Hospitality Underground: Filmic Documents of an Oppositional Practice

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> A couple of women and a much larger number of men, most of them clad in flamboyant thrift-shop women's clothes, frolic about, post and posture, dance with one another, enact various scenes of voluptuousness, sexual frenzy, romance and vampirism — to the accompaniment of a sound track which includes some Latin pop favourites, rock n roll, scratchy violin playing, bullfight music, a Chinese song, the text of a wacky ad for a new brand of 'heart-shaped lipstick' being demonstrated on the screen by a host of men, some in drag and some not, and the chorale of flutey shrieks and screams which accompany the group rape of a bosomy young woman, rape happily converting itself into an orgy. Of course, *Flaming Creatures* is outrageous, and intends to be. The very title tells us that.[2]

This is Susan Sontag's description of Jack Smith's 1963 film *Flaming Creatures*. *Flaming Creatures* has since become an iconic example of Underground cinema's liberal projection of sexuality, it was banned on several occasions following its release, both in the US and Europe, becoming a *cause célèbre* and counter cultural rallying point against censorship. Made by the charismatic filmmaker and performer Jack Smith, many different readings have followed Sontag's excitable prose. More recently Juan Suarez has explored the film as an expression of queer marginality performed through a reappropriation of Hollywood B Movie Stars, whilst Michael O'Pray claims it for 'one of the most conscious and successful attempts in the avant-garde cinema to engage creatively with the Hollywood dream-machine',[2] or Jim Hoberman finds it 'richly perverse and gloriously improvised'.[3]

Amongst the most consistent champions of *Flaming Creatures* remains the filmmaker and writer Jonas Mekas, for whom Smith's film, along with those of his contemporaries Ron Rice and Ken Jacobs, functioned as exemplars of a new form of oppositional cinema, of a poetic and performative aesthetic far removed from the socially committed realism of the earlier New American Cinema that Mekas had once feted. Couched in the language of the Underground, Mekas famously defined their films, in a Film Culture article of 1963 as 'a turn from the New York realist school (the cinema of 'surface' meanings and social engagement) towards a cinema of disengagement and new freedom',[4] relating them to the poetry of Rimbaud and Baudelaire as 'a world of flowers of evil, of illuminations, of torn and tortured flesh; a poetry which is at once beautiful and terrible, good and evil, delicate and dirty'.[5]

Mekas' passionate advocacy also accentuates experimental film's relation to the burgeoning spirit of counter-cultural disaffiliation during the 1960s, to the extent that friend and fellow film critic P. Adams Sitney was critical of Mekas's praise for this new style of filmmaking, suggesting that he 'mistook a flurry of contemporary activity for the avant-garde tradition'.[6] Astutely, Sitney notes that Mekas's interest was most particularly in 'the transformation of acting into performance, or the breakdown of the difference between the performer and his role',[7] influenced by his long-held interest in improvised forms of performance and theatre, steeped in early readings of Stanislavsky.

Indeed, it could be argued that this blurring of person and persona is at the heart of both *Flaming Creatures* and Ron Rice's contemporaneous 1963 *Chumlum*. The colourful and transgressive performers in both films occupy an ambiguous space between role-playing and performing their counter-cultural selves, so that *Flaming Creatures* functions on one level, as Michael O'Pray has asserted, as 'a document of Smith and friends at play'.[8]

It is the role of Underground Film as a document of an oppositional practice or performance of difference that I wish to focus on here. As Juan Suarez argues, the Underground Film movement functions as an example of what Raymond Williams defines in his study of cultural formations, as an oppositional formation, characterised by 'active opposition to the established institutions, or more generally to the conditions within which these exist'.[9] Yet, as Williams notes, in the twentieth century this outward hostility is based upon an informal condition of fellowship in contrast to the constitutional structure of earlier craft guilds. Relating his concept to the Dada and Surrealists, he notes: 'It is a looser form of group association, primarily defined by shared theory and practice, and its immediate social relations are often not easy to distinguish from those of a group of friends who

share common interests'.[10]

Could Underground Cinema be understood, therefore, as an instance of an oppositional formation where outward hostility – inhospitality – is dependent upon patterns of internal socialisation, built upon shared values – however transgressive – which we witness, played out on the screen? For the overt sexual content of *Flaming Creatures* and the documentation of illicit practices such as drug taking both in early Beat films such as Robert Frank and Alfred Leslie's *Pull My Daisy* (1959), *Chumlum* (1964) and Andy Warhol's later films such as *Chelsea Girls* (1966), challenged the taboos of what was deemed acceptable in mainstream media and society, while at the same time defiantly affirming and celebrating the collective disengagement of its Underground constituency from those societal norms.

For Suarez, Underground Film's 'oppositional thrust can be associated thematically and ideologically with other waves of dissent of the 1960s, such as youth movements, sexual liberation fronts, civil rights organizations, and the forms of protest and social experimentation often referred to as the 'counterculture'.[11]

Certainly, the nature of this dissent could be seen to exhibit a particularly complex strategy of resistance in comparison to earlier art movements. Al Rees, for example, notes this change when he describes the emergence of the Underground, as marking a telling 'shift in emphasis' from the 'advanced guard' of the earlier confrontational strategies of Dada or Surrealism to one of 'clandestine resistance, tunnelling rather than charging'.[12] As David James articulates in relation to its first protagonists, the American movement of Beat poets and artists, the counter culture transformed political protest into a form of passive resistance, choosing 'not to change American society so much as to disengage from it in acts of individual rebellion'.[13] From this position of individual disenfranchisement, a dialectic of the personal and political emerged, which was to become characteristic of the resistance strategies of the counter-culture. Alf Louvre suggests in his study of 1960s radical politics: 'There is a demand for a politicized culture, the realization that our most intimate, erstwhile private and personal activities carry profound political meanings and must be transformed. The personal and the political are seen as indivisible, and revolution therefore must be also personal liberation'.[14]

Therefore, despite the covert quality that the term Underground suggests, the alternative culture which developed as a result of the Underground movement asserted a vivid and varied expression of its radicalised, yet marginalised, position, where a celebration of individualism becomes a tactic of collective opposition. It was from this shared desire to articulate, and advocate, difference which led to the poetry of the Beats, the Underground Press, the new forms of theatre espoused by groups such as The Living Theatre,[15] and the Underground Film movement, whose modes of operation, as well as their frank portrayal of liberal alternative life-styles, was to be the catalyst for the establishment of a alternative filmmaking practice both in America and Britain, running in parallel to its mainstream counterpart, and playing an important role in defining an identity and establishing a community of difference.

However, while Sontag's reading of *Flaming Creatures* located it, like Sitney's, very much in the context of wider Underground culture, and while there is no doubt that his film represented its wayward denizens, this is a reductive reading, as Smith felt at the time.[16] I would argue that *Flaming Creatures* presents a more complex document of oppositional practice, in which, according to Juan Suarez, an apparently contradictory engagement with the object of his marginalisation as a filmmaker: the dominant industry of Hollywood, reflected a deeper marginalisation of gay culture and desire. As Jerry Tartaglia points out: 'In some very important ways, Jack Smith was significantly different from his straight male peers in the Underground film scene in New York. He wanted to mimic the Hollywood cinema of his childhood, whereas the others like Jonas Mekas, Ken Jacobs, Bruce Baillie, Hollis Frampton, and Tony Conrad worked in opposition to the aesthetics of Hollywood. Jack Smith was different: he worked with a campy twist in counterpoint with the Hollywood forms and style'.[17]

Smith's use of camp performance and parody, of décor and reappropriation, was a means of assimilating and understanding Hollywood's codes, where ironic re-enactments of the stars, genres, and tropes of silent cinema, now accessed as television re-runs, were motivated by a nostalgia for Hollywood's decline. Indeed, in 1963, the same year of *Flaming Creatures'* release, Smith wrote a

homage to the exotica of the faded Puerto Rican star Maria Montez, 'The Perfect Film Appositeness of Maria Montez', which also reveals a commitment to the performative blurring of person and impersonation which Mekas glimpsed in his Baudelairean paen. 'In my movies I know that I prefer non actor stars to 'convincing' actor stars only a personality that exposes itself if through moldiness (human slips can convince me in movies) and I was very convinced by Maria Montez in her particular ease of her great beauty and integrity'.[18]

It is also important to stress that this is a homage to Hollywood's past, rather than its commercial present, against which Smith's writings in *Film Culture* railed vociferously. And it is through its transformation into an outmoded spectacle and devalued archive that Smith can identify Hollywood with his own sense of marginality, displacing himself outside the oppositional binary of the experimental filmmaker and commercial cinema, both of which he saw as entrenched and monolithic, despite the best efforts of critical commentators from Sontag to Jonas Mekas attempting to claim it for the agendas of high art or the Underground or conversely, the authorities attempt to censor it.

Chumlum stars Smith himself, taking on the gestures and frayed costumes of silent cinema's faded stars: a grand vizier, perhaps, or villainous sultan. Indeed, reflecting the informal groupings of the Underground film community, Rice was a friend and close collaborator of Smith, and the performers in *Chumlum*, a disparate group of filmmakers, friends, actors and performers, were first brought together to film an earlier project of Smith's, the film *Normal Love*. As Sitney recalls, they tended to return to Rice's loft 'with most of the case, still in their costumes, after the day's filming. At first Rice made some casual film studies of the actors swinging on the hammocks in his loft. Later he expanded them into the production of *Chumlum*'.[19]

The improvised scenarios which provide the primary structure of both films reflect the significance of the *event* in Underground cultural practice. Stuart Laing has observed that the live event became the 'paradigmatic form of the counter-culture' where 'the cultural process ('performance', 'happening') rather than the fixed product was a central feature of much would-be revolutionary culture of the decade'.[20] Indeed, the replacement of art object with artist in the visual arts, using performance as a direct address to the audience, became an integral part of the experience of counter culture art practice.

Maxa Zoller also relates the use of performance and live event to an active politicisation of the body. As she suggests, in the context of counter culture politics, the body itself was privileged as a site of protest against the prevailing cultural and political establishment, either through political demonstration, on marches or 'sit-ins',[21] or, as we see in *Flaming Creatures* and *Chumlum*, through its overt display as a liberating, oppositional factor in the battles of censorship and morality with conventional society.

In this way we are returned to the Underground Cinema as a scenario of its oppositional community, where actors out of role but still performing improvise for Rice's camera. Indeed, this casual, improvised genesis of *Chumlum* can be felt in its loose structure. As Sitney notes: 'If there is a development or progress in the film, it is from indoors to outdoors, from swinging, crawling, and dancing in the harem to dancing in the sky over Coney Island (through superimposition)'.[22] It could be proposed that this evocative fusion of performance, re-imagining the event culture of the underground through the scenario of silent cinema, is attributable in part to the influence and presence of Smith, and the participation of his cast of exotics, such as Mario Montez (the faded star's cross dressing alter ego). However, Rice grounds Smith's cinematic re-imaginings and extravagant on-screen performances in the grain of reality, allowing the vernacular settings of loft space and New York exteriors to surface from beneath his diaphanous superimpositions. For it could be argued that Rice was rooted in a different experience of marginalisation from Smith, more directly related to the disengagements of the Underground first articulated in the philosophies and politics of beat culture.

As Suarez suggests, *Chumlum*, like Rice's earlier films *The Flower Thief, Senseless,* and the unfinished *The Queen of Sheba Meets the Atom Man*, 'partake of the stylistic vocabularies of both New American cinema and underground'.[23] In his 1961 *Film Culture* article 'Notes on the New American Cinema' Mekas lists Rice's film *The Flower Thief* amongst a rollcall of independent filmmakers working with a personal yet realist or documentary strain in their work. Indeed, Mekas

includes a short poem by Rice, 'Ode to the Eye,' which states: 'It is better to film anything that is living and real than to film ideas of what should, or might be real'.[24] His point does not deny the decadent display of Jack Smith's degraded Hollywood. The power of *Chumlum* lies in its convergence of Smith's cinematic re-imaginings with Rice's celebratory document of the Underground's oppositional creativity.

It could be argued that a *performance of difference* plays in different registers across both *Chumlum* and *Flaming Creatures*: as the actors perform their dissent from established societal codes, in and out of costume, and the filmmakers Smith and Rice inflect their own sense of marginality to mainstream cinema, as to queer identity, within the frame. As Sheldon Renan contemporaneously asserted in his book *Underground Film*: 'The Underground filmmaker uses people and places from his own life, because they are what he has feelings about. But actual life for the underground filmmaker may be only raw material to be manipulated into the form of his personal perspective'.[25]

Renan's definition suggests that we might understand these Underground films as a subjective film document of their shared ideological position of disaffection, a glimpse into the internal organisation and dynamics of a group in opposition, through the portrayal of the community of fellow artists who personified it. I would argue that *Chumlum* and *Flaming Creatures* provided points of focus, communication, and identification for a creative but marginalised community, epitomising a vigorous and dynamic creative community rooted in the developing counter culture of the 1960s, where, couched in Mekas' romantic polemic: '[I]n a sense, they don't have to "invent": they just have to turn the camera upon themselves, or upon their close friends, and it explodes into the pyrotechniques upon which no imagination could improve'.[26]

NOTES

1. Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969, p. 232.
2. Michael O'Pray, *Avant-Garde Film: Forms, Themes and Passions*, London: Wallflower Press, 2003, p. 91.
3. Jim Hoberman, 'The Big Heat: Making and Unmaking Flaming Creatures,' in *Jack Smith: Flaming Creatures: His Amazing Life and Times*, ed. by Edward Leffingwell, Carol Kismaric and Marvin Heiferman, London: Serpents Tail, London, 1997, p. 155.
4. P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-garde 1943–1978*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979, p. 340.
5. Sitney, *Visionary Film*, p. 340.
6. Sitney, *Visionary Film*, p. 340.
7. Sitney, *Visionary Film*, p. 345.
8. O'Pray, *Avant-Garde Film*, p. 91.
9. Raymond Williams, *Culture*, Glasgow: Collin, 1981, p. 70.
10. Williams, *Culture*, p.70.
11. Juan Suarez, *Bike Boys, Drag Queens, and Superstars: Avant-garde, Mass-Culture, and Gay Identities in the 1960s Underground Cinema*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996, p. 53.
12. Al Rees, *A History of Experimental Film*, London: BFI, 1999, p. 63.
13. David James, *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989, p. 93.
14. Alf Louvre, 'The New Radicalism,' in *Cultural Revolution? The Challenge to the Arts in the 1960s*, ed. by Bart Moore-Gilbert and John Seed, London: Routledge, 1992, p. 63.
15. For a contemporary description see Jeff Nuttall, *Bomb Culture*, New York: Delacorte Press, 1968.
16. See Suarez for a further discussion of Smith's opinion on the reception to *Flaming Creatures* and to the writings of Sontag and Mekas, in *Bike Boys, Drag Queens, and Superstars*, p. 187.
17. Jerry Tartaglia, 'The Perfect Queer Appositeness of Jack Smith,' in *Experimental Cinema: The Film Reader*, ed. by Wheeler W. Dixon and Gwendolyn Aubrey Foster, London: Routledge, 2002, p. 164.
18. Sitney, *Visionary Film*, p. 353.
19. Sitney, *Visionary Film*, p. 359.
20. Stuart Laing, 'The Politics of Culture: Institutional Change', in *Cultural Revolution?*, ed. by Bart Moore-Gilbert and John Seed, p. 90.
21. Zoller also suggests that the horizontal viewing spaces of the Arts Lab had connotations of the 'counter-culture of the late 1960s where 'sit-ins' became a common mode of protest'. Maxa Zoller, unpublished doctoral thesis, Birkbeck College, University of London, p. 96.
22. Sitney, *Visionary Film*, p. 359.
23. Suarez, *Bike Boys, Drag Queens, and Superstars*, p. 80.
24. Rice, Ron, *Film Culture*, no. 24, Spring 1962, p. 13.
25. Sheldon Renan, *The Underground Film: A History of Its Development in America*, Studio Vista: New York, 1967, p. 17.
26. Jonas Mekas, *Film Culture*, no. 24, Spring 1962, p. 13.