of the youthful male rebellion against constricting norms of masculinity represented by [Tracy's patriarchal role] ... The film narratives in which they appeared also suggest that these changes in the meaning of masculinity were acutely felt" (64).

By the 1990s, masculinity had become an even more complicated concept due to profound economic and social changes in American society. Chuck Kleinhans finds in the films of 1993 an American culture wary about perceived threats to American manhood. Movies such as *Jurassic*

Park and *El Mariachi* "both present an attractive masculinity" (1990s, 101), albeit in different ways, while Michael Douglas's role in *Falling Down*, as an embittered aerospace engineer who goes on a murderous rampage, prompted a *Newsweek* cover article on "White Male Paranoia" (102). Chris Holmlund's essay on 1999, "Movies and Millennial Masculinity," caps the decade, and more than a century of film, with a discussion of seven examples of an emerging "smart cinema," including *The Matrix*, *Magnolia*, *Fight Club*, *Being John Malkovich*, *Boys Don't Cry*, *Three Kings*, and *South Park*, all of which "present a picture of millennial masculinity in crisis: simultaneously fluid and fixed" (246). More than one hundred years after Sandow posed for Dickson, representations of the male image had become far harder to pin down.

Moving like this between different books in the series opens up further questions about the relationship between American cinema and the wider culture. Even in isolating one theme such as the depiction of masculinity in film, one is led through a maze with many cultural byways: film technology's ability to portray the male body in close-up (and the industrial apparatus that enabled film technology to exist); international histories of theater and public entertainment; the sociological and psychological impact of economic changes and of war on groups and individuals (and popular perceptions of such impact, generated by writers ranging from Freud to David Reisman); the repression of whole groups based on race, gender, and sexual orientation, and resistance by those groups and their allies (as well as public perceptions of such struggles as generated by news media and the movies), to name only a few.

It could be all too easy to see the movies of a decade as simple representations of some cultural trend or other, a point acknowledged by Charlie Keil and Ben Singer, the editors of *American Cinema of the 1910s*. Motion pictures engage with the culture of their times in varied ways that complicate a simple "reflectionism," they warn. Some films might "portray contemporaneous news events directly," while others might "engage with social issues and debates of the day," taking one side or another. Films may also "reflect" their times in unintentional ways, whether in the more-or-less unconscious ideological biases of filmmakers, critics and audiences, or by the display of "customs, norms ... behaviors, tacit assumptions [and] material environments" through narrative and mise-en-scène. Of course, absences can also be telling, in a "negative reflectionism" of "what kinds of films are *not* produced at a given historical juncture" (24).

Lee Grieveson's chapter on 1915, "Movies and the State of the Union," illustrates such complexities in his dis-

cussion of one of the most crucial premieres in American cinematic history, D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*. Grieveson's sharp critical analysis of this film, both an acknowledged milestone in film narrative and the history of Hollywood and an acknowledged dark spot in the history of American race relations, sets the film in the context of Griffith's naively idealistic hopes for the future of the cinema. Astounding in retrospect, Griffith forecast that moving pictures would soon supplant books as a neutral medium for teaching history: "There will be no opinions expressed. You will merely be present at the making of history" (144). Even though many viewers at the time might have agreed with Woodrow Wilson that *The Birth of a Nation* was like "writing history with lightning," most will now agree with Grieveson that the film is "profoundly racist" (144). The film itself was far from neutral, helping to spur the revival of the Ku Klux Klan and "more generally [enabling] racist discourse and practices" (145). *The Birth of a Nation* is not an ordinary mirror of its time; it was a parabolic mirror, concentrating the nation's racism to an incendiary focus.

Historical distance is usually an aid to critical perspective, as Grieveson's analysis of *The Birth of a Nation* demonstrates. With time for critical reflection, social change, and the emergence of new ways of thinking, one may not come at last upon some elusive truth, but one can develop more nuanced understandings, supported by scholarly discovery. In the first three volumes of Screen Decades covering 1890–1929, the writers often cite and discuss films once forgotten, thought lost, or mutilated in different prints. Further contexts are provided by documents and historical records that had once been unavailable or not considered worthy of attention. Michael Aronson's chapter on 1920, for example, focuses on how audiences in small and large towns came to experience and understand the movies "as made visible in their respective newspapers" (1920s, 23), allowing consideration of "movies seen on Main Street rather than Broadway" (24). Sara Ross illustrates the film year 1922 with such relatively obscure titles as *The Married Flapper*, *Bobbed Hair*, and *Manslaughter* in her essay, "Movies and the Perilous Future."

The scholarship needed to discover such details of the past is now greatly aided for films of the present and recent past by the resources now at our fingertips or even on

DVDs. Even so, the closer a Screen Decades volume is to the year 2010, the more one has to wonder how it will read several decades or a century from now. "How to assess a decade that most of us remember?" Chris Holmlund wonders in her introduction to *American Cinema of the 1990s* (1). How, indeed? The question in turn leads to a slightly different one: how to *remember* a decade that we have lived through?

The volume on the 1980s attempts to answer that question largely by casting the decade in the shadow of one man—the first actor–president, Ronald Reagan. Even though Stephen Prince's introduction cautions against oversimplifying the "complex and often contrary realities" of those years (1), the titles of four of the ten chapters in the book (1983, 1984, 1986 and 1987) specifically mention Reagan,

a singular point of reference unparalleled in the rest of the series. Finding an exact link between the president and the films of his terms in office is more problematic than might first appear. For instance, Alan Nadel's "Movies and Reaganism," explores the link between Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative (popularly dubbed "Star Wars") and the release in 1983 of *Return of the Jedi*, the last part of George Lucas's first *Star Wars* trilogy. One can certainly agree with Nadel that Reagan's concept of the SDI was "cinematic" (89), but Nadel goes further by suggesting that *Return of the*

Jedi is in its own way Reaganesque. His argument that the ghostly figures of Obi Wan Kenobi and Yoda in that film serve as "two versions of Reagan" (88) and his attempt to link Reagan's adroit use of communication to the film's pseudo-Jungian relativism is clever but unconvincing. Reagan the president is one thing. "Reagan" the signifier—still contested territory, even among conservatives—is another.

Reading dialectically, across and between years and decades, one comes to see how cultural memory has become a prize for the taking. The series' later volumes more ominously suggest that personal memory is also contested territory. Barry Keith Grant's introduction to *American Cinema of the 1960s* notes that the decade is "regarded as a special, unique period in America history and not just because of the romantic patina cast over the era by the Baby Boomers" (1). As the joke goes, "If you can remember The Sixties, you weren't there," but the real joke is that we didn't have to be there. Few of us living in that decade could observe history

A chapter in one of these books can be seen as a unit (like a shot) that relates dialectically to others in the same book and even to chapters in other books in the series. Reviewing all the books published in the series presents an opportunity to infer another set of themes and variations.

***The Adventure of the Real: Jean Rouch and the Craft of Ethnographic Cinema* by Paul Henley**

in person at the Lincoln Memorial, Dallas, Vietnam, Paris, Prague, Woodstock, the streets of Chicago, or the moon, but the television camera could, in a kind of perverse fulfillment of Griffith's dream of filmgoers being "present at the making of history." The camera, though, is not as neutral as it seems, a point made clear in Christie Milliken's discussion of Haskell Wexler's 1969 *Medium Cool*.

Even film history itself is subject to the ways in which culture shapes our memories. Nicholas Spencer's discussion of *Double Indemnity* and *Laura* in the 1944 chapter presents both movies as examples of film noir, which he baldly states "is a product of the 1940s and its issues" (1940s, 132). Yet, as is often noted, film noir was a retrospective construction by certain French critics, later popularized in America. Even though the term now is widely used, the creators of these movies saw their work in traditional film industry terms at the time. The concept of film noir has been a useful lens through which to see the films of the later half of the 1940s, but that tool was discovered only in retrospect. The history of why American critics, filmmakers, and audiences became attracted to the concept of film noir—a history which Spencer neglects to explore—may be just as important as the films themselves.

When it comes to film history, the ultimate question may be the first one posed in the Screen Decades series by André Gaudreault and Tom Gunning in their introduction to *American Cinema, 1890–1909*. They assert that, "The answer to the question 'Who invented the movies?' is not necessarily the same as the answer to the question 'Who invented cinema?' or 'Who invented moving pictures?'" (1). Each term is not synonymous with the others, and the use of one term instead of another raises "questions about origins [that] carry with them a certain degree of subjectivity," opening "onto numerous avenues and . . . many sharp words and passionate debates" (2). At its best, Screen Decades raises more questions than it answers, provoking readers to wander down new avenues and, one hopes, provoking even more sharp words and passionate debates. We live now in a new century when "moving pictures" are no longer "film" as such and "movies" are conveyed through many forms of media. The coming screen decades will inevitably change the way the history of cinema is regarded, requiring further attempts to make connections between an ongoing dialectical analysis of periods and topics, themes and variations.

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Over the past twenty years, a sizable number of book-length studies, anthologies, and journal issues in English or in French have explored the corpus of 130 films that the engineer-turned-ethnographer Jean Rouch (1917–2004) shot in sub-Saharan Africa between 1946 and 2002. Notable among these studies are Paul Stoller's *The Cinematic Griot* (University of Chicago Press, 1992), C. W. Thompson's *L'Autre et le sacré: Surrealisme, cinéma, ethnologie* (L'Harmattan, 1995), Steven Feld's *Ciné-Ethnography* (University of Minnesota Press, 2003), and Joram ten Brink's *Building Bridges* (Wallflower Press, 2007). Even so, Rouch is still known mainly for four films he completed between 1954 and 1960: *The Mad Masters* (*Les Maîtres fous*), *I, a Black Man* (*Moi, un Noir*), *The Human Pyramid* (*La Pyramide humaine*), and *Chronicle of a Summer* (*Chronique d'un été*). And, perhaps not surprisingly in the case of such an original filmmaker, there is no real consensus about how to classify Rouch. Jean-Luc Godard's praise in the pages of *Cahiers du Cinéma* for *Moi, un Noir* (1958) established it as a precursor of the New Wave. Rouch is also often cited alongside Alain Resnais, Chris Marker, and Agnès Varda as a member of the group responsible for what Richard Roud and Claire Clouzot later called Left Bank Cinema.

Paul Henley states early on in his new study that his main objective is to reclaim Rouch for anthropology by identifying how his films were made, rather than assess their contribution to the comparative studies of the local peoples of West Africa. Accordingly, the portrait of Rouch that emerges is that of the visual ethnographer who records her or his interactions during field work observing the lives of local peoples or communities through photographs, films, and videos, rather than through notes, articles, and books.

The Adventure of the Real begins with two chapters that make much of the impact a Paris-bookshop display of double-page spreads from the upscale art journal, *Minotaure*, had upon the sixteen-year-old Rouch. Henley recounts the episode along the lines of an initiation. As Rouch recalled the episode sixty years later, what caught his eye at the time were resemblances between a 1915 oil painting by Giorgio de Chirico and an "unforgettable photograph of the *kanga* masks up on the roof of the hunter Monzé" (20) shot during the 1931–33 Dakar–Djibouti expedition led by Rouch's doctoral supervisor Marcel Griaule. Henley reports that while no photograph in *Minotaure* corresponds to Rouch's belated ac-



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Hollywood's digital escape acts
Film noir in Paris

count of it, the slippage in detail is less important than what he considers Rouch's decisive association between the revelations he attributed to the landscapes that photography and painting had fashioned into objects of dreamlike fascination.

Part 2 draws out what Henley takes for the long-term consequences of this formative association of photography and painting (even if the encounter that prompted it is imagined rather than real). Part 3 engages what Henley calls Rouch's ethnographic "filmmaking praxis" (244); that is, the practical processes such as visual framing, camera movement, continuity, and sound recording by which Rouch made his films. At the same time, Henley compares Rouch's mobilization of these processes to the those of early documentarians Dziga Vertov and Robert Flaherty, whom he cites as antecedents of what Rouch conceptualized as ethnofiction or shared anthropology.

Henley's strongest claim challenges received understanding of the Hauka (literally "new gods") initiation ritual depicted in *The Mad Masters* as a political parody of British colonial rule in Ghana (known at the time as Gold Coast). Drawing on ethnographic and historical data, Henley concludes that while the colonial world evoked in the ritual may appear absurd, authoritarian, and violently aggressive, to suggest that this negative image is the purpose of this modeling confuses the means with the end, since the beings whom the ritual's performers seek to embody are not human Others, but spirit Others. Likewise provocative is Henley's take on a statement by Oumarou Ganda—who portrayed the central character in *Moi, un Noir* and later made films of his own such as *Cabascabo* (1968)—that every time he made a film, he killed Jean Rouch. In both instances, the drive to rethink Rouch's films builds on and thus complements Henley's consistent emphasis on the practical processes of their production. The clarity with which Henley demonstrates how these processes form the basis for understanding Rouch's corpus of filmed ethnography makes *The Adventure of the Real* an informed reference for anthropologists and filmmakers alike.

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BOOK DATA Paul Henley, *The Adventure of the Real: Jean Rouch and the Craft of Ethnographic Cinema*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010. \$95.00 cloth; \$37.50 paper. 536 pages

KARLA OELER

The Imperial Trace: Recent Russian Cinema by Nancy Condee

This book asks how Russian culture's longstanding implication in imperial domination structures the work of influential directors in the late and post-Soviet eras. The main part of the book is formed by six chapters, each devoted to a filmmaker: Nikita Mikhalkov, Kira Muratova, the team of Vladimir Abdrashitov and Aleksandr Mindadze, Aleksandr Sokurov, Aleksei German, and Aleksei Balabanov. Two opening chapters and a postscript frame these auteur studies, contextualizing them in relation to political and cultural theory and the mercurial recent history of Russia's film industry. Condee focuses on the "imperial trace" that marks this cinema and her subtle analysis counts as some of the best critical work in any language on these filmmakers. At once discerning and skeptical, the book provides an engrossing account of the jostling for various kinds of power and distinction in an industry that in the 1980s shook off strict state censorship, and in the 1990s had to fight an onslaught of piracy, televised films, and other factors that nearly caused its demise. Status and marketability, Condee demonstrates, have much to do with the way a director's films portray Russianness and history.

Condee combines specific portraits of these "six characters" at this time of crisis in Russian film with a detailed discussion of broader tensions between sharply different kinds of aesthetic, market, and political value. Deftly wielding the power of anecdote and statistic, attentively watching films and steeped in knowledge of their criticism, she teases out the directors' divergent stylistic, thematic, and political paths. She simplifies nothing. Take, for instance, her portrait of Mikhalkov. *The Imperial Trace* recounts his production of a montage film for the 1998 Fourth Congress of the Russian Filmmakers' Union that aimed to discredit his colleagues by emphasizing the excessive violence and lack of positive role models in their films. Rather than mentor younger filmmakers, he held them up for criticism in order to gain control of the union and align its agenda more closely with that of the state. Two pages later, however, she notes that Mikhalkov's imperious actions also resulted in better economic resources for the industry as a whole. Such sensitivity to paradox—an underhanded machination has beneficial side-effects—nuances Condee's dismissal of Mikhalkov's ahistorical, irony-free portrayals of Russia as "the divine state . . . whose anointed titular ethnicity nobly

sustains strong imperial and military traditions on the basis of enduring moral authority” (109).

Contrast this assessment of Mikhalkov with the book’s account of Aleksei German, the longest and most absorbing of the chapters devoted to a director. Alone, this chapter makes *Imperial Trace* a book for anyone interested in cinema as a serious art. Part of the chapter’s power lies in its clear registration of German’s intelligence. Condee grasps his radical realization of the ambiguity Bazin so admired: “Staging central events at the visual periphery, or the obverse, admitting peripheral characters momentarily to grandstand for the camera, German forces the spectator to sort out what is important, without benefit of a more traditional camera’s discursive nudge” (206). Against Mikhalkov’s divine state, German explores the aspiration and blindness of his father’s generation, which, in striving for justice, ran headlong into political terror. Crucially, his films do not make us feel wiser than the characters, but show “how the present moment is perpetually in excess of our capacity to understand its content” (186).

German makes ambiguous films about each generation’s inability fully to understand its own historical moment and part of his strategy entails generating audience incomprehension. Balabanov, his erstwhile student and more conventionally successful colleague, produces a different sort of perplexity: what to make of his slap-in-the-face-of-the-liberal-intelligentsia scenes of offensive bigotry and violence? Condee does not miss the grotesque irony of Balabanov’s films and with shrewd imagination compares his black humor to Stalin’s. She concludes, “his human already is a cunning and cruel animal; his films set out to remind us that we are as well” and he “does not necessarily see the cunning and cruel animal as a bad thing” (236). This description brings Condee’s “ultranationalist” Balabanov strangely close to her anarchical Muratova, who renders “human subjectivity as the feral mammal” (130). But in Muratova, little girls and women wield violent power as much as men. This difference between directors opens onto the question of gender more broadly, and how it shapes, and is shaped by, the experience of empire. Condee could have put more pressure on this question. Then again, a strong book does not try to say everything.

The Imperial Trace is a book for anyone who cares about the variety and strength of affective responses generated by a mass medium at a critical historical juncture, namely the apparent decline of a world of empires and some nation states as their mythologized “heartlands,” and increasingly provincial metropolises (Balabanov’s Leninsk), cede pride of place to a more fluid international network of cities and

corporations. Informed by profound cultural and historical understanding, Condee shows how the films of Abdrashitov and Mindadze hinge on the disconnect between the worlds of nineteenth-century Russian literature and the present, and how Sokurov tries to disentangle canonical art from its complicity with empire. Russian poetry, known by heart, infuses German’s filmmaking process, and Condee has the eye and ear to catch its delicate, counter-imperial trace in this nimble contemplation of Russia’s film industry, and the last of its Soviet-born, humanist intelligentsia.

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DAVID STERRITT

***On the Camera Arts and Consecutive Matters:
The Writings of Hollis Frampton*, ed. Bruce Jenkins**

***Optic Antics: The Cinema of Ken Jacobs*, ed. Michele Pierson, David E. James, and Paul Arthur**

Only a few kinship metaphors—stepchild, foster child, certainly not love child—fit the relationship of avant-garde film to the rest of cinema. Or so it seems, judging from the relatively sparse attention it receives. Even the name of the field has never been settled. “Avant-garde” means “advance guard,” suggesting that Steven Spielberg and Michael Bay are following the lead of George Kuchar and Kenneth Anger, a notion that would make all of them shudder. Stan Brakhage said he preferred “poetic cinema” but used “avant-garde” in print and conversation all the time. “Experimental film” has a trial-and-error tone that misses the expertise and exactitude of high-level practitioners. The once-popular “New American Cinema” is parochial, “personal cinema” is vague, “independent” now means “indie” in the IFC and Sundance sense. Of them all, “avant-garde” has shown the most staying power, so it’s probably the most appropriate for now.

With regard to adequate attention, the situation is improving. Enterprising companies such as The Criterion Collection and Kino International are distributing a growing library of DVD releases. Recent books include R. Bruce Elder on avant-garde movements and precursors, Malcolm Turvey on the European avant-garde of the 1920s, Isolde Standish on Japanese work of the 1960s and 1970s, A. L.

Rees on avant-garde film and video history, and P. Adams Sitney on the legacy of Ralph Waldo Emerson in what Sitney calls “visionary film,” quite a good contender in the nomenclature sweepstakes. Among the most welcome arrivals are new volumes on Hollis Frampton, who died in 1984 at the age of forty-eight, and Ken Jacobs, born in 1933 and still alive, energetic, and busy transferring his mad-scientist masterpieces to DVD so new audiences can tackle them. Both are consummate artists whose films, writings, dedication to cinema, and fierce adherence to aesthetic innovation have been exemplary and inspiring since the 1960s, when they created their first major works.

A year before his death, Frampton published a slender volume called *Circles of Confusion: Film–Photography–Video Texts 1968–1980* (Visual Studies Workshop Press), comprising a dozen essays on the visual arts. The title punningly refers to a pair of phenomena close to Frampton’s heart: the optical imperfections that photographic images carry because no lens can flawlessly focus light, and the ambiguities, ambivalences, and uncertainties that all art and aesthetic discourse contain because they are made by humans in a fallen world. The book soon went out of print, leaving Frampton enthusiasts to circulate existing copies among themselves until they wore out or fell apart (the books, not the enthusiasts). Its contents have finally returned to the marketplace, and in a wonderfully big way.

On the Camera Arts and Consecutive Matters: The Writings of Hollis Frampton, edited by Bruce Jenkins for the MIT Press’s eclectic Writing Art series, offers more than 300 pages of verbal and visual material. This includes the earlier book’s essays plus lectures, proposals, production notes, interviews, and correspondence as well as numerous photographs, most prominently the thirteen that appear in his 1971 film (*nostalgia*) and fourteen from his 1982 portfolio *ADSVMVS ADSVMVS*, depicting specimens from the collection of desiccated road kill, dried seafood, and other “formerly living objects” (105) that Frampton deemed “autographic likenesses” not so different from the photographs he took of them. It is a grand haul for those who know and treasure Frampton’s work, and newcomers will find it a first-rate introduction.

Frampton was keenly interested in taxonomy and terminology, which is probably why he avoided reductive

adjectives like avant-garde and experimental in his prolific writings. “*Cinema* is a Greek word that means ‘movie,’” he wrote in his 1971 essay “For a Metahistory of Film: Commonplace Notes and Hypotheses,” adding that since the illusion of movement is not inherent in the structural logic of the filmstrip, “we reject it. From now on we will call our art simply: film” (137). He also wittily observes (in a 1965 manuscript unpublished until now) that photography “is a word that could get along handsomely with two or three fewer syllables” (5).

While the “camera arts” were his primary concerns, Frampton was a polymath whose interests and abilities extended far beyond film and photography, the media he concentrated on as a practitioner. As a young man he befriended Ezra Pound when the poet was writing his magnificent *Cantos* in a Washington, DC mental hospital. He published important articles about artists Carl Andre and Frank Stella, who were his roommates for a time. He wrote vividly about the contrasting natures of film and video, although his low opinion of television could influence his views of video in general, as when he observed in “The Withering Away of the State of the Art” (1974) that while the film frame is a rectangle,

the video frame is “a degenerate amoeboid shape passing for a rectangle to accommodate ... cheap programming” (264). He wrote presciently on the dawning potential of computers and music synthesizers. And woven through everything is a vast web of reference, allusion, and citation, encompassing physics, mathematics, mythology, linguistics, philology, poetry, communication theory, dodecaphonic music, and a great deal else. He had a substantial ego that intrudes on his writing occasionally, as when he imagines himself chatting with figures no less illustrious than Aristotle, the Emperor Ch’in Shih Huang Ti, and Hegel in limbo after his demise. But the enlargement of some egos is justified, and Frampton’s was one of them.

Jenkins is arguably the foremost authority on Frampton’s life and work, and he has gracefully edited the collection. The photography section presents essays on historical forces and imposing figures, among them Edward Weston, with whose influence Frampton waged a complicated battle. The film section includes the script (such as it is) for the 1970 masterpiece *Zorns Lemma*, notes on film composing, letters to Brakhage and Donald Richie, and a long interview

Jacobs made his mark in the 1960s with quasi-anarchic romps such as Little Stabs at Happiness (1960) and Blonde Cobra (1963), starring Jack Smith, and around that time he began his career-long project of resurrecting footage from antique movies.

with film scholar Bill Simon about *Magellan*, the mighty cycle Frampton didn't live long enough to finish. Three final sections examine video, digital technology, and more. Adventurous lovers of the camera arts, and all the arts, will explore, ponder, and profit from this collection for decades to come.

Optic Antics: The Cinema of Ken Jacobs, edited by Michele Pierson, David E. James, and Paul Arthur, covers the amazing exploits of a filmmaker I've often referred to as avant-garde cinema's great mad scientist. While that designation still fits, I've come to think he's more of a mad alchemist, since his movies and methodologies are so marvelously strange that standard labels and apparatuses can't contain them. He uses the term "paracinema" for his multiprojector works, 3D displays, multimedia shows, shadow plays, and so forth, and that's also a good candidate for the nomenclature prize.

Jacobs made his mark in the 1960s with quasi-anarchic romps such as *Little Stabs at Happiness* (1960) and *Blonde Cobra* (1963), starring Jack Smith, and around that time he began his career-long project of resurrecting footage from antique movies and blasting the imagery open to find hitherto undetected visions secreted within it. In the seminal *Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son* (1969) he accomplished this by rephotographing a 1905 chase picture while screening it with a hand-controlled projector, and since 1975 he has done it with the Nervous System, using two hand-controlled projectors to show identical film strips one frame at a time on a single screen, alternating rapidly and slightly out of sync. The result is a seemingly impossible synthesis of movement and stasis that creates "eternalisms," described by Jacobs as "unfrozen slices of time, sustained movements going nowhere, unlike anything in life" (16–17). This may sound inscrutable, but remember, we're dealing with an alchemist.

Jacobs's protean creativity is well suited to the mosaic of approaches in *Optic Antics*, which is named after *Optic Antics Starring Laurel and Hardy*, one of his very finest Nervous System pieces (1997; DVD version 2005). As much as I've admired Jacobs's work over the past several decades, a chapter that particularly fascinates me is one that does not seek to canonize him or his *oeuvre* as a whole. "A Panorama Compounded of Great Human Suffering and Ecstatic Filmic Representation": Texts on Ken Jacobs" comprises a critical essay and nine journal entries written between 1995 and 2007 by coeditor Arthur, whose untimely death in 2008 deprived avant-garde cinema of one of its most eloquent and authoritative critics. Some of the diary notes are quite skeptical, and whether Arthur would have published them if he had lived is an open question. But the objects of his skepticism are entirely valid—some Jacobs works indeed



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drag on too long, repeat well-worn content, or fall short in the soundtrack department. And how refreshing it is to find an erudite, deeply sympathetic Jacobs commentator observe that parts of the digital video *Capitalism: Child Labor* (2006) look "a bit like my last colonoscopy" (37)! Most of Arthur's remarks are robustly favorable, and I focus on their negative moments as a salute to the editing team for its candor and impartiality in printing them.

Twenty-two more chapters look at Jacobs from many angles. Amy Taubin interviews his wife and collaborator, Flo Jacobs, whom he always calls his "lucky break." Flo presents family photos. Adrian Martin speaks well of *Capitalism: Child Labor* and makes an improbably good case for Jacobs as "the Busby Berkeley we need today" (227). Coeditor James analyzes *The Sky Socialist* (1964–68), while Eivind Røssaak dissects *Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son* and Tony Pipolo takes on the Nervous System piece *Two Wrenching Departures* (1989; DVD version 2006), Jacobs's most uncompromising meditation on death. In the final essay, Michael Zryd discusses the pedagogical value of Jacobs's life and work, quoting from a 2005 interview (255) in which Jacobs distinguished between "living through the movies" and "using the movies to enrich your critical engagement with life and the real world." The first is "an experience that dominates," he said. The second, truer option "condemns you to be free."

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BOOK DATA Bruce Jenkins (ed.), *On the Camera Arts and Consecutive Matters: The Writings of Hollis Frampton*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009. \$39.95 cloth. 360 pages.

Michele Pierson, David E. James, and Paul Arthur (eds.), *Optic Antics: The Cinema of Ken Jacobs*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. \$39.95 paper. 336 pages.