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JACK SMITH'S *FLAMING CREATURES*

by Susan Sontag

This early appreciation of the work of Jack Smith was written in 1964. It first appeared in The Nation and was reprinted in Miss Sontag's collection of critical essays Against Interpretation (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1966). She is also the author of two novels, The Benefactor and Death Kit.

Today, Flaming Creatures is generally considered one of the outstanding documents of the independent cinema movement in America. Susan Sontag's article is a highly perceptive critique of this film.

The only thing to be regretted about the close-ups of limp penises and bouncing breasts, the shots of masturbation and oral sexuality, in Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures* is that they make it hard simply to talk about this remarkable film; one has to *defend* it. But in defending as well as talking about the film, I don't want to make it seem less outrageous, less shocking than it is. For the record: in *Flaming Creatures*, a couple of women and a much larger number of men, most of them clad in flamboyant thrift-shop women's clothes, frolic about, pose 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 favorite (*Siboney, Amapola*), 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.

As it happens, *Flaming Creatures* is not pornographic, if pornography be defined as the manifest intention and capacity to excite sexually. The depiction of nakedness and various sexual embraces (with the notable omission of straight screwing) is both too full of pathos and too ingenuous to be prurient. Rather than being sentimental or lustful, Smith's images of sex are alternately childlike and witty.

The police hostility to *Flaming Creatures* is not hard to understand. It is, alas, inevitable that Smith's film will have to fight for its life in the courts. What is disappointing is the indifference, the squeamishness, the downright hostility to the film evinced by almost everyone in the mature intellectual and artistic community. Almost its only supporters are a loyal coterie of filmmakers, poets, and young "Villagers." *Flaming Creatures* has not yet graduated from being a cult object, the prize exhibit of the New American Cinema group whose house organ is the magazine *Film Culture*. Everyone should be

Jack Smith: From *Flaming Creatures*, 1963

grateful to Jonas Mekas, who almost singlehandedly, with tenacity and even heroism, has made it possible to see Smith's film and many other new works. Yet it must be admitted that the pronouncements of Mekas and his entourage are shrill and often positively alienating. It is absurd of Mekas to argue that this new group of films, which includes *Flaming Creatures*, is a totally unprecedented departure in the history of cinema. Such truculence does Smith a disservice, making it unnecessarily hard to grasp what is of merit in *Flaming Creatures*. For *Flaming Creatures* is a small but valuable work in a particular tradition, the poetic cinema of shock. In this tradition are to be found Buñuel's *Un Chien Andalou* and *L'Age d'Or*, parts of Eisenstein's first film, *Strike*, Tod Browning's *Freaks*, Jean Rouch's *Les Maitres-Fous*, Franju's *Le Sang des Bêtes*, Lenica's *Labyrinth*, the films of Kenneth Anger (*Fireworks*, *Scorpio Rising*), and Noël Burch's *Noviciat*.

The older avant-garde filmmakers in America (Maya Deren, James Broughton, Kenneth Anger) turned out short films which were technically quite studied. Given their very low budgets, the color, camera work, acting, and synchronization of image and sound were as professional as possible. The hallmark of one of the two new avant-garde styles in American cinema (Jack Smith, Ron Rice, *et al.*, but not Gregory Markopoulos or Stan Brakhage) is its willful technical crudity. The newer films—both the good ones and the poor, uninspired work—show a maddening indifference to every element of technique, a studied primitiveness. This is a very contemporary style, and very American. Nowhere in the world has the old cliché of European romanticism—the assassin mind versus the spontaneous heart—had such a long career as in America. Here, more than anywhere else, the belief lives on that neatness and carefulness of technique interfere with spontaneity, with truth, with immediacy. Most of the prevailing techniques (for even to be against technique demands a technique) of avant-garde art express this conviction. In music, there is aleatory performance now as well as composition, and new sources of sound and new ways of mutilating the old instruments; in painting and sculpture, there is the favoring of impermanent or found materials, and the transformation of objects into perishable (use-once-and-throw-away) environments or "Happenings." In its own way *Flaming Creatures* illustrates this snobbery about the coherence and technical

finish of the work of art. There is, of course, no story in *Flaming Creatures*, no development, no necessary order of the seven (as I count them) clearly separable sequences of the film. One can easily doubt that a certain piece of footage was indeed intended to be overexposed. Of no sequence is one convinced that it had to last this long, and not longer or shorter. Shots aren't framed in the traditional way; heads are cut off; extraneous figures sometimes appear on the margin of the scene. The camera is hand-held most of the time, and the image often quivers (where this is wholly effective, and no doubt deliberate, is in the orgy sequence).

But in *Flaming Creatures*, amateurishness of technique is not frustrating, as it is in so many other recent "underground" films. For Smith is visually very generous; at practically every moment there is simply a tremendous amount to see on the screen. And then, there is an extraordinary charge and beauty to his images, even when the effect of the strong ones is weakened by the ineffective ones, the ones that might have been better through planning. Today indifference to technique is often accompanied by bareness; the modern revolt against calculation in art often takes the form of aesthetic asceticism. (Much of Abstract Expressionist painting has this ascetic quality.) *Flaming Creatures*, though, issues from a different aesthetic: it is crowded with visual material. There are no ideas, no symbols, no commentary on or critique of anything in *Flaming Creatures*. Smith's film is strictly a treat for the senses. In this it is the very opposite of a "literary" film (which is what so many French avant-garde films were). It is not in the knowing about, or being able to interpret, what one sees, that the pleasure of *Flaming Creatures* lies; but in the directness, the power, and the lavish quantity of the images themselves. Unlike most serious modern art, this work is not about the frustrations of consciousness, the dead ends of the self. Thus Smith's crude technique serves, beautifully, the sensibility embodied in *Flaming Creatures*—a sensibility which disclaims ideas, which situates itself beyond negation.

Flaming Creatures is that rare modern work of art: it is about joy and innocence. To be sure, this joyousness, this innocence is composed out of themes which are—by ordinary standards—perverse, decadent, at the least highly theatrical and artificial. But this, I think, is precisely how the film comes by its beauty and modernity. *Flaming Creatures* is a lovely

specimen of what currently, in one genre, goes by the flippant name of "Pop art." Smith's film has the sloppiness, the arbitrariness, the looseness of Pop art. It also has Pop art's gaiety, its ingenuousness, its exhilarating freedom from moralism. One great virtue of the Pop-art movement is the way it blasts through the old imperative about taking a *position* toward one's subject matter. (Needless to say, I'm not denying that there are certain events about which it is necessary to take a position. An extreme instance of a work of art dealing with such events is *The Deputy*. All I'm saying is that there are some elements of life—above all, sexual pleasure—about which it isn't necessary to have a position.) The best works among those that are called Pop art intend, precisely, that we abandon the old task of always either approving or disapproving of what is depicted in art—or, by extension, experienced in life. (This is why those who dismiss Pop art as a symptom of a new conformism, a cult of acceptance of the artifacts of mass civilization, are being obtuse.) Pop art lets in wonderful and new mixtures of attitude, which would before have seemed contradictions. Thus *Flaming Creatures* is a brilliant spoof of sex and at the same time full of the lyricism of erotic impulse. Simply in a visual sense, too, it is full of contradictions. Very studied visual effects (lacy textures, falling flowers, tableaux) are introduced into disorganized, clearly improvised scenes in which bodies, some shapely and convincingly feminine and others scrawny and hairy, tumble, dance, make love.

One can regard Smith's film as having, for its subject, the poetry of transvestitism. *Film Culture*, in awarding *Flaming Creatures* its Fifth Independent Film Award, said of Smith: "He has struck us with not the mere pity or curiosity of the perverse, but the glory, the pageantry of Transylvestia and the magic of Fairyland. He has lit up a part of life, although it is a part which most men scorn." The truth is that *Flaming Creatures* is much more about intersexuality than about homosexuality. Smith's vision is akin to the vision in Bosch's paintings of a paradise and a hell of writhing, shameless, ingenious bodies. Unlike those serious and stirring films about the beauties and terrors of homoerotic love, Kenneth Anger's *Fireworks* and Genet's *Un Chant d'Amour*, the important fact about the figures in Smith's film is that one cannot easily tell which are men and which are women. These are "creatures," flaming out

in intersexual, polymorphous joy. The film is built out of a complex web of ambiguities and ambivalences, whose primary image is the confusion of male and female flesh. The shaken breast and the shaken penis become interchangeable with each other.

Bosch constructed a strange, aborted, ideal nature against which he situated his nude figures, his androgynous visions of pain and pleasure. Smith has no literal background (it's hard to tell in the film whether one is indoors or outdoors), but instead the thoroughly artificial and invented landscape of costume, gesture, and music. The myth of intersexuality is played out against a background of banal songs, ads, clothes, dances, and above all, the repertory of fantasy drawn from corny movies. The texture of *Flaming Creatures* is made up of a rich collage of "camp" lore: a woman in white (a transvestite) with drooping head holding a stalk of lilies; a gaunt woman seen emerging from a coffin, who turns out to be a vampire and, eventually, male; a marvelous Spanish dancer (also a transvestite) with huge dark eyes, black lace mantilla and fan; a tableau from the *Shiek of Araby*, with reclining men in burnouses and an Arab temptress stolidly exposing one breast; a scene between two women, reclining on flowers and rags, which recalls the dense, crowded texture of the movies in which Sternberg directed Dietrich in the early thirties. The vocabulary of images and textures on which Smith draws includes pre-Raphaelite languidness; Art Nouveau; the great exotica styles of the twenties, the Spanish and the Arab; and the modern "camp" way of relishing mass culture.

Flaming Creatures is a triumphant example of an aesthetic vision of the world—and such a vision is perhaps always, at its core, epicene. But this type of art has yet to be understood in this country. The space in which *Flaming Creatures* moves is not the space of moral ideas, which is where American critics have traditionally located art. What I am urging is that there is not only moral space, by whose laws *Flaming Creatures* would indeed come off badly; there is also aesthetic space, the space of pleasure. Here Smith's film moves and has its being.