

Review of Ben Cobb, *Anarchy and Alchemy:
The Films of Alejandro Jodorowsky*
Creation Books, 2007, 288 pp.

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The films of Chilean-born director Alejandro Jodorowsky have confronted and confounded critics for years, finding purchase amongst cult film aficionados appreciative of their heady blend of surrealism, esoteric mysticism, and savage violence. A long-running rights dispute prevented two of his most famous works, *El Topo* (1970) and *The Holy Mountain* (1972), from officially reaching contemporary audiences until 2007, having previously only been available as bootleg videos. Although very much a product of their time, these films stand as rich cross-pollinations between the counterculture and the avant-garde, well worthy of consideration alongside the work of peers as far-ranging as Luis Buñuel, Federico Fellini, Jean-Luc Godard, Raúl Ruiz, and Glauber Rocha. With Jodorowsky now primed for a belated rediscovery by the academy, Creation Books has released Ben Cobb's *Anarchy and Alchemy: The Films of Alejandro Jodorowsky*, the first English-language book devoted to his directorial career.¹ This fascinating but flawed volume provides a valuable (if incomplete) attempt to explore the talents and idiosyncrasies of a notoriously indefinable filmmaker.

The book's first three chapters discuss Jodorowsky's youth, his background in theatre and mime, the influence of surrealism, and his founding role in the "Panic Movement" alongside Fernando Arrabal and Roland Topor. Chapter 3 also presents a lengthy synopsis of Thomas Mann's novella *The Transposed Heads*, a close "shot-by-shot" description of Jodorowsky's 1957 short *La Cravate* (based on Mann's story), and the full text of his "Sacramental Melodrama" (a Panic happening from 1965).² Each of the subsequent seven chapters examines one of his feature film projects (including his unfilmed *Dune* adaptation), often fleshed out by similar synopses and reprinted source texts. Many of these supplementary texts are welcome inclusions in their respective chapters, providing considerable insight into Jodorowsky's creative

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process—such as a synopsis of René Daumal’s unfinished novel *Mount Analogue* (1952), one of the key inspirations for *The Holy Mountain*, or Jodorowsky’s own explanation of the aborted *Dune* production.³ While the shot-by-shot descriptions of each film are very useful for rarely seen works like *Tusk* (1980) and *The Rainbow Thief* (1990), they seem unnecessary for the films that are now widely available.⁴ Cobb interjects bits of analysis into these descriptions like a running commentary, but his own contributions are frequently out of balance with the sheer length and detail of the plot synopses. As a result, certain chapters feel more cohesive and organic than others; for example, in the *El Topo* chapter, Cobb leans extensively upon Jodorowsky’s previously published commentary on said film’s complex symbolism, whereas a more successful chapter on *The Holy Mountain* relies primarily upon Cobb’s own research, including helpful background information on alchemy and various ancient texts.⁵

From the outset, Cobb acknowledges the difficulty in deciphering the biography and work of a man who has drawn upon multiple belief systems throughout his artistic life, constructing a labyrinthine self-mythology along the way. As a result, a considerable percentage of the book’s text consists of quotes gleaned from (largely obscure) interviews with Jodorowsky. While this nicely marshals together material from hard-to-find sources, the overabundance of quotes unfortunately gives the book the disjointed air of an oral history at times, although Cobb’s own conversations with the director are a strong resource, especially in the last two chapters (the latter of which is pure interview), discussing Jodorowsky’s post-1990 career, his plans for a final film project, and the struggles to finance his vision. As with many books on cult directors, *Anarchy and Alchemy* has a distinctly auteurist slant, but while this applies well to a director with such a unique aesthetic and high level of creative control, it also sets up a somewhat simplistic artist vs. industry opposition that does not fully take into account Jodorowsky’s relation to other filmmakers (such as auteurs accepted by the critical establishment), the arguments of his detractors, and the social context in which his films were received.⁶ Lionizing tendencies obscure certain politically problematic aspects of Jodorowsky’s work, including the rampant misogyny of his early films and his well-intentioned but exploitative portrayal of persons with disabilities. In addition, due to the book’s selective focus upon Jodorowsky’s cinematic output, his considerable volume of writing (comics, novels, poetry, non-fiction) is only mentioned in passing, perhaps owing to its very limited availability in English.⁷

While a useful introductory guide to Jodorowsky’s life and art, the book is limited by its semi-academic tone and narrow degree of analytical depth. Published

as part of Creation Books' "Persistence of Vision" series, *Anarchy and Alchemy* seems aimed primarily at cult film buffs and moderately educated cinephiles, not specifically at scholarly readers.⁸ Although this sort of popular/academic approach is somewhat befitting for any book that takes a cult director as its subject, more erudite academics may be disappointed by the omission of Jodorowsky's place in the overlapping contexts of surrealism,⁹ magical realism, Third Cinema, and cult cinema.¹⁰ Cobb nicely highlights Jodorowsky's anti-colonial sentiments, but the director's political and philosophical motives could be expanded upon to include such factors as the liberatory qualities of his esoteric syncretism. Deeper aesthetic analysis of his relation to influences like Antonin Artaud, allies like Arrabal, and an array of other Latin American filmmakers is sorely wanting here as well.¹¹ To its credit, *Anarchy and Alchemy* is much like Jodorowsky's films themselves, offering a miasma of memorable and provocative details that might seem disconnected when taken individually, but which combine to form a sufficiently full portrait of the filmmaker's oeuvre. However, for a book billed as the "definitive" study of Jodorowsky, there remains further work yet to be done—but it nonetheless provides a fertile starting point for scholars willing to take up the task.

1 Though long out-of-print, Jodorowsky's *El Topo: The Book of the Film* (New York: Douglas Book Corporation, 1971) provides the director's own focused analysis of that film and a series of insightful interviews, but is limited to his early works.

2 Originally published in *City Lights Journal*, no. 3 (1966): 75-83.

3 Originally published in French as "Dune: The Film You Will Never See," *Métal Hurlant*, no. 107, 1985.

4 Difficult to find even among cult film collectors, *Tusk* is only available as a non-subtitled bootleg, while *The Rainbow Thief* is also out of print. Following a disastrous series of creative compromises, Jodorowsky disowned both films.

5 Jodorowsky, *El Topo: The Book of the Film*.

6 A fuller discussion of Jodorowsky's relation to New York underground cinema, the avant-garde tradition, and the counterculture movement can be found in J. Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Midnight Movies* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), 77-109.

7 For example, Jodorowsky's post-Jungian "psycho-magic" therapy is allotted little more than one page at the end of Chapter 8, but this brief explanation is disproportionate to its influence upon *Santa Sangre* (1989) and his late career.

8 Other subjects of the "Persistence of Vision" series include Kenneth Anger, Russ Meyer, Jean Genet, and the Vienna Action Group, indicating the blurred boundaries of taste and class that bridge cult repute and avant-gardism.

9 Michael Richardson has forwarded one of the only in-depth academic considerations of Jodorowsky's relation to surrealism in his *Surrealism and Cinema* (Oxford: Berg, 2006), 135-148.

10 For example, the ghettoization of his films into “midnight movie” venues and cult film networks has contained them as exotic and Otherly spectacles, denying much of their caustic political critique.

11 This is also addressed to some (brief) extent in Richardson, *Surrealism and Cinema*.