

Cult Hero: Jeff Keen

Jack Sargeant

Jeff Keen has been collecting props from dumpsters and toy shops, spray-painting them, setting fire to them, and animating the results for forty years. His underground films pre-date Warhol, and his fans include some of the most notorious and legendary figures in the world of cinema, music and art. On the eve of Shoot Shoot Shoot, a retrospective/celebration of British underground and experimental film at the Tate Modern and Photographers Gallery, London, and a night of new work by Keen at the Brighton Cinematheque, Sleaze headed for the South Coast to gain an insight into this 78-year-old legend of British cinema.

Sitting in his small two-room flat in Brighton, surrounded by tin robots, plastic dolls, rubber monster toys, cheap fireworks, boxes of plastic soldiers, hundreds of children's guns, old B-movie posters, cameras and pieces of cameras, cans of spray paint, and pads of paper, is one of the most important filmmakers to ever spit forth his visions onto celluloid. A man for whom 'paintings are machines for creating emotions' and for whom film is a form of painting and a tool for visual collage. Forget the so-called greats of the silver screen, the true cinematic visionaries are elsewhere, hidden away, woefully neglected by the bulk of historians, working like alchemists with their old super 8 cameras, choking refrigerators full of nearly-out-of-date film stock, and bizarre Ed Wood-style props made from scrap or purchased in bulk from the one-pound-shop. Jeff Keen is one such figure, a true great of avant-garde, experimental, and underground film.

From his south coast base – a kind of artist's studio meets Bond villain's lair – Jeff Keen produces the kind of films that resonate with a cinematic beauty and madness that most can only dream of. In a career that has spanned some forty-odd years he has, almost single-handedly, pushed cinema into various uncharted realms of glorious derangement with his own one-man film company, Rayday Productions. Keen has explored the very limits of cinema: he is a pioneer of expanded multi-screen cinema, of cinema as performance, and of the thirty-second television-slot epic movie, as well as an experimenter in genres. Trying to describe a Jeff Keen movie is all but impossible, as no lesser figure than filmmaker, photographer and flaming creature, Jack Smith, found when he explained Keen's movie *Autumn Feast* thus: 'It rubs the very noses of our mannequins in our own mold and sends us spinning into the street undone and toothless.'

In Jeff Keen's films, explosive stop-frame animation battles with live-action sequences. Sometimes these battles become literal wars beyond the loose narratives of the film, as multiple and competing projections spread the film across the exhibition space, the walls of which are often plastered with massive, Jack Kirby-meets-hip-hop graphics, many of which have appeared (or will appear) within the movies. Subsequently the film expands not just from one projection to another but off the screens and into the very architectural space, into the geographical terrain, and, if Jeff has his way, into the very universe itself.

During screenings Jeff Keen frequently appears clad in a paint-splattered boiler suit complete with a dust mask, sometimes in a peaked cap and T-shirt emblazoned with a skull and crossbones, thus appearing as a cross between an inventor in a Roger Corman monster movie and some 2000AD-style science fiction superhero. Sometimes he walks between projectors, making sure they are working as planned; occasionally he may add to the event by performing alongside the films (often with his trusty guitar amp and echo effects). In some recent shows avant-garde musicians have accompanied the films, punctuating the rapidly strobing, flashing images with shards of feedback and de-tuned guitar noise.



The themes of Keen's films are nothing less than the complete history of civilization and culture; warfare, explosions, science, painting, and destruction. All brought into a unique perspective, where meaning, iconography, and even language become personalised – taking on their own significations and importance – creating an entire Keen world. His influences are cinema – not just one individual film or filmmaker but the actual experience he had of going to watch movies in his youth in the pre-multiplex era, when a night at the movies meant seeing cartoons, a newsreel, a support film, and a feature, and, on weekends, a double feature. Many of Keen's movies meld together this experience into one film, jumping between styles and rhythms to a dizzying visual crescendo. Moreover, Keen spends time labouring over additions to his films, and he has produced photo-novellas, strip adaptations, posters, and even specialized boxes to store the original prints in, the very mise-en-scène of the cinematic experience informing the production, screening, and dissemination of his films.

Another influence on Keen are fifties hardboiled men's magazines such as *Confidential* and *Man's Adventure*, their pseudo-torrid stories and graphic design creating a melodramatic style that Keen has adapted and made his own. But perhaps his primary influence is comics; their visual style – graphic, fast, and lurid – matches his own, with many of his recent films rarely lasting for more than five minutes, and with many works having wild video-manipulated colours saturating the screen. As Keen states, 'The great thing about comics, originally they did have that kind of, not exactly primitive quality, but they were outside the world of bourgeois art.' Similarly, the characters that populate his movies are the kind of figures who could have walked from the pages of classic seventies Marvel comics like *The Punisher* or *Ghost Rider*, with names such as Silverhead, Omozap, Dr Gaz, Baby Blatzo, the Soft Eliminator, the Breathless Investigator, and The Catwoman. Even the film titles resonate with comic book symbolism, containing puns or an onomatopoeic quality, with names such as *The Pink Auto* (1964/5), *Marvo Movie* (1967), *White Lite* (1968), *Meatdaze* (1968), *Raydayfilm* (1969), *Cineblatz* (1967), *Mad Love* (1972/78), *ARTWAR* (1993), *OMOZAP 3* (2002), *From Ocean to Omozap* (2002), and so on.

While in his early films noir and melodramatic narratives explode and twist back on themselves, characters transforming, moving literally from screen to screen through movies designed for two-screen multiple-projection – the emphasis on dressing up, costume, and the carnivalesque – later works see Keen as the solo action filmmaker par excellence, stripping the war genre back to its roots. In his *ARTWAR* series, animated toy soldiers battle and explode, paintings spin into life, the director marches over the Sussex Downs dragging flamingo paintings, toys melt, graphics spin, words erupt onto the screen, and imaginary heroes do battle – some films in the series only last thirty seconds. Why waste time? Promotional postcards for a Channel Four late-night broadcast of one segment of the series depict a loaf of bread punctured with nails, on which is stencilled the word 'BOM'.



"The Return of dr GAZ"

-1976 - 30 mins.
Std 8 mm.
colour

Keen's films have a destructive nature about them – ask Jeff what his interests are and inevitably he mentions war films and guns. As he states, 'the handgun is a beautiful machine. Of course it's deadly destructive. A machine for destroying. But you can see why people are attracted to it, because it condenses power. It fits in the hand beautifully. I always thought the handgun and the bike are the two most beautiful machines invented. The bike fits your bum and legs, the handgun fits – perfectly – the trigger finger.' Of course, the camera is not dissimilar from the gun: both fit in the hand, and both 'shoot'. Keen's films recognize that the destructive spirit is truly gleeful, and many of his recent movies culminate in images of destruction with props melting into bubbling gloop or crashing in flames. When he states that the ARTWAR project existed in part as a way in which to dispose of accumulated things, he is only partly joking. Unlike artists who are precious about their work, leaving it fixed, cold and dead, Keen regards his work as an ongoing exercise; when he put his old props into his greenhouse for storage and they began to attract dirt, dust, mould, and decay, Jeff did not luxuriate in the whiny self-pity of the under-funded artist (although that is exactly what he is) – instead he rejoiced in the fact that they crumbled, collapsed and had to be taken to the dump. After all, the dump is where he obtained most of the material for his props, and where he shot numerous films.

The dump in question is located on the outskirts of the city, next to the supposedly notorious Whitehawk Estate, a location that gave Jeff Keen one name for his acting ensemble in the sixties: The Desperadoes of Whitehawk Valley. Later he would use the Family Star Players, names that resounded with outside status – gangs and carneys, hoodlums and roustabouts.

The (very) loose-knit ensemble groups who worked with him throughout the sixties and seventies would appear in the films, and at performance events organized by Keen. His acclaimed film *Meatdaze*, produced in the late sixties, involved a performance based on 'themes from French paintings' and included 'a little picnic on the grass, so there was a bit of nudity, lamps all around like a movie set up, big monster sandwiches and so on. Jim Duke with a hacksaw cutting up things and melting them and putting them in water.'

Destruction and creation. An endless process.

Perhaps this fascination can be traced back to Jeff Keen's experiences in the Second World War where, as a soldier he was asked to fit Pratt and Whitney WASP 14 Valve aircraft engines – 'reject flying fortress engines' – into Sherman tanks. 'I was trained to fire guns and all that shit, nothing else, but we were experimenting with floating tanks for D-Day.' Supporting the war effort? Military research? Or creating a techno-monster hybrid? Even now, at the age of seventy-eight, Keen talks of projecting his movies onto running aircraft engines. Remembering the noise and 'four foot high flames' with the enthusiasm of a child, anxious to see something new and exciting. That many filmmakers a quarter of his age can only complain in faux existential ennui is evidence enough that we still need Jeff Keen, and his multi-screened, luminescent animations, fires, spray paint, and wild characters. Jeff Keen: the most important man in cinema. Period.

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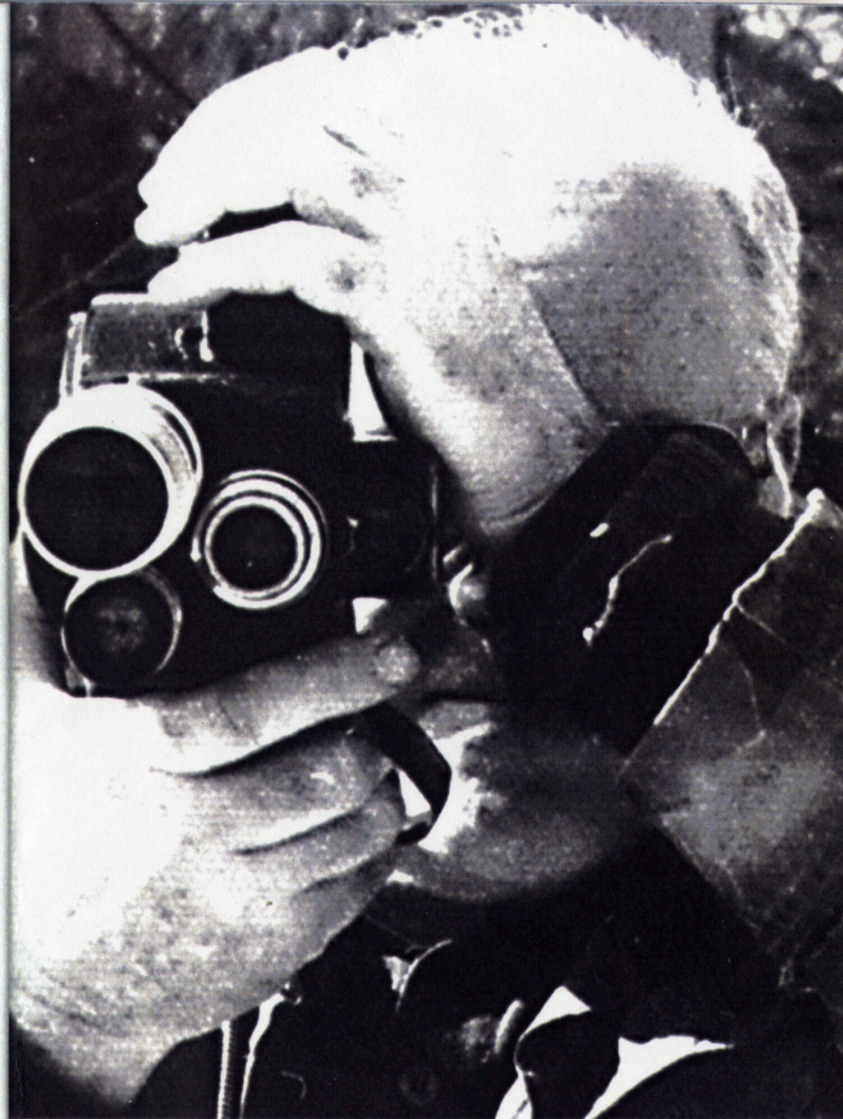


of an ordeal, and in the same year was approached by Tony Wogens of *Cine Camera* magazine. Tony liked Jeff's films *Wail* (1960) and *Like the Time is Now* (1961), and had them blown-up to 16mm for distribution through the amateur film circuit. The films made their way to London and to the National Film Theatre where the head projectionist set them up in the foyer. It was here that the influential critic Raymond Durgnat first saw them and became inspired to write about them for *Films and Filming* in 1965.

Although there was an amateur film circuit in Britain at that time there had been no real experimental film culture within Britain for some years (the last being the state-sponsored propaganda films made by, among others, Humphrey Jennings, during the War). Jeff Keen's work was highly unusual in the late 50s and early 60s (and, indeed, later, but for different reasons) and he was literally one of only a few people making films of this sort (others include Margaret Tait, John Latham and Bruce Lacey). Although he has no recollection of having seen any American experimental work at this time, Jeff's films do share some basic similarities with the early work of Ken Jacobs and Jack Smith in that they have friends perform and interpret other versions of themselves through costume and characters – in the case of Jeff Keen's films, characters created by the filmmaker. The friends in his films included Jas Duke, Tony Sinden, Tom Fowke, Steve Wynnard, Raymond Barker and Avril Hodges plus his wife, Jackie, and later his daughter, Stella. In 1964 Jeff made *The Pink Auto*, a twin-screen film, and an early example of what would later become known as 'expanded cinema'. Here, his friends play on the local tip, a place where Keen's interests in destruction and creation meet perfectly.

As the 60s moved on and the cultural shift saw more empowerment for a younger generation, Jeff Keen found support for his films in the swinging scene of London. He showed films in, amongst other places, the basement of Better Books on Charing Cross Road – a small, but key place to hear Concrete and New Poetry, and to see underground cinema. Inspired by the counter-culture scene in New York, the core group that gathered there, including Bob Cobbing who would later provide the soundtrack for Keen's *Marvo Movie* (1967), founded the London Film-makers' Co-op in October 1966. Involved in the proceedings, Jeff showed work in the Spontaneous Festival of Underground Film that soon followed at the Jeanette Cochrane Theatre off Southampton Row, London.

In 1967, Jeff Keen approached the Arts Council of Great Britain to ask for financial assistance with the production of prints. Although in doing so he was identifying his films as art and the Arts Council was yet to offer this kind of financial support. Instead, they directed him to the British Film Institute, who helped him with his first 16mm films, *Marvo Movie*, *White Lite* (1967), *Cineblatz* (1968) and *Meatdaze* (1968),





Jeff Keen

Jeff Keen was born in Trowbridge, Wiltshire in 1923. His father worked for the local landowner and the Keen family had no electricity or gas in the cottage where they lived. As a young man he worked in a branch of Sainsbury's and, in apparent preparation for the next part and, indeed, the rest of his life, took to drawing bombers. In 1942, he was called up by the army and sent to various locations to operate and experiment with aeroplane engines and tanks. He spent the last year of the War in Yarmouth, feeling isolated and helping with preparations for D-Day. It was only when a series of planes flew overhead that he and his friends realized the War was over. His time as a soldier, however, did not end there. Due to fears of the communists in Russia and the new Berlin, he was kept on for a further two years. Jeff Keen's later films and art draw heavily on war and military imagery.

Shortly after being finally dismissed in 1947, Keen moved to Acton, London and for a term studied art at a small college in Chelsea. He saw lots of surrealist and other modern abstract art during this period and remembers, in particular, the Art Brut of French painter, Jean Dubuffet. He then moved to live near relatives in Brighton and met Jackie Foulds, whom he would later marry, in 1956. She would star in nearly all his films in the 60s and 70s. Before this, the couple would go and see movies in London and in various local cinemas, sometimes several in one day. They liked Douglas Sirk and Bud Boetticher films and saw many of the B movies and Hollywood films of the time. Jackie was an art student, and by the late 50s Jeff was virtually running the film society at the college she attended. He chose and projected the films and also wrote the programme notes. He went through the historical classics and showed films by the auteurs, including Akira Kurosawa and Ingmar Bergman.

In 1959, and only a few years from 40, Keen started to make his own 8mm films. These helped maintain the film society and gave him a creative outlet while working for Brighton Parks and Gardens (where he was responsible for the laying of grass by the Brighton sea front). He worked with New York poet Piero Heliczer, who was living in Brighton at this time, to make *The Autumn Feast* in 1961. In 1962, he quit his job, finding the excessively long and cold winter that year too much

with contributions from their Experimental Film Fund. His other films, however, had no financial support and instead drew on inspiration, help from friends and whatever was at hand. In 1970, the NFT held the First International Underground Film Festival. Jeff and friends presented his *Rayday Film* (1968-70) using a variety of projectors and personal performance. *Rayday Film* took its name from the magazine, *Amazing Rayday*, which Jeff had been publishing in Brighton since 1962. Revealing his enduring love of comics, it includes graphics, poems and artwork and looked a little like a fanzine.

The underground culture that flourished in the 1960s changed with the arrival of the next decade. The London Film-maker's Co-op turned assertively away from figurative imagery and emotional engagement, even in fractured or experimental contexts, and instead focused almost exclusively on the formal qualities of film itself. While Jeff Keen's work was heavily concerned with issues of construction and projection, it did not shy away from visceral and forceful expressions of self, and of a range of mythic characters and themes. These manifestations reflected his interest in, and love of comics and of B movies which were no doubt further filtered through his experiences in the War and his appreciation of surrealist art.

Despite the difference between his films and those of others at this time, his work found support with screenings at the Co-op and inclusion in exhibitions such as 'Perspectives on Avant-Garde Film' at the Hayward Gallery in 1977. He made and showed his multi-screen 'Diary films' – all edited in-camera and containing multiple exposures – with music tape compilations of girl groups, jazz bands and film scores. The images drew on his family holiday experiences as well as the costume- and character-filled capers from the 60s and after. At this time he also made the longer, single-screen Arts Council funded films *White Dust* (1970-72) and *Mad Love* (1972-78). These demonstrated a fondness for popular film history and took conceptual approaches to experimenting with elements of narrative. The more overtly sexual elements to Keen's films developed in the 1970s too – around the same time as feminism – and were not always well received.

Twenty-five years into his career, the Arts Council made a documentary about Jeff Keen (included in this release) that was screened on the newly born Channel 4, in 1983. This gave him a chance to speak honestly and directly about his interests and his work. It became clear to those that didn't already know it that Keen was doing art for the long term and that his ideas and passions were by this point highly developed and most assuredly his own. This period marked a significant shift in Keen's style and, although his distinctive trademarks and references remained, other changes seemed to signal a new chapter, or even a new testament.

At this time we see the home movies and appearances from family and friends replaced with a highly controlled and expertly paced editing style. War references become more explicit and the imagery becomes more violent, both in terms of content and delivery. Keen himself becomes the sole performer and he otherwise uses paper props, image-layering and dynamic animated collage techniques (though not for the first time). After *The Dreams and Past Crimes of the Archduke* (1979-84), a sort of coda to his earlier stylistic phase, even the titles to his films become more abstract and, again, violent. Now we have *Blatzom* (1983-86), *B-B-B Bom and Lifestorm* (1990s), *Plasticator* (1990s), *Plazmatic Blatz* (1991) and *Kino Pulveriso* (1993).

Blatzom also offers the first hint towards Jeff Keen's highly personal and culminating series of works, *Artwar*: it's emblazoned on a knitted jacket some seven years before the word would become a Jeff Keen title in its own right. There are numerous versions of the *Artwar* film but the simply-titled *Artwar* was broadcast on Channel 4 in 1993 and, like many works from his 90s phase (when Keen was in his 70s), it was created on video tape. Visceral and abstract articulations of his memories of life as a veteran, works from the *Artwar* period are difficult to date precisely, but *Afterblatz 2* was made on a computer drawing animation kit in 2002, meaning that by then Jeff Keen had been making films in various forms for at least forty-three years. The *Artwar* series, it might be argued, sought at some level to express and encapsulate all of this time, and more besides.

Jeff Keen still lives in Brighton and has just turned 85. He has made well over fifty films and has generated an enormous collection of drawings, paintings, sculptures and poems. His films have been shown nationally and internationally and he has exhibited in an eclectic range of public and private spaces (from galleries and cinemas, to shops and beach-fronts, to television and DVD).

William Fowler, 2008
Curator of Artists' Moving Image, BFI National Archive

Flyweight Flicks

Raymond Durnat

Why take notes when you could take pictures? An 8mm camera is the ballpoint of the visual world. Soon (and the sooner the better) people will use camera-pens as casually as they jot memos today. Filmmakers will make 'rough-drafts' of their films as rapidly as painters dash off preliminary sketches. And the narrow gauge can take finished works of art.

First of the 8mm poets to operate in Britain is Brighton-based painter Jeff Keen, who may prove to have pioneered a new 'Brighton school'. At last Britain has its own avant-garde. Keen has been using 8mm since 1961. His films use 'pop'-art imagery and the casual spectator may at a first glance see in them all the themes that are fashionable among young painters: 'pixilated' American comics are intercut with motor-cyclists. Gagarin-rockets, monsters, jazz sessions, 'Pull My Daisy'-type goofing of glossy advertisements, and references to as extensive a range of writers as Mickey Spillane, Antonin Artaud and Piero Heliczer. But these motifs are galvanised by a new kind of movie sense. To take one example from a welter of innovations: The cameraman rides pillion on a motorbike which twists round and round another. The camera-eye follows the rider of the other machine, while tilting and tracking up and down from his head to his gauntlets and boots. The intricate weave of movements and counter-movements has a giddy excitement that recalls action-painting and justifies Keen's own manifesto: 'Cinema here needs the kind of jolt the great American exhibition gave to painting about four years ago...' Not that Keen rejects the past: Eisenstein, Cocteau, Buñuel and Kirsahoff are among his points of reference.

I've written unkind things about avant-garde preciosity and solemnity in the past. But behind Keen's visual dynamism, his gags and flip good humour, lies a spiritual resilience, a sense of direction, that lifts them altogether clear of the 'easy-fashionable' bracket. As Keen puts it: 'When words fail – use your teeth!' He cuts, not with scissors, but with a scalpel – a jet-propelled one! The pure visual rhythms even of his silent films have the spectator tapping his feet as if to music. Depending as they do on wit and movement rather than on photographic texture, they prove that mini-cinema can pack a good strong middleweight punch.

For me. Keen's *Like the Time is Now* (10 mins), *Wail* (8 mins), *Instant Cinema* (2 mins) stack up alongside little gems like McLaren's *Boogie Doodle* and Len Lye's *Color Box*. Let's hope some enlightened distributor of short films soon makes them available, on 8mm or 16mm.

Raymond Durnat, *Films and Filming*, February 1965

This piece accompanied an article by Anthony Wigen which advised readers on the use of 8mm and 16mm equipment.



Expanded Cinema

Jeff Keen

Concerned from the outset with extending film beyond its traditional narrative limits, it seemed a logical step for me to get beyond the frame, and explore the full graphic potential of the medium in the direction of non-linear movement and synthetic vision. Expanded cinema became the social art directed at, and involving, the audience, through visual and sound projections, often combined in violently disconnected and overlapping patterns.

This type of presentation reflected my early interest in the art of assemblage and its counter movement destruct-art (collage/de-collage), and in visual poetry.

RayDayFilm actually took its title from *Amazing RayDay*, an occasional poetry broadsheet which I first published in 1962. The same year saw the creation of *BLATZMAGAZINE*, further evidence of TotalArtWar and the debris of Earth One.

RayDayFilm was originally shown in disconnected sequences with an overlay of slide projections and accompanied by live-action variations on the screened performances. Now the 16mm material has been condensed into a twenty-minute film which forms the basis of a wide-screen collage.

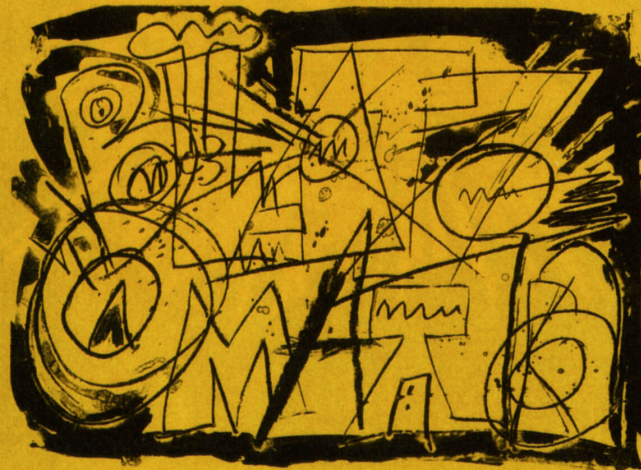
Since 1968, I have been making film-diaries quieter in tone and by their nature more subjective than the *BLATZART* films. Cut into 400 foot lengths and with separate titles, these films can be projected simultaneously or in sequence as an on-going story.

Strictly speaking the films are not true diaries. They do contain a lot of day-to-day shooting, but since two cameras were used, and the films exposed two or three times from camera to camera, whole sequences have been automatically re-edited and subjected to chance superimpositions and action overlap.

Over the years a *dramatis personae* has crystallised out of the film-making activity itself, expressive in part of the personalities of the non-actor performers and of certain Art/Life processes in contemporary culture.

These personages now suggest a comic strip of life, a theatre of the brain, and the creation of a secret cinema of tableaux, jokes, and mysteries, that hopefully will embrace within a fluid cinematic context both the emblem and the natural world.

Perspectives on British Avant-Garde Film, Hayward Gallery catalogue, ed. Rodney Wilson, Arts Council of Great Britain/Hayward Gallery, March-April 1977



Born to Kill: Mr Soft Eliminator

Tony Rayns

Jeff Keen pushes multiple tautologies to the point where they become synonymous with a not-easily-recognised simplicity. This effect is achieved by keeping his repertoire of images/props/settings/slogans/stencils/references as carefully circumscribed as his 'stock company' of characters. The profuse repetition has little to do with obsessions, sexual, thematic or otherwise, but seems rather designed to create a climate of defined expectation. It is this aura of predictability, of reliability, that gives the random factors in Keen's work their full force. Thus *The Pink Auto*, the most important precursor of Keen's 'films-as-evidence', documents four very similar events (countryside odysseys to a dump, where the rusting body of an abandoned car is painted pink) and arranged them both comparatively and sequentially: parts 1 and 2 on one screen side-by-side with parts 3 and 4 on the other, of Man Ray's *Les Mystères du Château de Dé* (1929): a wholly filmic play of repetitions and permutations whose mode of signification is at once 'absurd' and ambiguous, the tension between the two being the main focuses of interest. The same tension exists when Dr Gaz (Jeff Keen) sprays a surface white to create a screen on which he projects an image of Motler (Jim Duke) stencil-spraying the slogan 'RUB OUT THE WORD' on a wall.

Keen is indebted to the Surrealist tradition for many of his central concerns: his passion for instability, his sense of *le merveilleux*, his fondness for analogies and puns, his preference for 'lowbrow' art over aestheticism of any kind, his dedication to collage and *le hazard objectif*. But this 'continental' facet of his work – virtually unique in this country – co-exists with various typically English characteristics, which betray other roots. The tacky glamour/True Beauty of his *Family Star* productions is at least as close to the end of Brighton pier as it is to Hollywood B-movies. His performance as Dr Gaz in *RayDayFilm* evokes the archetype of the English artisan, unperturbably stencilling graffiti onto the screens, erasing them with silver spray guns, cobbling projectors and other bits of apparatus into spasmodic life, shambling around in

overalls. His 'experimental' series *24 Films* has an almost classical rigour and methodicalness that belies its freneticism. The heroic absurdity and adult infantilism that are the mainsprings of his comedy draw on a long tradition of post-Victorian humour: not the 'innocent' vulgarity of music hall, but the anarchicness of *The Goons* and the self-lacerating ironies of the 30s clowns, complete with their undertow of melancholia. Most typically English of all is Keen's isolation as an independent film-maker.

Reprinted from AFTERIMAGE, Summer 1976.

