



Alternative Projections

David E. James &
Adam Hyman



Between the Black Box and the White Cube Andrew V. Uroskie

CHICAGO

THE STRUGGLE FOR FORM

PERSPECTIVES ON POLISH
RUHRIT-CARDE FILM 1916-1989



KUC & O'PRAY



Kinder and
McPherson

Transmedia
Frictions

The Digital, the Arts,
and the Humanities



Remes Motion[less] Pictures: THE CINEMA OF STASIS



Installation and the Moving Image

CATHERINE ELWES



THE PRACTICE OF LIGHT

CUBITT



CINEMA BY OTHER MEANS LEVI

OXFORD

COLOR AND EMPATHY CHRISTINE N. BRINCKMANN

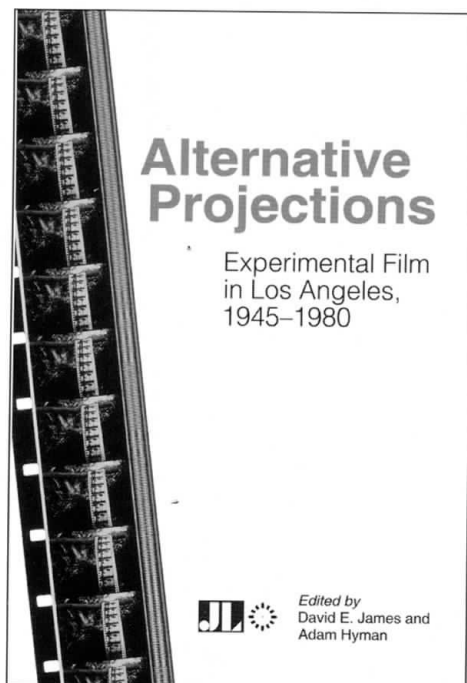
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ALTERNATIVE PROJECTIONS: *Experimental Film in Los Angeles, 1945-1980*

Edited by David E. James and Adam Hyman
John Libbey Publishing/Indiana University
Press, 2015

The idea haunting a good deal of David E. James and Adam Hyman's recent anthology *Alternative Projections: Experimental Film in Los Angeles, 1945-1980* involves the uneven attention paid to New York artists and intellectuals in the formation of the canon of experimental film, over and above the under-represented west coast. Reasons given for the disparity of attention include the overshadowing of artistic effort in motion pictures by the behemoth of the Hollywood machine, the dominance of European avant-garde traditions that especially influenced artists and intellectuals on the east coast, and even—in an excellent essay by Josh Guilford on the heliophobia expressed by Jonas Mekas and others on the east coast—the overabundance of sunshine in southern California. Much of the energy of this volume fixates in one way or another on bicoastal rivalries, making an argument for the need to reevaluate the important contributions of west coast artists and to adjust the canon of experimental cinema accordingly.

Whether the reader of the volume agrees with such arguments, James, Hyman, and their illustrious roster of collaborators go a long way toward making the case. All biases aside, *Alternative Projections* provides a useful

corollary and often a corrective to what has become a somewhat unilateral approach to experimental cinema in the period taken up here. At its very best moments—and there are many—it illuminates (with that California sunshine) what has been obscured by New York's shadow and offers insight into alternative candidates for inclusion in the canon of America's experimental artists, many of whom were working across media and across the boundaries of high and low art during the post-war period through the 1970s.

In fact, the porosity of those boundaries informs many of the scholarly contributions, including Matt Reynolds' essay on artist Ed Ruscha in which he addresses the paracinematic elements of Ruscha's photo books, especially *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1967), arguing that Ruscha's work "provide[s] examples of using fine arts practices to create a more radical rethinking of the cinematic medium" (191). Likewise, the divide between commercial and artistic interests is challenged in Julie Turnock's magisterial essay on the commerce (literally, too) between experimental artists and the commercial mainstream directors of Hollywood blockbusters like *Star Wars* (1977). She

posits that art and commerce at this moment enter into a useful symbiotic relationship, such that "experimental filmmakers, both directly as labor and indirectly as inspiration, *taught* popular filmmakers...strategies for organizing and mobilizing the elaborately designed composite *mise-en-scène*," primarily through their labor on the optical line of these features. Moreover, according to Turnock and supported through her meticulous research and first hand interviews with the artists, the influence ran both ways: "these filmmakers took skills and inspiration from their day jobs back to their own work" (228).

Other essays put more focus on directly disparaging the influence of New York and European art traditions in the formation of the experimental film canon. For instance, Juan Carlos Kase's essay on Roberta Friedman and Grahame Weinbren's collaborative work posits that their films have not seen greater attention because they do not fit into the dominant mold for experimental film, "Structural Film," a certain kind of experimental film identified in the writings of P. Adams Sitney around 1969 that emphasizes a formalist approach and, according to Kase, "isomorphic technical similarities, including a fixed camera position, the flicker effect, and loop printing" (253). Kase passionately argues that we must "diversify the historical record in order to recognize greater material detail and a wider range of under-recognized, under-historicized films that do not satisfy the basic categories presented by [Sitney]" (253).

Like Kase, several of the scholarly contributions bring to our attention works or artists that have fallen by the wayside for one reason or another. Ken Eisenstein's research on John Vicario's film *Shoppers Market* (1963), which I hope will inspire current and future film scholars with his detective-like diligence in uncovering the salient details both of the film's production and its importance for film history, stands out in this category. So does Jesse Lerner's effort to bring understanding to the art practice Chicano arts group Asco, an effort made difficult by the scarcity of remaining primary sources of their work because they tended to destroy it after the fact. Their research enriches our understanding of the history of experimental film production from new angles.

Further, as part of its commitment to the breadth of experimental film culture in L.A. during this period, the volume includes essays that examine aspects of the L.A. Rebellion, feminist and queer films and filmmaking, and Chicano and Asian-American experimental productions, with many of these profiting from UCLA's Ethno-Communications program (established in 1970 to encourage and provide

institutional support for non-mainstream people and cinema). In that the anthology provides in-depth discussions of the contexts such as this program, it helps to account for the rich diversity of contributions to experimental fare during this period as well.

Several other important sections in the book complement these uniformly well-written and researched articles in the scholarly section. First of these is a foreword by Adam Hyman, explaining the scope of the Alternative Projections project, of which this volume is one part. It details the provenance of the project and includes information about the screening series that accompanied the editors' efforts from the beginning. A remarkable amount of labor (and love) went into both undertakings, and a website (<http://alternativeprojections.com/>) offers a great resource (including newly recorded oral histories with the artists) for more information about the films and filmmakers who have passed through L.A. from the 1940s forward. The detailed introduction by David E. James elaborates further on this information and makes the initial argument about the importance of the works the collection examines. Next, a section that could benefit from more editorial guidance as well as inclusivity proffers primary source writings by key players in the L.A. experimental film scene. Though a bit limited in its scope, it does offer some food for thought about the institutions and the influences felt during this period. Finally, in the last section of the book, the editors have included the program notes for the screenings that were part of the larger Alternative Projections project. These especially are wonderful insights into how the programmers envision the role of experimental cinema as it continues to make an impact in L.A.

SARAH KELLER