

Interview Transcript

Ken Jacobs – Avant-Garde Filmmaker

Interview conducted on 3/18/2019

EARLY INFLUENCES

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KEN JACOBS: I went to a high school in Brooklyn, and at one point...in Williamsburg, so poor, a poor neighborhood. Poor students. And one day it was announced that the Museum of Modern Art, which I had never heard of, was giving one or two tickets to the school to let students use so they could visit MoMA with free, you know, free admission. And I borrowed the ticket and discovered MoMA. And after a while discovered that in the basement they showed movies. They showed movies from all over time, all over the world. And one of the films I saw was *Greed* by Erich von Stroheim, and I came out stunned and then I read [laughs] the, you know, the-the papers they-they gave out with each film, that this was only part of the film, that he had shot an eight hour film and that the studios had disposed of the rest of the movie. Everyone that saw it in-in MGM realized this is the greatest film ever made. They all said it, and then they destroyed it. They reduced it down to a normal sized film, maybe two hours, and they got rid of the other footage. They got rid of it. And I was maybe 17, and I knew from that point on I would never want to go to Hollywood. You know, they're stupid. They're smart, and they're stupid. I also saw Jean Vigo, *Zero for Conduct*. So I knew there was something else besides the really stupid movies Hollywood-Hollywood was churning out, with very few exceptions, after the war. I mean, *The Sweet Smell of Success* is-is a tower. Most movies were imbecilic. They would tell you, they were telling you to be an imbecile. I lived with my grandparents. And my grandmother outlived my grandfather. And after the war, she was getting a couple of....She was hearing from a couple, a couple of relatives in Russia, near Odessa area, and at some point I saw a picture that

someone had sent made in the studio of his daughter and himself. This is a man standing with a young daughter. And they were living skeletons, and they were dressed in their best. But they were skeletal, and they were...they had behind them, like this, a picture of swans in a pond, swans- a picture, you know, behind them. So this was their picture to send to my grandmother, who was sending packages to them. So I wasn't ready to make movies. You know, I was- I was trying to deal with that. And then I was...very aware of...this country's history, and I was moving towards making a movie called "Star Spangled to Death." I was also interested in painting. And painting also seemed the most accessible way to...operate. And the New York School was on, the...action painters and Abstract Expressionists. And that's what I was studying, and the films were in line with that thinking.

ENCOUNTERING THE AVANT-GARDE

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I made a film of Orchard Street, on the Lower East Side. Again, the Jew thing, OK? I'm very...I'm very...I'm hostile to religion of all sorts. I hate them all. I hate them all. They're all- All of them seem like children's stories that have been taken to heart and passed on and, you know, codified and made into the rule, the law. They're all horrible. But I was drawn to film Orchard Street down on the Lower East Side. At that time, it was still very Jewish. All kinds of people. But...you still had that quality that early Williamsburg in Brooklyn had for me. I needed to...still deal with that. I was looking for a musician, thinking at the time, "Well, this, you know, this is a silent movie and it has to have music." I don't think that way anymore. And I worked in a bookstore earning \$0.65 an hour. Yeah, the minimum wage. And the guy who ran the bookstore was a poet, and he said that he-he knew a musician. I should bring over my film and show it at-at his house. And...I did, and then when I got there, there were people, there was the avant-garde intellectual, you know, cinema intellectuals of New York, which he sprang on me. One of them was Jonas, and his brother, Adolfas. And I showed this film, you know, the "Streets of...Orchard Street," and they were very against it. And someone approached me and said, "You know, someone made a film of a street crowd in-in Britain, and you could see them eating, and you see how disgusting, you know, they were, you know, food going in and out of the mouths, you

know, that's- that-that was a comment!" And it was so far away from anything [laughs] I wished to do or I had done. I was trying to catch the actual life of the place. So that was the level of criticism. Jonas was quiet, he didn't say anything, and he recited some poetry in Lithuanian that no one could understand. So I didn't know who he was, I just, you know, years later, I recognized "This was Jonas." And his brother, Adolfas, was there. So they were very hostile to "Orchard Street." There was a lot of jealousy, a lot of backbiting, you know, a lot of dismissing somebody else for being somebody else. And Jonas was a very important figure... You know? And he made a network of sorts, a peer- you know, a category of filmmaker. But mostly we were poor artists drawn to work in film with very little money, but also enjoying the freedom of making your own films your own way on your own money, you know, allowed you. And then the movies were deadly then, it was the fifties, it was political oppression like you can't- you can't believe it. You can't believe how, uh, asphyxiating it was.

COMMENTS ON STRUCTURALISM

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Structuralism was very simplistic thinking. If somebody could see a scheme to something, it became structural. You know? I never thought of such a thing. I just- I worked on what interested me. Let's say Hollis Frampton would work with schemes. Okay? And...if you didn't get the scheme, the film was just very boring. You had, you know, understand the scheme and how this fit into the logic of the scheme. But visual? Forget it. OK? As a-as a sensory work, you know...He made some things that were better after a while, but the thing that brought him attention was this logic that was, you know, that was very evident in the work and the fact that it was so far from a sensory experience.

PURPOSE OF CINEMA

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[laughs] It's a strange world. Society is strange. We are strange. And I think that, you know, cinema generally is-is an effort, when it isn't being stupid, commercial, is an effort to understand where we are, what's going on. It's really mystifying, and there's, you know, great story films like *8 1/2*, you know, they're trying to help you understand where you are. But...I think I've also been interested in not letting the understandable limit us, you know, going into places that...are real, are...vital. But are also beyond understanding. Until maybe we get a larger understanding.

EXPERIMENTAL FILM

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I follow this and that idea, this and that urge, this and that...curiosity. I'm a promiscuous filmmaker who is...doesn't have proper inhibitions. A good cook tries things, OK? Little of this, little that: a new dish! You know, you try things. "Hmm. Interesting." "Hmm. Not interesting. Let me go another way." So I guess that's experimental. You poke around and some things...are rewarding, and some things are not. So I think experimental is a legitimate term. I know that Jonas...Jonas reacted because experimental sounded like someone didn't know what they were doing, and would throw this in, that in, and they would call it a movie. So I think he objected to that. No, what I'm talking about is-is much more purposeful, including the times when-when you decide not to assert a purpose.

LEARNING TO MAKE FILM

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Well, it's all, you know, individual. And it's, you know, if your life has...led you to a place where you just fall into this, you're open to it, you know, or you're not, in which case a teacher might help you do it. And this is a wider way of thinking, and there's things here that you can grow on. OK? Unless your...your deep need is to make money. You just need to make money. You know, if you make money, you will prove who you are. You know? That that is who you are. You're all that money. I think it's crucial. I think these things, in their very diverse ways, help create the

mind. And we need mindfulness. Boy, do we need it! You know, some people can proceed in a very structured way towards learning something. And some people have to...throw something at the wall, and see what sticks. You have to be willing to screw up. But it doesn't mean that, you know, you don't know what you're doing. You don't know what you're doing, but you-you're following...hints, in the brain, hints in the mind that are moving you this way, that way, you know? The mind is operating, it's-it's operating outside of language, perhaps, but there's a realm outside of language. Language only covers so much.

MEETING SALLY DIXON

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We went to Boulder. You know, Stan Brakhage. He didn't live in Boulder, but right close to Boulder. And spent a lot of time there. And Sally was there. She was very nice. She was very tall. She was very good hearted. Extremely good hearted. And she was very human. She wasn't...a strange wacko. She was...solid, and very, very human, very, really nice person. Very...well-meaning. Her attitude towards us was-was very welcoming and appreciative. Ricardo was much younger, and it was like- a little bit like she was taking her son along with her. But at that time, they seemed very happy together. She definitely made the city accessible to us. She was enthusiastic and helpful. And a very nice spirit. She laughed at my jokes.

CONTEMPORARY AVANT-GARDE

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You know, there's an avant-garde on video, working in video, and I think it's thousands of people. And some very good ones. Very occasionally...I poke in to...see what people are doing. And it's extraordinarily...high work. I'm concerned, are these people seen? Are these works seen? And perhaps they are, by other people who-who are also interested in this area, interested in what can be done. What can be done is what can be done with us. What can be done to explode our ossified preconceptions of things? So there's a lot of-a lot of work out there now, more than ever!

More than...could be-could be dreamt of then. At that time you just needed, you know, odd people. [laughs] Now it's just people. I think the avant-garde...is virulent today [laughs]...As much as it ever was. And a lot more, a lot more people because people like you have been teaching it. And...exciting young people into picking up on these-on these- on possibility. And new cameras come along, new technologies. It's gotta create a ferment of-of new stuff.