

Acropolis Cinema, REDCAT, Los Angeles
Filmforum, LACMA, and 3-D SPACE present



October 9, 2018 ~ 8:00pm ~ Downtown Independent

ABOUT THE FILM

Ken Jacobs has been concerned with the exploration of stereoscopic phenomena since the mid 1960s. He has experimented with a number of 3D techniques, and has developed ways to infuse his 2D work with heightened illusions of depth. *The Guests*, which has existed previously as a slide installation and an anaglyph video, will be presented tonight in its final incarnation: as a digital 3D spectacle. Continuing the work started with *Tom, Tom the Piper's Son*, Ken Jacobs revisits an early Lumière Brothers film, *Entree d'une noce à l'église* (1896). As we watch the congregation mounting the steps of a Parisian church, our attention is drawn to the smallest of details: from the grain of the image to the facial gestures of the long-dead guests to the city landscape behind them. Ken Jacobs does more than extend the time (and space) of the original footage: he invites us to see in a way that we have never seen before. (Bozar Centre for Fine Arts)

74 min // USA // 2013

Untold Depths by Max Nelson

The following is an excerpt of an article originally published by Reverse Shot, January 8, 2015

Of the many cryptic sayings scattered throughout Jean-Luc Godard's latest film *Goodbye to Language*, one of the most striking is the narrator's suggestion that, in cinema, "the difficult thing is to fit flatness into depth." Nestled as the line is within the movie's constant shiftings of perspective, slippages of meaning, and layerings of frames within frames (the film is Godard's first in 3D), it's unclear for whom this difficulty is supposed to come up. Filmmaking, one might want to say, has always involved creating the illusion of depth within what is, essentially, a flattened-out reproduction of three-dimensional space. The difficult thing, you'd think, would be "fitting" the depth of this space into flatness—not, as Godard suggests, the other way around.

Suppose now that the difficulty in question isn't on the filmmaker's side, but rather on that of an audience confronted with a series of flat images and asked to *infer* depth out of them, to expand them on sight from two dimensions into three. Taken this way, Godard's line becomes about something else. In the course of watching a movie, what sort of ocular work—scanning the frame, racking focus, aligning bodies in space, slotting them into different visual planes—are we supposed to be doing? And how, if at all, can that work be taught?

The conceit of *The Guests*, a 73-minute 3D frame-by-frame exposition of a single, thirty-second fragment of the Lumière brothers' *Entrée d'une noce à l'église* (1897), recalls both one of Ken Jacobs's best-known films—his monumental *Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son* (1969-71), a two-hour riff on a 1905 Biograph short by Billy Bitzer—and one of his most notable recent works, *Razzle Dazzle: The Lost World* (2008), a stroboscopic video built out of a one-minute Edison short. For the forty years separating those two works, the

making of individual, finished films wasn't at the heart of Jacobs' artistic practice. In 1975, Jacobs developed the first of what would become a series of "Nervous System" live performances: improvisatory dual-projector screenings in which two prints of the same early silent film would be projected one frame at a time on two slightly staggered or asynchronous channels, both placed in front of a rapid, adjustable shutter. The flickering, pulsating three-dimensional effects Jacobs coaxed out of this setup have become the stuff of legend. (Having never seen one, I have read of them as, variably, "twisting, warping whirligigs of volumetric protuberance"; "paradoxical experiences of motion" in which "the screen itself seems to rotate slightly or its surface become convulsed by sudden ripples"; and spectacles in whose "ceaselessly reforming shapes" audience members "are apt to discover . . . spectral images of monsters and other horrors coming straight from their own subconscious storehouse of anxieties.")

The "Nervous System" performances were essentially incomplete; part of their power, I gather, came from their constantly being unstable, in flux, lacking any fixed or predetermined end. (In this respect, they perhaps also recall Jacobs's marathon lectures at SUNY, where he taught for over thirty years.) It was only once sophisticated digital video technology came on the market that Jacobs found a cinematic vocabulary with which he could make something like film versions of the shows. Since then, he has been strikingly prolific. It's perhaps best, then, to take *The Guests*—the second of Jacobs's films included in the festival—as one installment in a single, ongoing exploration of what it might look like for a close-reading to take the form of a spectacle or magic show.

The clip around which *The Guests* is based shows the rear half of a wedding train entering a church in backlogged double-file. In Jacobs's reconstruction of the movie, each frame is frozen and superimposed over its immediate successor; every five seconds or so, the film advances one frame, so that the original B-frame is then superimposed over the one immediately after *it*. The result is supposed to be that, in Jacobs's words, "similarities and differences between the two images create illusions of deep space . . . with solids appearing as voids and vice-versa." But *The Guests* is not, like *Wire Fence*, an engine for frustration or eye-straining perceptual work. Instead, it's a sort of cinematic equivalent of a literary *explication de texte*—an exercise in which a single, brief work is made to expand, undulate, deepen, and shift shape simply by virtue of being *looked at* unblinkingly and at length.

What emerges first are the moods and personalities of individual people: the little girl who pokes her head peevishly and impatiently out from behind the wall of another, unseen woman's coat; the unsmiling, slightly pained-looking woman advancing slowly in an elaborate frilled dress whose ruffles mesmerizingly catch the light; the nervous, frail, wispy-haired young woman who gets in line late, anxiously peers into the church, then retreats back into her place clutching her purse in what looks like fear. The space within the frame, too, undergoes a sort of change. Looking at the image for an extended period of time, the distance between the carriages and shops in the distant background—the church is situated on one side of a courtyard-like town square—and the figures in the extreme foreground starts to widen and collapse, especially during the few brief moments when Jacobs jarringly inverts or re-colors the image itself.

Then there are the figures inside the frame, which seem alternately to project out of and recede back into the surface of the screen. This particular effect, unlike others in Jacobs's repertoire, isn't an innovation. One of the draws of 3D, from its early uses in midcentury

creature features to its resurrection in the 1980s at immersive theme park rides, has been the way it makes onscreen objects protrude threateningly or seductively from the surface of the frame. But its use here, in the recalling and contemplation of a turn-of-the-century wedding, is telling. One of Jacobs's central concerns in both these movies—and, for that matter, in much of his life's work—is to find (or create) roiling, unstable motive forces in seemingly placid moments; to suggest that any single image, carefully enough regarded, will over-spill its own boundaries, force the creation of new images and texts. Another way of putting this suggestion would be that the work of taking in an image on our part is, in the end, inseparable from the work of *producing* images—the work of making a static image move, or fitting flatness into depth. ♦



Coming Soon to Acropolis:

-Still Light: Films by Robert Beavers—Oct 24, Downtown Independent

-*Dead Souls* (Dir. Wang Bing, 2018)—Nov 11, Billy Wilder Theater



@AcropolisCinema



/AcropolisCinema



AcropolisCinema@gmail.com

www.acropoliscinema.com