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A remediation instant: Ken Jacobs' experiments with materials, archives, and figures.

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The films made by the American experimental filmmaker, Ken Jacobs, reveal a constant challenge that interacts with film material, media, and the experience of viewing itself. Not by chance, Jacobs' films always lead the audience across media boundaries by contrasting the limits of human perception. In this paper I highlight how Jacobs' earlier and contemporary films can contribute to understanding what I am calling a *Remediation Instant*, which can happen between frames and medias, between the eye and the brain.

I have divided this paper into three different parts. In the first part, I will focus on a very brief presentation of Jacobs' films. In the second part, I will show and analyze a short passage of the film, *A Tom Tom Chaser* (2002), which allows us to contrast the concepts of *mediacy*, *hypermediacy* and *remediation*. It is a very provocative film that blurs the glance of the audience and installs image experiences in the eye through translations, resignifications, materialities, and different media technologies.

In the third and final part, I will introduce, discuss, and describe *The Guests*, a film that unfortunately is impossible to show because, as far as I know, it was only released at the Berlin Film Festival and really should be seen in 3D. In a subtle yet radical manner, Jacobs, in *The Guests,* inverts the habits of observing and seeing figures in a picture and in a film. By inserting visual and 3D effects, Jacobs challenges our understanding of the language games played by archives and technologies.

I. Who is Ken Jacobs?

Ken Jacobs was born in Williamsburg, New York, in 1933, and grew up among Jewish families and institutions. In the early 1950s, Jacobs began frequenting the MOMA museum and since then he has been a unique moviegoer. In 1955, he directed a 16mm silent film entitled *Orchard Street*, and a few years after that he released *Star Spangled to Death*, which is a mix of performance and found footage, two elements often found in his work. Since 1961, Ken Jacobs has been directly involved with the *Anthology Film Archives* group, which gravitates around Jonas Mekas and his circle of friends, and has been conducting research, screenings, debates, and experimental film productions. Jacobs also taught at St. John's University and Binghamton University. Although he has directed more than 30 films, his work can be divided into two different approaches.

First, is important to consider Jacobs' experimentations with archives, particularly the way he focused on the 'films of attractions' period and what might be called 'early cinema.' The first screening of *Tom, Tom, The Piper's son* was in 1969, where Jacobs picked up and updated a 1905 film produced by both Mutoscope and Biograph film. In an inspired aesthetic gesture, he re-presented the old film and added many new frames and decoupage that changed both the original value and the aesthetic principles of the film. This famous experiment influenced some remarkable experimental and contemporary filmmakers such as Michael Snow and Peter Kubelka, among many others. In addition, Jacobs also approached early cinema by going beyond the established interpretation that restricted this period as pre-narrative (and pre-historical) cinematography. By emphasizing the visual attractions of films like *Tom, Tom, The Piper's Son,* Jacobs also directly influenced the academic research of Tom Gunning and Charles Musser, whose works updated the interpretation of early cinema.

The second group of experiments conducted by Jacobs is known as *The Nervous System* films, which are, again, directly related to archives. However, Jacobs did something more radical when he inverted the sense and directions of the archive frames, thus confronting the audience's habits of forming an image, which might occur in intervals between eyes and brain. Ken Jacobs explained the

central objective of these experiments in his “Notes on the Nervous System”:

> *The Nervous system consists*, *very basically, of two identical prints on two projections capable of single-frames advance and 'freeze' (which the movie back into a series of closely related slides). The twin prints plod through the projections, frame.... by frame in various degree of synchronization. Difference makes for movement, and uncanny three-dimensional space illusions via a shuttling mask or spinning propeller up front, between the projectors, alternating the cast images*.
>
> (KEN JACOBS: *Notes on the nervous system*, 1989).

Jacobs' 2005 film, *Otic Antics Starring Laurel and Hardy: Bye, Molly,* is possibly one of his most famous and clarifying *Nervous System* experiments. In one of the first frames of the film, Jacobs shows the wheels of a train that spin in different rhythms and directions. Sometimes the image bifurcates then fuses two frames in one. Sometimes the image is paused and the audience hears an astonishing soundscape, which is also inconstant. Although *Ontic Antics* is not a 3D film, it was directly influenced by the 3D principle while in the making. This means that Jacobs emphasized the intervals between the frames in cinematographic image as well as the lapses between eye perceptions and the brain registering an image. In *Ontic Antics* Jacobs edited the archive of his *found footage* film according to the rhythm of an old locomotive and, inspired by this cinematographic imagery, he forced the audience to see something that had not been previously present (or perceived, or even imagined) in the frames of the archive.

To briefly sum up the aspects of Jacobs work, we can highlight his experiments with archives as well as his use of 3D effects in frames and media apparatuses that were not originally made for a 3D session or audience. I aim to show how both aspects appear in the films *A Tom Tom Chaser* (2002) and *The Guests* (2014).

II. *A Tom Tom Chaser* (2002): a displaced archive.

Jacobs classified *A Tom Tom Chaser* as a scanning improvisation. In an extremely simple manner, the film picks up once again the archive of *Tom Tom the Piper's Son* and observes its telecine process, which transfers the 'original' chemical material to an electronic image. Using a similar aesthetic principle, Jacobs also reframes the original takes of the Mutuscope and Biography film archive. However, in *Tom Tom Chaser* the image *blur* is much stronger and takes center stage. This reframing gesture is punctually placed between medias and different technological configurations, which means a subtle language game between mediacy, hypermediacy, and remediation.

By emphasizing the material and media transformation of the archive, Jacobs situated it nowhere, or without a definite place. Therefore, he invites the audience to invent a glance through archive transformation. It is neither an original archive nor a further archive in a process of becoming. It is only a simple and displaced archive. Peculiarly enough, the audience glance has no other possibility: it must occur in between medias, within a certain boundary, and without a specific media configuration.

Wittily edited, *A Tom Tom Chaser* creates fast aesthetic perceptions that sometimes force the audience to a specific media; thereafter it throws the same image to another media materiality and then alternates the image perception between media frames. This reframing occurs in between medias, which, consequently, *blurs* the *image.* In addition, the eye rarely has enough time to reframe between theses medias. This means that eye reframes need more time to capture, focus, and see (or believe to see) an image without media and materiality.

Directly or indirectly, these movements made by Jacobs interact with the remediation concept elaborated by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, who state that remediation is a transference and refashioning of one media content (and media perception) to another media configuration. However, remediation might happen in two different instances and aesthetic or technological gestures. The first is

known as immediacy, which creates a first person point of view and a virtual reality effect. In visual medias, immediacy tackles viewers in an immersive experience, in which seeing simulates a sense of reality. In their genealogy of immediacy, Bolter and Grusin refer back to the Renaissance perspective when viewers saw through the image and had a sensation of believing what they saw. Thus, immediacy constructs a natural sensation and an 'unmediated presentation.'

On the other hand, hypermediacy is a construction that offers viewers the perception of the media configuration itself. It means that the viewer can simultaneously observe the representation as well as the media used to enact this representation. In this way, hypermediacy flirts constantly with fragmentation, heterogeneous medias, interruptions, and indeterminancy.

> „In all its various forms, the logic of hypermediacy express the tension between regarding a visual space as mediated and as 'real' space that lies beyond mediation"(41).

The remediations made by Jacobs in *A Tom Tom Chaser* (as well as in most of his works) dialogue more precisely with hypermediacy and tradition. However, in very brief moments, Jacobs invites viewers to believe in what is known as the archive effect, which is a sense of past and reality while casting the glance in the frame. The *Tom Tom* archive oscillates between chemical and electronic perception, and Jacobs inserts both remediation and hypermediacy between medias, within the boundary. In a provocative manner, Jacobs asks the audience to believe and yet doubt what they are seeing. The place of his hypermediacy is in between archives, as cinematographic phenomena and perception, and medias.

If the scanning process erases the traces of remediation in a digital age, Ken Jacobs does exactly the opposite. In between archives and hypermediacy *A Tom Tom Chaser* offers precisely a scanning-image, which is not only transitory, but also without materials or media configuration. When an image is liberated from its material support it occurs only inside the brain in a delay, as an illusion. Without specific materiality, the image restricts itself to a phantom, or a simulacrum that is almost an autonomous figure.

III. *The Guests* (2014): the perverted archive and the figures that observe viewers.

Released this year (and restricted to a festival circuit), *The Guests* is Ken Jacobs' last film and it is directly screened in 3D technology. This recent work is the first in which he uses a 3D camera, as well as 3D glasses. However (and as I stated earlier), Ken Jacobs had been experimenting with 3D concepts since the 1970s in his *Nervous System* films, which can be seen as an intimate continuity between both moments.

Once again, *The Guests* uses an archive and a found-footage chemical based film as its starting point. The original Lumière film is no longer than a few minutes and merely registers the arrival of the guests at Lumière's sister's wedding reception. The first perversion Jacobs makes in Lumière's archive is a radical extension of cinematic time using slow motion to extend second frames to minutes. By alternating rhythm and movements, Jacobs transformed the few minutes of Lumière's archive into a 90 minute experience. This radical extension dilates the presence of the figures, of the guests, who walk step by step, frame by frame, through Lumière's camera and 3D glasses.

The second perversion is directly related to the Pulfrich effect, which, as Ken Jacobs once affirmed, is one of the key concepts that influenced him in his 3D experiments. The Pulfrich effect occurs when the two eyes send image signals to the brain in different time frames. The gap in this case is totally different from the retinal persistence, which claims that the internal movement of the cinematographic apparatus and frame opens and creates an illusionary image. Very subtly, the gap of the Pulfrich effect occurs in and between the two eyes and the brain. It creates a delay in the picture and small differences in light, thus inserting a pendulum or time lapse between the eyes and the brain, which extends the time of perception from one image to another. The curious thing is that the Pulfrich effect has often been evoked to create the three dimensional effect. In *The Guests*, Ken Jacobs does the opposite: he installs 3D glasses and evokes the Pulfrich effect to suggest distrust in the act of seeing; he blurs the view and creates a mist in a three dimensional environment. In so doing, the 3D becomes

opaque. Consequently, the imagistic pendulum woven by Ken Jacobs establishes a spatial disparity in moving objects. Therefore, *The Guests* is a film in which space is not a projection, but an invasion.

Ken Jacobs combines the length of an archive with the Pulfrich effect and, little by little, in between 3D. Thus, he perverted the so-called archive effect and does something more radical than remediation. Together with *Adieu au Language*, Godard's last film, one can notice a hypermediacy experiment with 3D, in which an opaque 3D phenomena happens between the eyes and brain and produces a strange feeling in front the 3D apparatus, which is itself perceived and experimented by the audience. However, *The Guests* gradually becomes a film of effects that suggests counter effects. It is as if it played against its own device: it starts with the 3D, seeing unusual or nearly invisible frameworks and frame details. With such gestures, Lumière's film refers back to traces of an impressionist painting (echoing the last impressionist, as Godard once called the Lumière's brothers). The audience begins to perceive faces, tiny details, delicate gestures, and unusual image-movements or image-times. In this film, Jacobs creates a 3D experience similar to kinetic art and uses a play of colors and depths that remind us of a Mondrian painting. We are looking at a plastic work that highlights surfaces.

It is as if the ghost imagery recorded by the Lumière brothers created volume, shape, and forms that, once alive, would present themselves as autonomous effects. This is a sculptural film. Gradually, between one pendulum and another, between the ontological and vertigo images, one gets the feeling that the audience is not just viewers watching ghosts, but rather the exact opposite. The viewers are seen and observed from the other side of crystal-images. This spatial disparity of *The Guests* appropriates the 'survival of the images' (Nachleben), as Aby Warburg described. However, Jacobs still debates a cinema that abolishes the dynamics of Renaissance perspective and reveals a form of sensible image organization that denies the original projection or point of escape. Ken Jacobs eventually creates fissures in the ontology of media filming within Lumière's archive, and perverts it. His update is the opposite of archeology and what has been called the archive effect, because he points to the future, to

images that demand to be created.

In conclusion, the remediation instant in *The Guests* can be considered a *dismediation* of the archive. It is a heretical gesture that goes beyond aesthetics. Its is a form of salutary disrespect. Therefore, at the end of this unprecedented experience, we toast to the vitality of our retinas while, distant and guarded, Ken Jacobs greets us with this unique visual heresy.