



Alejandro Jodorowsky

Interview by Michael Nardone / Photography by Giasco Bertoli

Hobo #16 - Paris, February 2014. Filmmaker, writer, mime, master of tarot, psychomagician, Alejandro Jodorowsky is an artist whose robust sense of living is matched only by the exceptional breadth of his creative practice. Author of dozens of books—from philosophy to poetry—and, with the French artist Moebius, the highly praised L'incal series of graphic novels, Jodorowsky's works are marked by a great generosity as well as a remarkable ability to provoke. His first film, *Fando y Lis* (1967), shocked its audience into a riot when it premiered at the Acapulco Film Festival and was subsequently banned in Mexico. His following two films, *El Topo* (1970) and *The Holy Mountain* (1973)—beloved and supported by John Lennon—became immediate cult classics, initiating in the United States the “midnight movie” phenomenon in which his films would play for years.

Jodorowsky's recent film, *The Dance of Reality* (2013)—based on his 2001 autobiography—is a surreal exploration of the dream territories and traumas of his childhood. “The story of my life,” he writes, “is a constant effort to expand the imagination and its limitations, to capture its therapeutic and transformative potential.” Alejandro and I met at his apartment in Paris the evening after his 85th birthday. In his office, surrounded by walls of books and esoteric objects, we discussed his films, his influences, chance and intention, gravity and reality.

Michael Nardone — *For The Dance of Reality, you returned to your homeland to shoot a deeply autobiographical work, yet it's one that uses that personal past to imagine numerous and coexisting presents and futures. Can you describe the process of making this film?*

Alejandro Jodorowsky — I made *The Dance of Reality* in order to have a psychological experience. I was born in a small town called Tocopilla, in Chile. It was near the desert, near mines of copper. I was a child in a time of crisis. Everyone was poor there. Everyone was fighting against poverty. There was only a plant to produce electricity there, and the only people who had jobs worked there. The name of this town is not on any map. During my eighty-five years, the town hasn't changed. Not one new house. It is exactly the same as when I was a child. The only thing that has changed is that the house and the store of my father burned to the ground.

— *What kind of store was it?*

— He liked to sell women's underwear! My father had an obsession with sex. Since there was a port at Tocopilla – the ships came there to take away the copper – sailors would come to town to see prostitutes. Prostitution was the only other way, other than copper, to make any money. Anyway, my father would go by the ships when all the sailors were in town and steal boxes from them. He would open the box and see whatever was inside. One time it would be a box full of scissors, another time all cups. Often it was clothes, and, yes, occasionally, women's underwear. He would sell anything!

— *What was it like for you to grow up in this town?*

— I suffered a lot there. I was different. It was the north of Chile, near Bolivia and Peru. Everyone was dark and had small noses and I was fair with a big nose. I was a mutant. I also suffered very much from my mother and my father. With *The Dance of Reality*, I wanted to go back to the roots of that suffering, in order to see how I could live there, to see what I make there with the impress of that suffering.

— *What was it like to return over seventy years later?*

— It was incredible. I walked around the town's dirt streets as I had done as a child. Everything was the same. I saw the old Japanese man who cut my hair when I was a child. It was not him, really! It was his son, but the resemblance was perfect. Everything was the same. It was as if I had begun to dream. It was a conscious dream: I could change it, I could act within it and, through this film, transform this little town into something else.

— *Did you have any family still there?*

— No. They are all dead.

— *After you shot the film, I believe you returned to Tocopilla to premiere it there?*

— Yes, we did! The first time we showed the film was there. To 8,000 people! Every person in the village came. We used the town's stadium as the theatre. They built a giant screen and had so many chairs and couches and there were people sitting everywhere in the grass. People were crying. Everyone was so pleased. It was an incredible experience for me. When I was a child, I was a victim of that town. When I returned, people treated me like I was a hero. To be a hero in a small town, it is not a bad thing, no?

— *From Tocopilla, you went to Santiago. Will you tell me about this transition?*

— Yes, my family left Tocopilla when I was nine years old and moved to Santiago. I stayed there until the age of twenty-two. It was there that I became a poet.

— *What was the culture of Santiago like as you were growing up, as you were becoming an adult?*

— It was crazy at that time! It was a time of war, but Chile was far away from all of that. There were mountains and an ocean that separated us from the rest of the world. We had a strong economy at the time because we were selling copper and saltpeter, a main component to make dynamite. Chile was rich! Every day by six in the evening it was a party and everybody was drunk. All the people!

— *And yet, when you were just a young man, in your early 20s, you left Santiago, you left Chile?*

— Yes, I left for Paris. In 1952, I wanted to do three things. I wanted to go to the Sorbonne and I wanted to study with the philosopher Gaston Bachelard. I wanted to attend the Surrealist group meetings of André Breton. I wanted to study pantomime and work with Marcel Marceau. I arrived in Paris and I set out upon each of these three things. First of all, I was not a fantastic mime. Marceau was a great mime, but not me. Yet I was more intelligent than Marceau. He always wanted to do very romantic works, like Chaplin. He was a soloist, too, like Chaplin. I proposed that I would write for him metaphysical pantomimes and then we began to collaborate. With Bachelard, I could not go to the university because I didn't possess the correct papers to study. But I didn't want a diploma, I simply wanted to learn from the man. I would go to the Sorbonne and simply sit in on his classes. I learned a lot from Bachelard. And with Breton, I spent two years attending his Surrealist group. Very often, I would create games for them all to play.

— *How did you find the Surrealists?*

— The Surrealist group was like a religion. Breton was their pope. He had such great disdain for so many things. He didn't like science fiction. He didn't like police stories. He didn't like music. He didn't like abstract painting. He didn't like pornography. He didn't like fashion. It was at that time that I became close with Fernando Arrabal and Roland Topor and together we developed the Panic Movement. We were tired of Surrealism and wanted to go beyond its confines.



— *I see pantomime as having a distinct impact on your filmmaking. What drew you to this practice?*

— I did pantomime to express myself, to explore what I could understand of my body. It is an intuitive, bodily thing and it is also spatial. Immediately, you are confronted with the problem of space: how to organize yourself in it. Then it's important to understand the language of expressing emotion through the body. Then you learn how to use your vertebrae, how to position your body. Then you learn ways to transcend the weight of your body. We are people who must abide by the law of gravity. It's the worst! It's terrible! Our lives would be so much better if we were to be finished with the law of gravity. Everything would change.

— *This is in the years just before you began to make films. Were there any other major influences that came into your life at that time?*

— Yes, there was another group around, *Le Grand Jeu*, *The Great Game*. It was led by the poet René Daumal. He, for me, is the best writer in France. Daumal discovered all of the things that Surrealism didn't want to see! He was the first to translate Sanskrit writings

into French. Daumal also translated D.T.Suzuki's writings on Zen. He was a disciple of the great spiritual teacher Gurdjieff. His works go far deeper than Surrealism, into places Surrealists could never have envisioned. Daumal truly altered my mind.

— *You mentioned Zen and I know it plays an important part in your films, as a kind of method for composition and also as an imaginary for content – images and gestures – but I also see in your work a strong relation to Tantra.*

— Yes, you see that connection because I studied the tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. Tibet was a country completely immersed in the tradition of Tantra. Do you know about Marpa?

— *The Tibetan lama?*

— Exactly. Marpa was a great teacher. When his son died, Marpa was crying and crying. He made no shame of it and wept uncontrollably. A person who knew him came up to him and asked, "Marpa, you teach us that life is an illusion. Why are you crying?" And Marpa said, "Yes, it is true: life is an illusion. I cry because my son was the most beautiful illusion."

— *I love this tale.*

Menu

sculpture of a woman who has a thorn embedded in her heel, and she is attempting to remove that thorn from her skin by using another thorn.

— It is a strong image.

— *It embodies so well this concept of utilizing something so as to be rid of it, to move past it. This relates to something that always makes me so wild for your films. They are such elaborate creations: every thing has its specific place, every moment has its gestures. Yet each specific image or act reveals nothing but itself.*

— It's true.

— *After the first time I saw El Topo, I was talking to a dear friend about the film and when she asked me what the movie was about, I couldn't tell her! I had no clue. And yet I could recall and describe for her the details of nearly every scene.*

— Every moment you watch the film, it changes. Like a cloud.

— *Yes! It's amazing how lush each moment of it is, how ornate. It forces the viewer to be present to the composition and forget everything that exists outside of it.*

— It's a beautiful illusion.

— *At some point you left Paris and moved to Mexico?*

— I lived in Mexico for twenty years, from 1960 to 1980. I made all of my films there: *Fando y Lis*, *El Topo*, *The Holy Mountain*. Eight years after I left Mexico, I went back there to make *Santa Sangre*. Of course, to shoot my last film, I went back to Chile. This upcoming year, I will go to Mexico to make another film.

— *In regard to the constellation of these places and influences – from Chile to Paris to Mexico, from Surrealism to pantomime to Tantra – will you tell me something about how you first approached making these films?*

— My theory of making films took form in Mexico when I saw a person who had been run over by a streetcar. The train went right over him, crushing his body, basically splitting him in two. I saw it happen and the outcome. I approached the situation changing my position toward the incident six or seven times, each time the sight of what had happened and what was happening revealed something different. Then I came right next to the man and I took his hand and waited with him. He became very calm and we remained there waiting. We could do nothing else. This was an accident and it resonated with me: approaching the scene, witnessing this body transformed by the street car, seeing the reactions of the

onlookers from different angles, then interacting with this man in a personal way. It stayed with me for some time. When I began to think of films I realized that I did not want to make compositions as much as I wanted to create accidents. I wanted to shoot the accidents and respond to them in their moment.

— *How do you make this work? I mean, your films have so many characters: more often than not, there are numerous main characters and hundreds of additional people in the cast as supporting roles and extras. How is it possible to film accidents working like this?*

— It's a kind of craziness! You are not normal when you are making films like this! I cannot say exactly how it happens. I feel like I always become some kind of medium. In a trance, there are no problems. You simply act.

— *There is an interesting relationship between chance and intention in your films in that you can never tell if a particular confluence of moments was scripted or improvised or, as you say, an accident. How do you negotiate your own objectives that you intend for a film with all of the contingencies that arise in the film's making?*

— How can I explain how these things come together? I can give you but one example. For the final scene in *The Dance of Reality*, I wanted to have a shot where an expanse of ocean was perfectly still. Yet this does not happen! Gravity does not allow it! The special effects people said to create this, it would cost a fortune and that they could not capture it the way I wanted. For me, though, it was very important. All throughout the making of the film, I was wondering how we were going to shoot this final scene.

Then one day, while we were driving along the coast, at a crossroads, I saw the name for a town: Mejillones. I had never been there, but I knew in seeing the name I had to go there. We drove to the town, to the coast, and I yelled "Stop! There!" I could see the ocean and I got out of the car and began to run to it. The water was perfectly still. No waves, no swell. Perfect glass. There was a fisherman by the water and I told him, "The ocean is nice today. It's so still." And the fisherman said that the ocean was like this often there. Why? There were two juts of mountainous land that cradled the ocean and kept the water still. We brought a boat there to shoot our final shot and all of a sudden a thick fog rolled in and I managed to get exactly the shot I wanted. When I finished the fog blew away. It was perfect! I cannot explain to you how it happens. If you have clear intentions, reality will meet you. Reality will become an ally.

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