

A geography of resistance: Locating US underground film and TV cultures

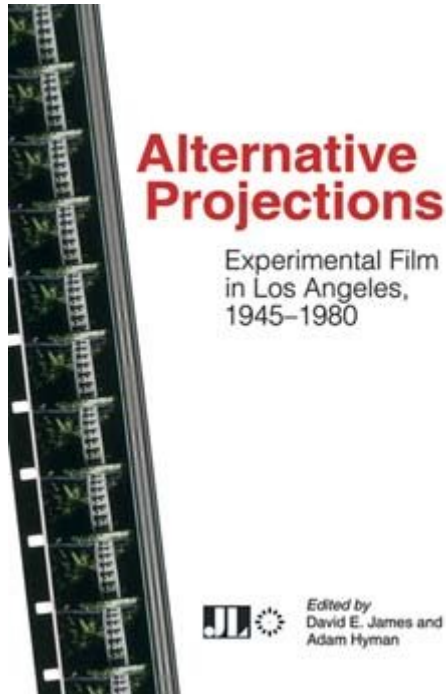
NECSUS 5 (2), Autumn 2016: 247–253

URL: <https://necsus-ejms.org/a-geography-of-resistance-locating-us-underground-film-and-tv-cultures>

Keywords: alternative, book review, culture, experimental, film, Los Angeles, television

The latest collection from David E. James[1] and Adam Hyman (filmmaker and former executive director of the Los Angeles Filmforum) offers a historical and critical representation of the emergence and organisation of the US West Coast postwar experimental cinema scene. The book, titled *Alternative Projections: Experimental Film in Los Angeles, 1945-1980* (New Barnet: John Libbey Publishing, 2015),[2] capitalises on a symposium and a film exhibition that took place between winter 2010 and spring 2012 and offered a multifaceted exploration of film and video created outside the Hollywood and independent narrative spheres. The book's structure thus follows an intertwined path, alternating between a brand new ensemble of scholarly works and some of the most relevant essays and interviews by and with the filmmakers, film critics, programmers, exhibitors, and curators who shaped that 'marginal cinema' scene.

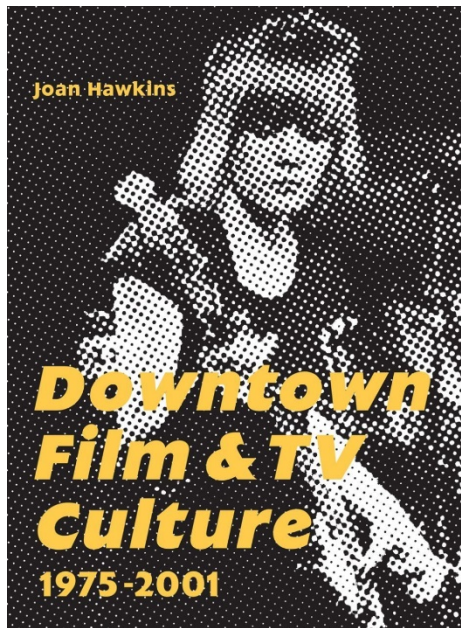
Taking the baton from James and Hyman, Joan Hawkins looks towards the East Coast, presenting and revisiting the New York Underground scene in her collection *Downtown Film and TV Culture 1975-2001* (Bristol: Intellect, 2015). Here, the late twentieth-century avant-garde is excavated and exposed in a way that, to some extent, recalls the *Alternative Projections* project. Indeed, this book was also initiated at a specific event: The Thirteenth Annual Onion City Experimental Film Festival, which took place on 14 September 2001 in Chicago, three days after 9/11. *Downtown Film and TV Culture 1975-2001* also alternates and mixes original scholarly works with interviews and reprinted articles from scholars, filmmakers, and producers. However, it does so in a more dynamic way, offering a freer structure than James and Hyman's rather stiff collection.



Both books point to a crucial and canonical assumption at the core of amateur and experimental cinema studies: the divide between amateur and professionalism – a divide that serves as the corner stone of Patricia Zimmermann’s well-known social history of amateur cinema.[3] Not surprisingly then, Maya Deren’s 1959 short essay ‘Amateur versus Professional’ opens the *Alternative Projections* reprint section. The way Deren reframes ‘the radical importance’ of any practice of cinema that is inassimilable into the productive system of capital and its ideological force field’ (p. 4) arguably played a pivotal role in James and Hyman’s project. In the introduction, James correctly insists on the germinal action of Man Ray’s *Juliet* (1940), Maya Deren and Alexander Hammid’s *Meshes in the Afternoon* (1943), and, perhaps surprisingly, Orson Welles’ *Citizen Kane* (1940): they recapitulate the past season of the interwar film avant-gardes, inaugurate a mode of understanding film as a medium of independent self-expression – in terms of production as well as poetry – re-conceptualise the ‘private substance’ of the former amateur and home movie tradition, and anticipate the tropes of underground cinema.

These three films limned the spectrum of possible modes of production for the subsequent art of film in Los Angeles. This variable gear articulated the pull between Deren's 'amateur' and 'professional' practices; at one extreme, Welles' unprecedented auteurist control over the industrial studio, not matched until the doyens of the 1970s 'New Hollywood'; at the other, Man Ray's jeu d'esprit, made for pleasure and with recourse to only the most minimal domestic form of the cinematic apparatus; and between them, Deren's inauguration of an art cinema as a process of psychic self-realisation. (pp. 11-12)

Maya Deren's film and essay in particular attested to a mutated status for experimental practice[4] by shading a subverting light on its amateur origins. In fact, experimental film practice could express radical emancipatory possibilities against the industry, precisely for its 'amateurish' inability to valorise capital. Deren shot *Meshes in the Afternoon* in the city of Los Angeles, locating her experimental intervention at the centre of the Hollywood industrial culture. She became, according to James, the 'prototypical practice of resistance to it' (p. 12).



Miles and years far away, *Downtown Film and TV Culture 1975-2001* frames the New York Downtown art scene as 'perhaps the last historical movement that believed deeply that one could make a political difference simply by intervening in society's spectacle' (p. xix) (see, for example, the 1979 reprint-

ed article of J. Hoberman's 'No Wavelength: The Para-Punk Underground', which forms the book's second chapter; pp. 13-20). Punk Culture, and strong links with postmodern theories including Queer Theory (a major focus in the chapter by Chris Dumas), played a basic and structural role. As for *Meshes in the Afternoon* in the city of Los Angeles, New York had its seminal and breakthrough movie in Amos Poe and Ivan Kral's concert film *Blank Generation* (1975) – the very emergence of the moving image component of the Downtown scene (see Mark Benedetti's chapter, 'The Blank Generation and Punk/Downtown History', as well as Ivan and Cindy Kral's account on the birth of the film in their chapter 'Birth of the Blank Generation'). On the East Coast, in the words of Joan Hawkins, 'what draws Downtown cineastes and cinephiles of the late twentieth century together is a common urban sensibility, a shared commitment to formal and narrative experimentation, a view of the human body as a site of social and political struggle, an intense interest in radical identity politics, and a mistrust of institutionalized mechanism of wealth and power' (p. xii). Bette Gordon asserts, even more precisely, that 'it was relatively contained between the Lower Eastside, Tribeca, which was just sort of being born, and SoHo' (p. 135). Thus, spatiality patent-ly roots methods, approaches, and philosophy in these collections.

In 1943, soon after making *Meshes in the Afternoon*, Maya Deren moved to New York. As Josh Guilford demonstrates in his contribution to the *Alternative Projections* collection ('Against Transparency: Jonas Mekas, Vernon Zimmerman, and the West Coast Contribution to the New American Cinema'), the disparity between independent film production in New York and in Los Angeles assumed a meaningful, although controversial function in the shaping of the American avant-garde cinema. Spatiality, and even the geomorphology of the territory intersected issues of the so-called "privacy crisis" that took shape in American society at the end of the 1950s' (p. 103). Jonas Mekas contested – symptomatically, according to the author – that 'the sun in California must simply "[affect] one differently"', that "in this shadow-less sun all the proportions of life seem to have been bleached out", and that the same scenes shot in New York "would have acquired a certain sadness, a certain humanness"(p. 101). In Mekas' vision the inner and private sphere of the human existence – pivotal in the new course of experimental cinema inaugurated by Maya Deren – was deserving of other locations, and the West Coast could not provide them.

Leaving anecdotes aside, from a historiographical standpoint the research and curatorial efforts of James and Hyman demonstrate that geogra-

phy and micro-analysis of specific spatialities allow a deep, nuanced, and stratified exploration of the germination, evolution, and transformation of avant-garde cinema. This peculiar micro-history is not a local or a regional history, rather it is an attempt to develop what James has previously called a 'geocinematic hermeneutics' or 'the investigation of the way a given place is inflected or determined by the productive resources found there'.^[5] *Alternative Projections* expands, circumscribes, and pushes forward this excavation.

Even though there were downtown scenes on the West Coast – the movement encompassed New York, Chicago, Texas, Florida, Mexico – the 1970s had a particularly significant impact on New York City, as the city faced bankruptcy, a huge housing and illegal occupancy crisis (that deeply affected the city throughout the 1980s), and the plague of AIDS, which escalated in the mid-1980s. As Beth B (a well-known New York No Wave underground filmmaker) states in her interview included in the *Downtown Film and TV Culture 1975-2001* volume: '[t]he films of the late-70s and -80s reflect a time, a place, and an attitude in New York City' (p. 92). To confirm this intimate connection with spatiality, a peculiar cartographic image has been chosen to symbolically open the volume: a graphic depiction by Ward Shelley. Its title, 'Downtown Body', evokes the graphic transformation of the Downtown map into an organic system with fluxes circulation, viscera, and canals – arguably retracing the underground network. It represents, according to the artist, 'a portrait of New York's avant-garde cultural landscape' (p. xxxiv). Thus the organic and inner depths of spatiality – including its (psycho) pathologies – are even explicitly announced as the focus of Hawkins' edited collection. Organs mean corporeal afflictions and affects, contagion and mutations, the private side of existence (its 'inner' part), but they also mean infrastructures – technological systems, devices, and the techno-material 'substance' of the avant-garde. Thus the AIDS epidemic, and also Super-8, video technology, television, and public accessibility to cable(s) (crucially, see the chapters by Tony Conrad on Super-8, Terese Svoboda on TV network public access, and Laurel Westrup on the digital era). Contagion provoked isolation in the same way that connection and medium specificity contributed to the shaping of the avant-garde fringe: '[d]owntown filmmakers separated themselves from their contemporaries by medium', as Hawkins states in her introductory comments. (p. xvi). This geographically situated 'infrastructural pressure' highly influenced and moulded an urban

sensibility that indelibly and remarkably impacted the US and global art, music, and cinema history.

The genesis of *Alternative Projections* and *Downtown Film and TV Culture* shared a common struggle in the editorial process; this makes manifest the vivid and reactive resistance to the US avant-garde spirit today. For example, both collections had a very long gestation period. The *Alternative Projections* book, despite some ancillary funds, was made possible only by the generosity of its contributors and an independent British publisher – prior to this, a dozen US university presses rejected the project. The belatedness of this book's appearance, James confesses, 'and the fact that it could only find a publisher on the other side of the globe and in another continent, testifies to the resistance still faced by the kind of cinema with which it is concerned, especially in the city that was historically the medium's city'. He further explains 'the precariousness and marginality of all non-commodity film-making have always been extreme in Los Angeles, and are so especially now when forced to sail between the Scylla of what has become a monstrously inflated artworld, and the Charybdisian whirlpool of the corporate media industries' (p. 3).

As stated earlier, the Thirteenth Annual Onion City Experimental Film Festival – from which Hawkins' book took inspiration – took place shortly after the 9/11 attacks. An 'apocalyptic' note opens the book:

[t]his particular anthology owes a great deal to that Opening Night [...]. September 11 effectively brought [an earlier] project to a halt [...] The materials I had planned to view were covered in a thin sheet of dust [in a rented Manhattan apartment] and we did not know what – if anything – would be salvageable. And it was no longer clear what contemporary cultural attitudes would be in the wake of the attack. (p. xi)

The attack marked a definitive break and a real rupture in artistic production, a true physical break due to the real loss of work, but also a rupture occurred in the concept of 'avant-garde' itself. At this point in time a new epochal shift was taking shape and force. As Hawkins later states:

[s]o for me, 'Downtown' ends with what might later be called the 9/11 era. A time when 'shock and awe' took on a decidedly militaristic tone. (p.xxiii)

This follows her earlier definite opening comment that '[t]he avant-garde millennium had begun.' (p. xi)

Alternative Projections and *Downtown Film and TV Culture* reframe the cartography of marginal cinema in the United States, providing new ideas on the way we might think spatiality, microhistory, and geography in film and media history.

Andrea Mariani (University of Udine)

References

- James, D. *The most typical avant-garde: History and geography of minor cinemas in Los Angeles*. Berkeley-Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005.
- Tepperman, C. *Amateur cinema: The rise of North American moviemaking, 1923-1960*. Berkeley-Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2015.
- Zimmerman, P. *Reel families: A social history of amateur film*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995.

Notes

- [1] James' previous works include *The Most Typical Avant-garde: History and Geography of Minor Cinemas in Los Angeles*.
- [2] Printed and electronic book orders are available from Indiana University Press.
- [3] See Zimmerman 1995.
- [4] Charles Tepperman brilliantly insisted on the complex and nuanced dialectical swinging of the terms 'amateur' and 'experimental' in the preceding interwar period, in both East Coast and West Coast areas. See Tepperman 2015.
- [5] James 2005, p. 18.