

The Exploding Eye: A Re-visionary History of 1960s American Experimental Cinema

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By Steve Anderson

Wheeler Winston Dixon's goal in *The Exploding Eye: A Revisionary History of 1960s American Experimental Cinema* is a noble one. In a brief (barely five-page) introduction, Dixon outlines his desire for a "work of recovery and regeneration" which will call attention to "those filmmakers whose works have escaped into the phantom zone of the absent signifier." Himself an experimental filmmaker, critic, and first-hand participant in the New York alternative film scene of the 1960s, Dixon seems like a logical person to undertake such a revision, to challenge existing canons and construct a new history which hews close to the intentions, words, and films of the innumerable unsung artists of this extraordinarily fertile period in experimental cinema. Unfortunately, while Dixon's book may serve as a useful handbook on selected filmmakers who have slipped through the cracks of history, it fails to address any of the most compelling questions about how and why such cracks and canons are formed and ultimately does not live up to either its historical promise or revisionist aspirations.

The book is structured as a series of encyclopedia-style entries ranging from one sentence to several pages on some 150 filmmakers, arranged alphabetically by the artist's last name. The entries are largely cut-and-pasted from a variety of sources, including reviews, interviews (conducted by Dixon himself), and, most frequently, descriptions from the Canyon Cinema and Filmmakers' Co-op catalogs. In his aversion to imposing an "external ideological grid" (2), Dixon produces a disjunctive and unsatisfying kind of history which remains as idiosyncratic and incomplete as any previous work while lacking any sense of context or historical interpretation. He explains this as a desire to avoid creating an "artificially unified narrative" (4), choosing instead an artificially fragmented one. In spite of its central role in some of the greatest works of experimental film (e.g., Hollis Frampton's *Zorn's Lemma*, Su Friedrich's *Sink or Swim*), the alphabet simply does not provide an effective structural framework for a work of history, particularly one which proposes a historical intervention. After Foucault and Hayden White, Dixon's belief that it is possible to avoid ideology, authorial presence, and narrative in a work of history seems anachronistic and naive.

The most consistently interesting parts of the book are the excerpts from interviews with filmmakers conducted by the author in the late 1960s. Dixon also interestingly draws attention to numerous individuals who are not known primarily as filmmakers--or experimental filmmakers--including, for example, Greg Sharits, whose programming work at the Filmmakers' Cinematheque was largely overshadowed by the films of his brother, Paul Sharits. However, within the same chapter, Dixon entirely neglects Adolfo Mekas in favor of his more famous brother, Jonas. Perhaps most disappointingly, Dixon's attempt to write women artists back into the history of experimental film is inconsistent almost to the point of irresponsibility. While he includes brief but useful entries for filmmakers such as Madeline Anderson and Sara Kathryn Arledge, the critically and historically neglected Chick Strand, who, in addition to her prolific film work throughout the 1960s, participated in the founding of Canyon Cinema, is entirely absent from Dixon's book.

Apart from including his own historically neglected film work in the book, Dixon seems to think that it is not only possible but desirable to write a history that is free

of authorial presence and commentary. But, as his book and the above examples illustrate, history can never be objective; authorship is not omniscient. It is unfortunate that Dixon's "re-visioning" refuses to engage directly with any of the most important histories and revisions of American experimental cinema of the past three decades, including P. Adams Sitney's *Visionary Film*, David James' *Allegories of Cinema* (which is not even mentioned in the bibliography), and James Peterson's *Dreams of Chaos, Visions of Order*. In spite of his claim to personal, experiential authority, the extensive use of catalog quotations makes it unclear whether or not Dixon has even seen many of the films in question. He claims this is his way of allowing the filmmakers to speak for themselves, but is this really the best--or most interesting--way to provide access to an unfamiliar body of film work? History writing is a contested terrain which is and ought to be subject to continual renegotiation and revision. While Dixon's book contributes some useful additions to a generally underresearched field within Film Studies, it shies away from the very things which make the history of the avant-garde worth thinking about.

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