

THE ARCHIVAL IMPERMANENCE PROJECT

FILM RESTORATION, POETICS, CASE STUDIES, AND HISTORIES

AUTHOR
PUBLISHER
PAGES
ISBN

ROSS LIPMAN
STICKING PLACE BOOKS
464
9781942782919

REVIEWED BY JONATHAN ROSENBAUM

The American film restorationist Ross Lipman, pictured surrounded by graffiti on the back cover of this large-format volume, earns his somewhat daunting dialectical title by launching a discussion that doesn't simply include the four topics in his subtitle but often merges them in provocative, far-ranging ways. Neither an academic nor a journalist, he maintains a certain analytical distance from both professions, inviting us to reconsider what 'restoring' a film entails. He encourages us to rethink whether the results of his heroic restorations of works by Kenneth Anger, Charles Burnett, John Cassavetes, Shirley Clarke, Bruce Conner, Emile de Antonio, Steve James, Barbara Loden, John Sayles and Dziga Vertov (among many others) should be seen inside cinemas, at museums, or within intermediate screening spaces we haven't yet figured out how to devise. (Two relevant chapter headings – 'A New Model for Moving Image Museums' and 'Performing Cinema in the Age of the Death of Everything' – manage to encompass Lipman's tastes for utopia and apocalypse in virtually the same breath.)

This is an intimidating book that becomes a friendly treasure trove once one maps out a personal way of dealing with the seeming overflow. As a filmmaker and/or essayist, Lipman combines film with literature (Samuel Beckett's 1965 short *Film* in Lipman's 2015 documentary *Nofilm*), jazz (essays on the music of Charles Mingus in Cassavetes' 1959 film *Shadows* and on Freddie Redd, Ornette Coleman and others in two Clarke features) and even puppetry (in Lipman's semi-archival and very creepy 2021 film *The Case of the Vanishing Gods*, made with the satirical, Chicago-based Theater Oobleck).

In other words, one could belabour the obvious and say Lipman regards film as part of art and therefore as part of the world, with all the complexity and ambiguity this implies. In his autobiographical, globetrotting introduction buttressing three pages of acknowledgments, he moves from his graduate seminars with film theorist Rudolf Arnheim in Michigan in 1983 (when Lipman was still an undergraduate) to becoming an East London squatter attending "an eccentric private film school in New Mexico" to taking diverse technical courses in Chicago to more travels abroad (including Hungary and Slovakia) to becoming a cataloguer at



This is an intimidating book that becomes a friendly treasure trove once one maps out a personal way of dealing with the seeming overflow

Berkeley's Pacific Film Archives and then finally getting hired as an assistant at the UCLA Film Archives – and this only covers the first 17 years of his progress, before he became known for restorations.

In keeping with his scattershot career and his overlapping concerns, the reader is advised to follow his or her own wayward bents rather than trudge through the book's consecutive sections on Poetics, Case Studies (on Thom Andersen's *Eadweard Muybridge, Zoopraxographer* 1975; Mack Sennett's *Tillie's Punctured Romance*, 1914; Rob Epstein's *The Times of Harvey Milk*, 1984; and Bruce Conner's *Crossroads*, 1976; plus ten Short Takes), Histories (including *Shadows*' jazz; Kent Mackenzie's *The Exiles*, 1961; and "competing histories of American experimental film" that daringly juxtapose Peter Kubelka's *Invisible Cinema*, an experimental movie theatre at Manhattan's Anthology Film Archives, with the nonfilmic canons of philosopher Mortimer J. Adler and critic Harold Bloom; plus two dozen more Short Takes on American Neorealism, People, and Films), and a slew of appendices. Try to imagine Kubrick's *2001* monolith as a flat stone bounding across a lake, and you might arrive at some equivalent to Lipman's monumental yet lighthearted sense of flight.

His 2009 essay 'The Gray Zone: A Restorationist's Travel Guide' usefully outlines many of the photochemical, aesthetic and historical issues involved in cinematic resurrection. For starters, "The Gray Zone is that uncharted territory where a preservationist needs to make decisions when there is no definitive guide left by the filmmakers. The choices made may make the difference between an effort that is faithful to the spirit of the

work and one that is not. And they very much determine the ultimate experience one undergoes when viewing it. If poor judgment is used, a film can, ironically, be lost in the very act of preservation."

Lipman goes on to assert that recreating a film's 'original viewing experience' is both impossible and, anyway, not part of the goal of film restoration: "The physical materials and methods of duplication and exhibition available today differ from those of the past. Different technologies lead to different experiences." Because hand-cranked silent films were projected at variable speeds, a "contemporary constant-speed projector denies the possibility [of an exact duplication] by definition." Moreover, if a silent film is "tinted and toned", we can't reproduce the original colours because "Even if we use the actual dye formulae of the period, the chances of precise emulation are near zero, due to process and procedural variations, and the dyes' different interaction with modern film stocks."

Consequently, one must make subjective rather than objective judgements to proceed. Eventually this leads Lipman to cite the hero of Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker* (1979) as "a model of the restorationist... bridging the gap between C.P. Snow's 'two cultures' of art and science... in an alchemical process of cultural continuation." In effect it requires the sort of critical intelligence that Lipman shows in one of his better essays, "The Savage Heart of Kent Mackenzie", drawing on Mackenzie's own master's thesis about the production of his 1961 masterpiece to explain why and how he arrived at the film's sounds and images – a helpful backdrop to (rather than a ground plan for) its restoration.

ABOVE
Charles Burnett's *Killer of Sheep* (1978)