REANIMATING *TOM TOM*

Edwin Carels, Koninklijke Academie voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerpen

In 2008 the legendary experimental filmmaker Ken Jacobs made two feature-long reprises of his landmark structuralist filmwork *Tom Tom, the Piper's Son* (1969-1971, figs. 1-2). For both he used the same source material: a 1905 silent short film ascribed to G.W. "Billy" Bitzer, best

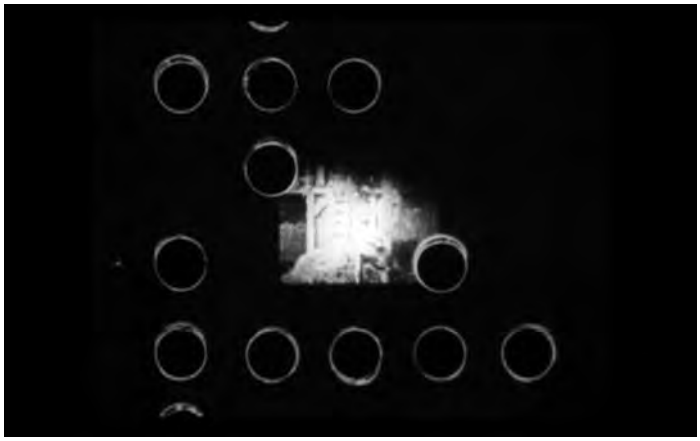

Fig. 1. – *Tom Tom, the Piper's Son* (Ken Jacobs,1969-1971).

Fig. 2. – *Tom Tom, the Piper's Son* (Ken Jacobs,1969-1971).

known for his later collaborations with D.W. Griffith. Both *Return to the Scene of the Crime* (2008) and *Anaglyph Tom with Puffy Cheeks* (2008, fig. 3) are striking in their use of electronic manipulation of the image and in their explicit deconstruction of the digital medium. Beyond the obvious stylistic update of his structuralist approach, the question that remains unanswered has to do with what it is that motivates this obsessive rereading, remediating and reanimating of images from cinema's past through a contemporary technological filter. At each occasion Ken Jacobs offers an extensive close reading of Bitzer's original frames, as such already a stunning interpretation of a classic Hogarth painting combined with a traditional folk tune about a young thief. Transgressing the figurative, Jacobs systematically moves on to abstract this imagery, turning it each time into an autonomous, unmistakingly contemporary artwork, a combination of formal concerns and ideological critique.

Fig. 3. – *Anaglyph Tom with Puffy Cheeks* (Ken Jacobs, 2008).

In the light of these recent *Tom Tom* remakes, there is good reason to revisit the original from 1969, and to reconsider its status. Although the characteristics of the initial *Tom Tom* film to a large extent satisfy the criteria P. Adam Sitney determined when coining the term "structural film" [1]. Ken Jacobs did not intentionally adopt this paradigm. In hindsight it becomes clear that what Ken Jacobs actually started to develop was his personal strand of media-archeology, an investigation of the medium by returning to its formative stages. For this Jacobs purposefully operates on two levels: the iconography of early cinema and a reconsideration of the performative potential of projection. This leads to a second reappraisal of an important section of his work: a repositioning of his activities from the notion of expanded cinema to the field of media-archeology and an application of the discussion around the dispositif to the praxis of experimental cinema.

Thirdly, within this text we want to explore how Jacobs's concern for remediation leads to an iconological revalorisation of a classic motif, William Hogarth's evocation of the *Southwark Fair* (1733). The constant play with permutation and transformation of one key image, "setting art

history in motion," begs for a further investigation of the films within the framework of iconology, as initiated by Aby Warburg and further developped by Georges Didi-Huberman and Philippe-Alain Michaud. From a film-historical, via a media-archeological to an iconological angle, the question each time remains: what is the status of what we see in Ken Jacobs' *Tom Tom* trilogy?

Rereading

In an interview Ken Jacobs compares his persistent fascination for the vintage *Tom Tom* film with "the way someone might be taken with untying a knot, the screen is so busy and direction of the viewer so lax" [2]. As he demonstrates time and again: the original film from 1905 is an inexhaustible marvel of mise-en-scène. Ken Jacobs transforms what was essentially an extended chase scene featuring a comic crowd of villagers into a meditation on the way we view films and on the medium itself.

It is important to consider that Ken Jacobs premiered his much heralded structuralist masterpiece several months before the term "structural film" was actually coined [3]. In the slipstream of conceptual and minimal art, a rigorously formalist approach to the medium was in the air. Yet the ambition of Jacobs was not particularly limited to deconstruction, nor reduction. Investigating the aesthetics of early cinema, Jacobs was actually ahead of his time in several ways. His experimental visual essay preceded with almost a decade the resurgence of interest in what up till then was frequently dismissed as "primitive" cinema. In 1978 the FIAF (International Federation of Film Archives) at its 34th congress in Brighton, triggered a thorough re-assessment of the pioneering period of cinema on a more theoretical level.

Two decades after Ken Jacobs extensively mined the filmic profusion of his spectacular source material, Tom Gunning and André Gaudreault introduced their very productive term "cinema of attractions" [4]. What made Ken Jacobs, a selfproclaimed "second-hand dealer of in film's curiosity shop" [5] invest such attention and energy into this longforgotten piece of silent film, notably in times of strong socio-cultural upheaval, the revolts of May 1968? The first reason Jacobs fell in love with the footage was perhaps the affinity he felt for this anachronistic, bohemian commune of semi-improvising actors on a 1905 stage [6].

Contesting all the conventions that adhered to the practice of cinema, structural filmmaking was more than a purely theoretical approach. For Ken Jacobs the autonomy of vision, a personalised perception, seeing things as for the first time, remains a central concern in all aspects of his carreer. His emerging role as a programmer and teacher in the mid-1960s might also help to explain his almost didactic interest in early cinema [7]. *Tom Tom* would never cease to occupy his mind.

The visual poetics of Jacobs's *Tom Tom* film are quite distinct from the more rigorous investigations of contemporaries such as Paul Sharits, Hollis Frampton, Michael Snow or Tony Conrad, all mentioned in Sitney's first article on structural film. There are even moments of discrete romanticism. With a particular sense of poetry, Jacobs rephotographed the original footage while it was projected above his bed, and added some inserts of a flower and a shadowplay on the sheets, thus alluding to the illusion of spatiality, which will remain one of the consistent interests throughout his carreer. In *Return to the Scene of the Crime* the entire film is focused on the first act of the original *Tom Tom*, allowing Jacobs to scrutinize the choreography of several thiefs in action, at times resonating Robert Bresson's *Pickpocket* (1959).

As the title of this second instalment immediately suggests, Jacobs's motivation is not strictly a material or formal one. Some text inserts clearly signal that his "forensic" excursions into silent

cinema are less escapist than symptomatic for his ideological concerns about the *Zeitgeist.* The "anachronistic" visual additions are even more bold here: the C-span footage of the economic authority Allan Greenspan at the moment of his downfall is an abrupt reminder of Jacobs's concerns about neoliberal capitalism. *Anaglyph Tom (Tom with Puffy Cheeks)* directly states in its subtitle: *The Heartwarming Story of a Boy Who didn't Know It Was Wrong to Steal.* Although less concerned with subtext than the previous remake [8], *Anaglyph Tom* can also be read as a meditation on excess, with sudden bursts of indexical truth piercing through the virtual layers the image. With his first *Tom Tom* Jacobs wanted us to look at cinema and consciously see film as a material condition; he now wants his viewer to acknowledge the illusory play with depth perception.

A final correction on the reduction of *Tom Tom the Piper's Son* as a quintessential structuralist film is Ken Jacobs's ongoing affinitity with the teachings of his mentor Hans Hoffman. In his electronic remakes the focus first shifts to the impact of colour, then illusion of depth. These manipulations can all be related to Hofmman's famous push/pull theory, describing how to translate the plasticity of three dimensionality to two-dimensionality, working on structural tensions between space, form, color and planes. As is often the case with Jacobs, the method can also be understood as a metaphor: a translation of Hogarth's play on the incongruities between the high and low, the ridiculous and the sublime.

Remediating

When in 1733 Hogarth painted his *Southwark Fair*, he concurrently produced a set of engravings for the market. This technological migration of a visual motif from painting to engraving continued in the 20th century to Bitzer's nitrate film, then to a paper print for the Library of Congress, then in the sixties to the 16mm interpretation by Jacobs and later the 35mm print by the MOMA, serving as a basis for the more recent electronic manifestations. As Bolter and Grusin argue in their book *Remediation* [9], new visual media have become culturally significant precisely by paying homage to, and refashioning such earlier media as perspective painting, photography, film, and television. The past always remains present and dead media are occasionally resurrected. Long before media-archeology became a theoretical study, Ken Jacobs was already putting it into practice, adopting and adapting old technologies, "always finding something new in the old" [10].

In 1965 he started to present kinetic shadow plays with his *Apparition Theater of New York*. Ten years later the *Nervous System* performances began, and in 2000 he presented his first *Nervous Magic Lantern* show. Picking up on the earliest days of cinema when a showman would present an evening of the latest technical marvels live on the spot, Jacobs was reinventing these old techniques around the same time as Stan VanDerBeek coined the term "expanded cinema," later made famous in 1970 by Gene Youngblood's eponymous book. As for several of his contemporaries, Jacobs's motivation for expanding conventional film viewing to a more performative experience was to activate and alert the individual viewer, and counteract cinema's traditional hierachy and conditioning of the viewing collective.

In the interval of four decades, seperating the first interpretation of the Bitzer film from the two consecutive feature length versions, Jacobs reprised parts of his favorite footage for live performances. In 1975 his paracinematic praxis even started with *The Impossible: Chapter One, "Southwark Fair."* Another one of his early "Nervous Systems" pieces was the door opening in the finale of *Tom Tom* called *The Impossible: Chapter Three, Hell Breaks Loose* (1980). "By

breaking the automatic whirr of twenty-four frames a second, Jacobs returns cinema to its prehistory in Marey and Muybridge's analysis of motion" [11]. Both these pioneers were first and foremost interested in what the machine recordings could reveal to the human eye, how human physiology stood corrected. Ken Jacobs however increasingly focuses more on the capacity of eye itself. That is also why the flicker consistently plays a crucial role in his diverse forms of output. In Jacobs's hands, the projector is not a reproduction device to reconstitute analog recordings, but rather an autonomous engine that produces particular visual pleasures. Reconsidering the agency of the projection apparatus on a phenomenological level also implies for Jacobs the question of what a filmimage essentially is, problematizing the material object of the filmstrip itself.

Throughout his carreer, Jacobs has avoided in many ways to shoot film himself. In his *Nervous System* performances, the lightsource and the shutter play the central role, more than what is sandwiched in between them. For the *Nervous Magic Lantern* performances, Jacobs produces his own slides, thus reverting to the oldest form of projected moving imagery. As Lev Manovich indicated, the manual construction of images in digital cinema represents a return to nineteenth century pre-cinematic practices, when images were hand-painted and hand-animated. "Consequently, cinema can no longer be cleary distinguished from animation"[12].

Animation essentially addresses the eye of the beholder, as an explicit form of optical illusion. After inviting his audience to participate in a performance by hand-holding a light-reducing grey filter before one eye, Jacobs started to explore electronic manipulation for a similar effect of spatialization. In order to generate a filmic equivalent to the push/pull effect, as advocated by his painting teacher Hans Hoffman, Jacobs developed his own patented technology: Eternalism[13]. The appearance of transfixed continuous motion ("a going without going anywhere") is created in this invention from a specific employment of flicker. Flickers are a product of the act of projection, they cannot be reproduced as such.

Over the last years Jacobs applied his glimmering, flickering, blinking, flashing effects to a series of films based on vintage stereoscopic images. Reducing his found footage to the minimum of two nearly identical frames, Jacobs exploits the difference in parallax between the two, and in combination with the eternalist effect generates an impressive illusion of depth and movement while dissecting the image on its ideological contents. This happens most explicitly in his video-dyptich *Capitalism: Slavery* (2006) and *Capitalism: Child Labor* (2006). As an obsessive archaeologist, Jacobs plays with these historically determined interactions between mind and matter, physiology and technology. At the same time he sketches the industrial complex that generated these conditions of the modern experience, taking us back to the machine room of the Industrial Revolution and evoking some of the fundamental characteristics of modernity: exercising control through systematised massproduction, the systematic exploitation of nature and human labour, imposing a global, strict time regime and standardizing workmethods.

On a more formal level, this series of video-vignettes based on stereophotographs once again underlines Jacobs's obsession with three dimensional illusion. The principle of stereoscopy is older than photography, and was already featured in the research of several inventors of moving images (i.e. Plateau, Marey, Reynaud, the Lumières). The real subject of *Anaglyph Tom* is depth-perception itself, requiring red and blue filter spectacles to view the film. Recently, Jacobs exploits the effect of socalled "free view 3D" that requires a cross-eyed viewing attitude[14].

In the early proposals on the dispositif Jean-Louis Baudry already dealt with the entire viewing situation, and not only the basic equipment. Also, in discussing the disciplining of the viewer, the dispositif was commonly understood in function of mainstream, narrative feature films. In Jacobs's radical experiments the critical investigation of the projected image has moved from deconstructing a film to deconstructing the act of projecting as it is taking place. Yet his agenda

is not so much one of opposition to conventions, or to the institutional mode of representation, but rather the proposal of unique experiences. As Frank Kessler describes Jean-François Lyotard's reconceptualization of the apparatus theory: "The concept of dispositive is explored as a type of formation which not only produces control and constraints, but also opens up possibilities of contact, participation, plays, as well as bodily and sensual experiences" [15].

By inciting to fill in the spaces that lie in between, and by provoking personal response from each viewer by working directly on the nervous system, what Ken Jacobs does with his kinetic "sub-genre of painting" can be considered a radical form of animation. Just as important as what is visible on the images, is what happens in between them. Exploiting the potential of the interval to the maximum, his strategy not only works on a technical and physiological level, but also provokes cultural memory. Repeating images over and over again, revisiting materials and remediating technologies, through his media-archeology, Ken Jacobs activates not only the viewer's nervous system, but all sorts of memories, personal and collective. Or as Philippe-Alain Michaud puts it: "To attribute motion to a figure that is not moving, it is necessary to reawaken in oneself a series of experienced images following one from the other" [16].

Reanimating

The alternation of attention to what happens on the frame and what happens between images is already a point of discussion since Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne*-project was further developed by his admirers. Warburg based his iconology on the interrelationships between the figures, and not on the meaning of the static figures themselves. "Warburg considered the image a cinematic structure, within a problematics of movement, or montage" [17]. Warburg himself spoke of "an iconology of intervals" (*eine Ikonologie des Zwischenraumes*) involving not objects but the tensions, analogies, contrasts, or contradictions among them [18].

Using animation both as a method and a metaphor, Ken Jacobs is considered by Michaud as a "hermeneutic" figure, someone who uses the filmic dispositif as a medium to interpret and criticize images from the past. For Jacobs it is not the originality of the source material that matters (hence his predilection for archival material) but a sense of discovery through visual experience. The agency of the images on each plate of Warburg's *Atlas* finds an equivalent in Jacobs's selective editing and accentuating of details within the frame. The way he "writes" information onto the images that is purely anachronistic, illustrates his sense of continuity and the agency of particular gestures and poses. Similarly, Warburg's analysis of the inscription of figures onto the picture plane seems to translate the transferal of individuals into images and the transformation of bodies into pictorial entities.

In his elementary comments on visual culture, Ken Jacobs notes in the end titles of *Return to the Scene of the Crime* that the first public screening of film in Britain took place at the actual Southwark Fair. He graphically isolates the detail of the two people in the Hogarth etching looking into the little house on sticks upfront, and clarifies: "They are viewing 'forced perspectives,' a precursor to the movies." G.W. Bitzer did not restrict himself to the content of Hogarth's engraving but used it as a backdrop for the visualisation of a traditional nursery rhyme. Still Tom Tom feels perfectly at home in this universe. His gestural motifs are in tune with the context, this migration signals a repetition across history. Beyond the figuration, and the ghosting of the image, is the awareness of the dynamics of the viewer's own memory at work.

Whereas Walter Benjamin demonstrated that a cultural history comes with an "optical unconscious," Aby Warburg proposes that there is a something like a "temporal unconscious" at work,

indicated by the notion of *Nachleben*. This survival of images provokes anachronisms, cutting through chronologies and linear history, and confusing the present. In combination with the reanimation of old footage, the frozen slices of time activated by Ken Jacobs's eternalist technique are bringing this temporal unconscious to the fore. Producing a spatialised time-effect, an eternal movement going of nowhere, yet in a highly suggestive fashion, they release an energy that is purely of the present, and that occurs in the moment of perception itself. The virtual time-intervals Jacobs generates during performance with the use of his shutter, or with the insertion of the hypnotic blacks in his electronic works, are the zones where the images come to life – an equivalent to the black backgrounds onto which Warburg was mounting his pictures in a cinematic arrangement. The black isolates them and makes their internal movement appear stronger: "Warburg's construction also reflects the process of projection in which the sequencing, fusion, and contradiction among the images take place: it has simply lost its diachronic aspect and demands active intervention from the viewer" [19].

Whereas Warburg wanted to demonstrate a surviving continuity, the afterlife and metamorphosis from Antiquity to his own day, Ken Jacobs is reverting our awareness back to 1900, to the period when industries disciplined the masses and psychic mechanisms were identified for the first time (Freud, Charcot). The implications of the first *Tom Tom* film retain the relevance they had in the mid-1960s and continue to resonate. Georges Didi-Huberman defines Warburg's phantomatic *Nachleben* as a form of "urgent survival." Haunted by a film from 1905, Jacobs demonstrates time and again that these images still contain a manifest energy and signification. Animating the anachronisms, enlarging the grain and pixels, summoning both Tom Tom and Alan Greenspan, Ken Jacobs continues to exhalt both the meaning and the life of images in the present tense, for the present time.

1 P. Adams Sitney, "Some Comments on Structural Film," in *Film Culture*, no. 47, Summer 1969. Sitney identified four formal characteristics common in structural films, but not all four characteristics are necessarily present in any single film: a fixed camera position; the flicker effect; loop printing; re-photography. No reference is made to Ken Jacobs in this article.

2 Ken Jacobs, "Ask Ken!," in *tank.tv*, http://tank.tv/askken/, last visit 22 May 2010. Complete quote: "*Tom Tom the Pipers Son* fascinates me the way someone might be taken with untying a knot, the screen is so busy and direction of the viewer so lax. It seems a perfect way to keep someone amused without ever becoming enough. Fact is, I'm awed by it and adore the (slowly sorted-out) performers. It 'springs to life' every time, lending itself to all my wacky permutations and ready after each for the next, a marker of development across the years."

3 P. Adams Sitney' article on *Film Culture* was published some months later than the première of *Tom Tom the Piper's Son*.

4 For a historical reconstruction on the introduction of the term, see Wanda Strauwen, *Introduction to an Attractive Concept*, in Id. (ed.), *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam 2006, p. 11.

5 Tom Gunning, "Films that Tell Time: The Paradoxes of the Cinema of Ken Jacobs," in David Schwartz (ed.), *Films that Tell Time: A Ken Jacobs Retrospective*, American Museum of the Moving Image, New York 1989, p. 3.

6 From a 1833 description : "This fair was attended, generally, by the inhabitants of town and country, and, therefore, was one that afforded great variety ; especially as, before its suppresion, it was devoted to everything loose and irregular. [...] It is sufficient to remark that it presents us with an endless collection of spirited and laughable characters, in which is strikingly portrayed the character of the times."

William Hogarth, John Trusler, Joseph Hogarth, John Nichols, *The Works of William Hogarth: In a Series of Engravings with Descriptions, and a Comment on Their Moral Tendency*, Jones, London 1833, p. 110.

7 In 1967 Jacobs created the *The Millenium Film Workshop* in New York City. In 1969 he became a teacher at Binghamton University.

8 In the end titles of *Return to the Scene of the Crime*, Jacobs thanks besides his collaborators also "the work itself for diverting me from the spectacle of our courts and politicians playing dumb while USA descends to Nazi level under Bush-Cheney."

9 Jay David Bolter, Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, The MIT Press, Cambridge (MA) 2000.

10 Siegfried Zielinski's media-archeological motto, as expressed for example in his *Deep Time of New Media: Toward an Archaeology of Hearing and Seeing by Technical Means*, The MIT Press, Cambridge (MA) 2006, p. 3.

11 Tom Gunning, "Films that Tell Time: The Paradoxes of the Cinema of Ken Jacobs", cit., p. 8.

12 Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, The MIT Press, Cambridge (MA) 2001, p. 250.

13 "The appearance of continuous movement, using only two substantially similar pictures, has been accomplished in live performance by simultaneous projection of both images onto a screen, wherein one picture may be slightly off-set from the other picture as they appear on the screen, and by rotating a two-bladed propeller, wherein the propeller blades are set off from one another by 180 degrees, in front of and between the two projectors such that the two images are made to both alternate and overlap in their appearances, with both images in turn alternating with an interval of complete darkness onscreen when both projections are blocked by the spinning propeller." Ken Jacobs, *Eternalism: A Method for Creating an Appearance of Sustained Three-Dimensional Motion-Direction of Unlimited Duration, Using a Finite Number of Pictures*, United States Patent 7218339, available at the address http://www.freepatentsonline.com/7218339. html, last visit 22 May 2010.

14 Recent manifestations of Ken Jacobs's exceptionally consistent interest in the potential of depth illusions are the following titles in free view 3D : *Berkeley to San Francisco* (2009), *Brain Operations* (2009) and *The Near Collision* (2010).

15 Frank Kessler, "Notes on Dispositif" (2006), http://www.let.uu.nl/~Frank.Kessler/personal/notes%20on%20dispositif.pdf, p. 4, last visit 22 May 2010.

16 Philippe-Alain Michaud, *Aby Warburg and the Image in Motion*, Zone Books, New York 2004, p. 273.

17 *Idem*, p. 282.

18 *Idem*, p. 244.

19 *Ibidem*.