

## ***Razzle Dazzle: The Lost World***

by Ken Jacobs

introduced by

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In the work of Ken Jacobs, ghosts of past cinematic eras come to life, celluloid and light achieve equal billing with narrative and the boundaries between re-enactment and historical document blur. In his recent masterwork of film-meets-digital transformation, *Razzle Dazzle: The Lost World*, a minute-long Edison short from 1903—a deliriously careening carnival ride, endlessly thrashing—crashes into the present day and lurches into three dimensions. Combined with archival sound and documentary imagery from the century past, *Razzle Dazzle* celebrates the potential of cinema while documenting and mourning the realities of history, exposing the at-times perverse confluences of entertainment, fear, excitement and violence inherent in the past century of image-making. [Steve Polta]

***Razzle Dazzle: The Lost World*** (2008) by Ken Jacobs; digital video, color, sound, 92 minutes, tape from the maker

“Once more into the breach, Ken Jacobs further explores the ground zero of cinematic representation with his feature-length *Razzle Dazzle: The Lost World*. [...] Jacobs’s video projection takes its evocative title and much of its imagery from a minute-long 1903 Edison actualité, which documented the circular whip-like amusement-park ride known as the Razzle Dazzle. Edison’s image spins in and out of grainy abstraction, accompanied by a combination of old-timey carnival music and solo-piano waltzes. Jacobs complicates the footage through stroboscopic cutting, invented close-ups, and some meticulous digital colorization. The effect is precise without being slick, as when the artist contrives to have the whole once-photographic image pivot and float away. Later, the picture plane will swell and throb, or take the form of a spinning cube.

“Despite such digital razzamatazz, Jacobs’s video is largely predicated on the rhythm of projected film. The same impulse can be found in Stan Brakhage’s late abstractions—but, unlike Brakhage, Jacobs is never ahistorical. He annotates the amusement-park footage with a series of 19th-century stereopticon images, with domestic scenes shifting to more spectacular photographs of mid-air leaps and crashing waves. The rapid oscillation of two slightly different points of view produces a shimmering frozen moment, while inducing a shallow 3D effect.

“Jacobs slices the image like a sausage, introduces new colors, creates floating vapors. As he focuses ever more closely on the original material, however, this excavation becomes a memento mori. Faces start to resemble skulls; Old Man Edison himself materializes, or rather his voice, talking about the ‘Great War.’ The stereopticons obligingly provide images of soldiers, battlefields, and Jesus hovering in the sky. Ultimately, these are compressed into a planet of skulls and bones, spinning mid-screen like a Buddhist mandala.

“In a sense, *Razzle Dazzle* is a continuous loop. The amusement park merges with the film machine; these long-vanished children are riding the celluloid ribbon through the projector. Despite its defined ending, the piece projects an eternal Now as the artist ponders the infinite possibilities that photography (and re-photography) afford to reconstitute the moment. *Razzle Dazzle* feels endless—not a criticism—because it is.” (J. Hoberman: “*Razzle Dazzle*: Digital Joyride,” *The Village Voice*. June 24, 2008. [www.villagevoice.com/2008-06-24/film/digital-joyride/](http://www.villagevoice.com/2008-06-24/film/digital-joyride/))

**Federico Windhausen** teaches film history at California College of the Arts. He writes about experimental film and video and Argentine cinema. His essay “Theories of Moving Pictures: Ken Jacobs after Hans Hofmann” will be published in the forthcoming anthology *Optic Antics: The Amazing Cinema of Ken Jacobs*.