

Deconstructing Cinema

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Interesting [article](#) in the NY Times about the work of Ken Jacobs, experimental film-maker whose work focuses on the materiality of film and its after effects and distortions.

The Nervous Magic Lantern is a variation on a proto-cinematic machine, dating from the Renaissance or earlier, called the magic lantern, a device for projecting images. By the mid-17th century, it was popular enough that the diarist Samuel Pepys bought one “to make strange things on a wall.” Mr. Jacobs, a leading figure in American avant-garde cinema, has been making strange things shudder and writhe on screens for more than half a century. The germ for the Nervous Magic Lantern dates back to his earlier device, the Nervous System, a machine with two 16-millimeter projectors and a rotating shutter, on which he showed identical strips of film and with which he created optical effects, including an illusion of depth.

These manipulations were a continuation of a long preoccupation with cinema’s material properties as well as its effect on our heads and bodies. Born in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, in 1933, Mr. Jacobs watched movies like “Greed” at the Museum of Modern Art with a high school pass, studied painting with Hans Hoffman and bought a camera with the idea of doing “combat cinematography in the streets of New York.” With Jack Smith, a film and performance artist, he did just that, shooting Smith frolicking in shorts like “Little Stabs at Happiness” (1958-60). Mr. Jacobs once described another of these films, “Blonde Cobra” (1959-63), edited from footage shot by Bob Fleischner, as a “look in on an exploding life, on a man of imagination suffering prefashionable Lower East Side deprivation and consumed with American 1950s, ’40s, ’30s disgust.”