



Review: Jack Sargeant (2008)  
*Deathtripping: The Extreme Underground*  
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The first American edition of Jack Sargeant's *Deathtripping* more than a decade after its first UK edition allows us to take a new look at the phenomenon of the American-based 'Cinema of Transgression' movement of the late 70s and the 80s, a term coined by the main coordinator, Nick Zedd, of a post-punk group of filmmakers from New York's East Village. Sargeant's account is divided into three sections: in chapter one he gives an introduction looking at the origins and influences on the Cinema of Transgression, gives a description of the earlier Punk/New Wave Cinema of Beth and Scott B and gives an overall introduction to the movement as a whole and its emergence as well as its difference from other avant-garde or underground movements in film. The main body of the book is a look at the individual filmmakers and long interviews with them (these include Zedd, Richard Kern, Tommy Turner, David Wojnarowicz, Tessa Hughes-Freeman, Cassandra Stark and others) as

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well as a more recent wave of filmmakers working in the same vein, for example Jeri Cain Rossi and Todd Phillips. A concluding section speaks of more recent work by these filmmakers, looks at their growing recognition outside the East Village post-punk scene by more established art institutions and their legacy and influence through the establishment of Underground Film Festivals. Finally there is an appendix with three film scripts by Zedd, Turner and Wojnarowicz and by Kern.

Many questions immediately arise after a viewing of some of the films by these filmmakers<sup>1</sup> - was this really a new and significant stage in Underground Cinema history? What is the exact meaning of the term 'transgressive' in relation to the works by these filmmakers and what validity is there in using this term for these films? Was their aim to shock an authentically Dadaist impulse or did they merely reflect the exploitation ethos with a theory of transgression tacked on as an afterthought? What were the material bases to this movement? What were the fissures and contradictions in the 'movement'? Did they expand the possibilities of cinema (as their idea of Expanded Cinema implied) or did they at times unwittingly reproduce reactionary trends in Reagan's America which they aimed to combat? Did punk (or post-punk) cinema really "specifically valorise the radical democratic and egalitarian aspects of popular culture: amateurism, conviviality, improvisation, illegitimacy, profanity, transgression and collectivity" (Reekie 2007, 187)?<sup>2</sup> The answer Sargeant gives to these questions is generally one that accentuates the positive side of the movement although the general tone is not simply hagiographic. A real effort is made to explicate the thought processes and ideas that belonged to this group of filmmakers. The interviews manage to give a broad picture of the ambience, the ideas and the individual styles of the various filmmakers and to locate them historically. Four decades ago it was another historian of Underground Cinema, Parker Tyler, who made a critique of Underground film criticism as all too-often consisting of "more or less flattering bouquets extended to a big round of in-under filmmakers" going on to add that "Underground Film criticism may sound persuasive and to the point till one actually witnesses the creative work it pretends to interpret; an appalling gap then appears

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<sup>1</sup> Some of these films can be viewed on the web at <[www.ubu.com/film/transgression.html](http://www.ubu.com/film/transgression.html)>.

<sup>2</sup> An opposing viewpoint was offered by Simon Taylor who in his review of *Deathtripping* argues that "Some of the worst aspects of the punk aesthetic are emphasized in the Cinema of Transgression: the aestheticized violence and puerile humor, the racism and sexism, the fascination with Nazi regalia and the radical chic of serial killers." (Taylor 1996)

between the object in view and the description itself. By and large, Underground Film criticism is an occupation to be termed blurbing" (Tyler 1974, 217). But one does not feel that this critique is wholly applicable to Sargeant's work. He has managed to give the fullest possible account of the Cinema of Transgression movement that presently exists and gives very precise descriptions of many of the films which by now may be unavailable for public viewing.<sup>3</sup>

Sargeant begins his account of the Cinema of Transgression by situating this movement within a history of cinematic transgression the key exponents of which, for Sargeant, were Jack Smith, Ken Jacobs, Andy Warhol, the Kuchar twins and John Waters. This constellation of filmmakers does point to a rather exclusively American-centred view of underground cinema and although a discussion of what constitutes the idea of Underground is rather outside the scope of the book it is indeed rather rare to find any history of the Underground being anything but a history of the Anglo-Saxon Underground - what is all too often missing is any sense of Underground as a global phenomenon. Some of the 'transgressive' filmmakers might mention Dadaism and Parker Tyler in his list of Underground Classics may make reference to French, Soviet or German classics of the 20s and 30s (1974, 233-238), yet surely any concept of Underground must have some more universal connotations or must we see Underground as a movement in film that has arisen within the confines of American cinema with ties mainly to subcultures like Beat and Punk? If the term Underground itself originated from the subculture of European resistance during World War Two (Reekie, 139) then couldn't one see a kind of Underground at work in strongly transgressive films made under authoritarian regimes - what would the inclusion of films like *Strange Journey (El Extraño Viaje)*, Fernando Fernan-Gomez, 1964) or *A Bad Joke (Skvernij anekdot)*, Aleksandr Alov and Vladimir Naumov, 1966) mean for a more global idea of Underground or transgressive cinema? Perhaps more appropriately, where would the more explicitly Underground films such as those by the

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<sup>3</sup> Some of the texts from the other contributors to the book- (who include Stephanie Watson, Jeri Cain Rossi, Duane Davis and Jack Stevenson) detract at times from the unity of this approach that Sargeant manages to achieve and one or two (most notably, Duane Davis's sections on Joe Coleman and Lydia Lunch) lapse into fanzine-speak.

late Soviet necro-realists fit into schemas of a transgressive underground made by filmmakers completely independent of any official film-making authorities?<sup>4</sup>

Sargeant begins his account of the central figures of transgressive cinema with the work of Beth and Scott B. He sees them as being the immediate precursors to the Cinema of Transgression and argues that their work does not fully belong to this movement owing to its more directly political stance - for Sargeant they belong to the New Wave/New Cinema movement and directors alongside directors like Amos Poe and Vivienne Dick who were part of the early Punk movement (the Cinema of Transgression being situated in a No Wave/ post-punk ethos). However, it is also clear from the interviews published in this work that the movement's protagonists can be said to have taken widely differing approaches and that there were significant fissures within the movement: if the self-appointed leader, Nick Zedd (author of the original manifesto of the Cinema of Transgression under the pseudonym of Orion Jeriko) speaks of two waves within the movement, other filmmakers in the 'movement' would point to more definite points of conflict over approaches and a clear parting of the ways.<sup>5</sup>

A number of themes come through in both the interviews carried out by Sargeant and in his introductory articles which suggest that some aesthetic and even formal traits are shared by the various filmmakers belonging to this post-punk wave. Stacy Thompson, in his look at punk cinema from a materialist perspective, states "the history of punk is the history of the interplay between (aesthetics and economics) which find expression in and through one another" (Thompson in Rombes 2005, 22) and the very 'D. I.Y.' nature of punk (or post-punk cinema) was, of course, made possible through technical innovations (the super 8 with synched sound) and the specifics of the New York scene is amply described as

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<sup>4</sup> It is curious, though, to note that American Underground as a movement was full of first and second immigrants-in its early history one may speak of the influence of Jonas Mekas, Oskar Fischinger, Hans Richter and others and even the Cinema of Transgression is replete with examples like Cassandra Stark, Tessa Hughes-Freeland and Ela Troyano.

<sup>5</sup> Cassandra Stark Mele is the most critical voice here. She sees the Cinema of Transgression as initially involving "an active resistance against capitalistic uses of film" with a large female presence in the movement. But the initial moment was distorted by "certain egos (who) seized opportunities to dominate, by the usual means of manipulation and feigning appearances as being the biggest, meanest, baddest, loudest; the usual infant perversions.... The biggest mouths are definitely absent from all the various social struggles going on ... I guess they must have transgressed themselves so far that they are no longer concerned with fighting injustice and oppression. They want to project themselves as rebels, they turned out to be pimps!" (Cassandra Stark quoted in Sargeant 2008, 202-3). Her criticism later specifically is directed at Kern, Zedd and Lunch and for Stark Mele "the imagery pertaining to violence and sexuality was used in damning ways, to oppress and titillate and entertain the sick oppressors" (Cassandra Stark quoted in Sargeant 2008, 210).

being the fundamental backdrop of this transgressive cinema. Much is made of the description of the actual physical environment in which this movement played itself out (fundamentally the East Village in Manhattan but equally other areas such as the warehouse district in Chicago and SOMA district of San Francisco which would be important in the development of this new form of Underground film- these were all depressed areas where rents would be cheap and the protagonists of the movement could live in a state of 'independent poverty' (Hawkins in Jancovich et al 2003, 224). The interviews printed in Sargeant's book give accounts of the more significant clubs and a lively and convincing description of the scene in which the films of this movement were made and shown. The very material limitations faced by the protagonists would often lead to new aesthetic solutions being brought into play. The idea of 'found footage' became an absolutely central notion for many of the filmmakers discussed in this book as well as their dependence on the super 8. Their links with the No Wave punk movement as a whole also would influence their work as being very much dependent on the idea of film as performance. If the inspiration is Dadaism, some of the practical solutions to their material constraints are surprisingly reminiscent of early Soviet *agitki* and the use of found footage echoes that of Esfir Shub six decades earlier.<sup>6</sup>

As well as the technical and material aspects of the 'Extreme Underground' of transgressive cinema (of course, the earlier Underground of the sixties was also a response to new technology in the guise of the 16mm film), the move from camp to punk was the thematic disjuncture that separated the Underground Cinema of the 60s (Jack Smith, Ken Jacobs, the Kuchar brothers) with that of the Cinema of Transgression. For Hoberman and Rosenbaum "while the films of the sixties underground were often displaced orgies, those of the para-punks were shot through with fantasies of punishment and revenge" (Hoberman and Rosenbaum 1991, 283).<sup>7</sup> For Sargeant the transitional figure is John Waters for it was Waters' seventies movies which "pushed the personal vision of the underground

<sup>6</sup> The 'transgressive' use would later be replicated in the late Soviet work of the Aleinikov brothers and their parallel cinema (the first authentically independent and underground cinema movement in the Soviet Union along with the Necro Realists led by Evgeny Iufit mentioned above).

<sup>7</sup> Beth B in her interview with Sargeant explicitly states this point – for her, films of the earlier Underground and, in particular, those by the Kuchar brothers "had itself very much more in camp... I was more attracted to a certain reality of the streets and of the underbelly of society, and so ... the punk aesthetic fitted perfectly with that because it was all that alienation and self-destruction ... which was very much what that time was about" (Beth B quoted in Sargeant 2008, 25). Beth B saw her filmmaking as an explicit rejection of structuralist/formalist filmmaking and as an attempt to take a more narrative approach than had previous underground filmmakers.

into a zone in which it was deliberately confrontational" (Sargeant 2008, 13). Moreover the intervening seventies was also the period of the explosion of the exploitation or Grindhouse phenomena which may also be said to have had its influence on the style and 'perversity' of the Cinema of Transgression. The specific thematics of this cinema could also be read as a response to the times in which the movement was born: Sargeant mentions Wojnarowicz's statement that the Cinema of Transgression was a socio-political response to the Reagan era. Wojnarowicz argues that transgressive cinema attempted to push at the barriers and boundaries that were being made more and more rigid during the Reagan era's family values, homophobia and racism.<sup>8</sup> The economic downturn and the advent of the second Cold War also certainly appear to explain some of the more apocalyptic tones of these films as compared to the films of the earlier Underground. The No Future attitude of punk and the emphasis on evil and violence in many of the films seem to be very much of their time but some exponents of this transgressive cinema were still making a fundamentally Baudelairean cinema championed by Mekas or what P Adams Sitney calls a 'mythopoeic cinema' (Adams Sitney 2002, 328). One can see this in some of the work by Hughes-Freeland and Cassandra Stark.

The link between Underground film movements and a specific sub-culture are equally important<sup>9</sup> and make it difficult to speak of these 'movements' as movements within cinematic history in the same vein as French or Czech New Wave or Italian Neo-Realism. This point is extremely well brought out within Sargeant's account: while a study of, say, French New Wave may not require an intensive knowledge of the 'scene' within which this cinema is produced, the study of Underground Cinema would be pointless without it. This, of course, may appear (and often is) a weakness for any general recognition of Underground Cinema as a subject fit for scholarly study.<sup>10</sup> Equally the centrality of the

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<sup>8</sup> Wojnarowicz (quoted in Sargeant 2008, 36) states that "They began to push everything they could to see how far they could go before they exploded it, or it exploded them".

<sup>9</sup> This was as true of the early Underground of the sixties as it was of the extreme Underground of the eighties. As Reekie states "Underground Cinema first developed around the late 1950s as a component of the emergent counter-culture; a heretical and mercurial combination of experimental film, amateur cine culture, pop, beat, radical agit prop and anti-art. The shift from experimental film to Underground was a gradual and disparate process; it was the surfacing of a subculture" (Reekie 2007, 140).

<sup>10</sup> The Cinema of Transgression can not be said to have brought any aesthetic or formal breakthroughs to cinema itself as such – as noted above the extensive use of found footage was a feature of Soviet montage cinema. Tessa Hughes-Freeland's notion of Expanded Cinema is one of

concept of 'transgression' as cement for a movement meant little more than that while some films were wonderful examples of an exploration in the idea of the grotesque, at worst some of these films were "incompetent adolescent pretension" (Reekie 2007, 190). Some of these films were poignant critiques of society's surrounding violence and explorations of power and domination but the transformative element in the early work sometimes "got swept away by something mean and irresponsible... the imagery pertaining to violence and sexuality was used in damning ways" (Cassandra Stark quoted in Sargeant 2008, 210).

The lauded egalitarian ethos of punk, the attempt to break down the barriers between life and art, the importance of performance (and it is central to note here that often these films were not made as films as such but as components of performance art)<sup>11</sup> didn't necessarily result in any real transformative project but in some ways pushed the boundaries. Various aspects of the expansion of the US underground such as video distribution and the development of underground film festivals led to a greater expansion of film production and even, temporarily, a democratisation of it and perhaps it is here, rather than by any strictly cinematic criteria, that one may judge the contribution of this movement to cinematic history.

The strengths of Sargeant's account are that he manages to give an account of a period and a movement, it could also be said to give a convincing account of the development of a subculture in its historical moment, an account which doesn't neglect the question of the place of this movement within cinematic history. If many wider aspects of the historical and global links are not drawn out this hardly belongs to the scope of this book – this book is a fitting account of a single movement (and not one without influence) within the wider history of Underground or alternative cinema and it allows many of the main figures of this movement to speak for themselves filling in many of the details of the trajectory of this movement, its genealogy and its legacy and gives some (although rather superficial) philosophical grounding for the transgressive ethos citing the works of

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the few that comes closest to actually expanding the notion of cinema itself (Hughes-Freeland quoted in Sargeant 2008, 179).

<sup>11</sup> As Hughes-Freeland states "a lot of people weren't finishing films necessarily to have them as objects- there was lots of use of films combined with performance and those very performers would then act in the films in turn. But the distinctions, the boundaries, weren't so clear" (Hughes-Freeland quoted in Sargeant 2008, 179).

Nietzsche, Foucault and Bataille. It is not an academic or dispassionate account but neither does it lapse into hagiography or the fanzine histrionics of some writing associated with cult films and film movements. A wider more global history of Underground or Alternative or transgressive cinema still waits to be written but this volume will be an excellent source text for a small but not entirely negligible part of this history.

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