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Film

Camp Fire

Jack Smith's burning house of love

by Owen Gleiberman



Too hot to handle?

FLAMING CREATURES. A film by Jack Smith.

The crowd that showed up to see Jack Smith's "Flaming Creatures" on Friday, March 28, didn't exactly fill the Massachusetts College of Art's Longwood Auditorium to the rafters; you'd be stretching things to call an audience of around 50 people a crowd at all. Every bit as notable as the small turnout was the low-key, almost humdrum atmosphere in the place before the lights went down. This was not the eagerly curious crew that packed the Longwood three years ago to see *The Chelsea Girls* (which, like "Flaming Creatures," was presented by the Boston Film/Video Foundation). I can't be sure, but it seemed that for many of the people last week, this was just another avant-garde film show, another curiosity, another diverting evening of punkish weirdness. And maybe they were right: maybe that's all it was. If the people there had heard of "Flaming Creatures," few could have had much notion of the scandal it caused, and fewer still could have cared. After all, way back then, when the '60s had yet to ignite and the taste of censorship was still in the air, it took little more than a few shots of limp penises to start a scandal. Does anyone really care whether it was "Flaming Creatures" in '66 or *I Am Curious (Yellow)* in '67? That's ancient history, folks — it's all flesh under the bridge.

But is it art? I was just getting to that. Shot on a New

York rooftop for \$300, "Flaming Creatures" was shown publicly for the first time at midnight on April 29, 1963, at New York's Bleecker Street Cinema, a scant six months before the premiere of Kenneth Anger's "Scorpio Rising" and a little item called *Kiss*, which was to be first of many, many Andy Warhol films. "Creatures" was busted three years later at a University of Texas campus showing, and later still — in 1967 — at the University of Michigan. This last incident, which had the police marching into the half-finished screening and dramatically seizing the print, was the last major scandal provoked by the cinematic avant-garde, the end to a veritable tradition dating back to "Un chien andalou," which had caused a ruckus in 1928. After "Flaming Creatures," the floodgates were open: porno, Swedish "art" films, experimental nude psychodramas — everything went, and has continued to go, Jerry Falwell notwithstanding.

What no longer goes are the chilly aesthetics of the avant-garde. Always a fringe movement (by proud proclamation), the world of experimental cinema now caters to a taste so rarefied, so lacking in any spiritual connection to mainstream culture, that its makers and followers seem to be under the spell of some ominous psychic-emotional wavelength beamed in from a distant planet. It's an odd and abstract realm, one in which "formal" preoccupations reign supreme and irony is the

lifeblood. The end of censorship has a great deal to do with this. In the '60s, even a lowbrow — or, more likely, a collegiate middle-class kid under the influence of some brave new stimulant — could take in an avant-garde film show and get the idea that something bold and zesty and subversive was going on. The movement had its form freaks even then, of course (if you've ever spent an evening watching the films of Stan Brakhage or Peter Kubelka, the expression "It was like watching paint dry" comes to seem only a slight exaggeration). But by and large, sex, in an assortment of perverse forms, was the calling card of the underground. When nudity flashed on screen, that eternal niggling question — "What does it all mean?" — didn't linger in the mind quite so mysteriously. You didn't have to be a genius to see what "it" meant. It meant liberation, wildness, the shedding of preconceptions and taboos; it meant passion and caprice; sometimes, it even meant fun.

When did you last go to an avant-garde film show for fun? The supreme irony of experimental cinema (or video) in the '80s is how completely the philosophical tables have turned: where avant-garde movies once grasped at throbbing, subterranean truth, they now suggest an almost complete escape from the body. Many of their most appealing aspects have been snapped up by music videos and the general sexualization of the culture (at least in terms of images). What remains is apt to seem wan and fussed over and slightly sinister; even many of the new postpunk bohemians are little more than hip technocrats — MIT meets PiL. In this light, "Flaming Creatures" gives you a heady whiff of the orgone box. Twenty years later, it still feels vital, tumultuous, alive — and, yes, even shocking.

Around 35 minutes long, the movie is basically a whirlwind drag-queen parade. As a cacophony of rock and roll, hacienda music, radio commercials, shrieking sound effects, and snippets from Maria Montez movies unfurls on the soundtrack, a variety of men in wigs and frilly white dresses dance and twirl and fondle one another; they apply generous quantities of lipstick and mug — ever so gently — into the camera; they tear off the clothes of a woman (yes, a real woman) and commence an ecstatic rape/orgy. There are shots of limp penises being fondled and large breasts getting knocked around like toys; there's a particularly ungainly and striking transvestite — he looks like Holly Woodlawn done up as Monroe or Harlow — who climbs out of a white coffin and joins the festivities, plus a man dressed as a Spanish dancer who does a whirling flamenco number, spinning round and round and round... There are frequent cutaways to some mysterious magic lantern, a snippet of "Be-Bop-a-Lula," and then the fade. Nothing, on paper, that sounds too revolutionary — or too arresting, either.

Except that the camera is swirling and dancing too. Smith literally hovers over his performers — cutting from one to another in a frenzy, letting the camera quiver (once the orgy commences) like an earthquake, bathing everything in a garish white light that may have been planned or may just have been the result of bad lighting and overexposure. The movie has been described as a kind of acid-headed Josef von Sternberg fantasy, a blend of neo-'30s glamor-queen splendor and camp stylizations of Maria Montez movies. But whatever it looked like in 1963, "Flaming Creatures" is bizarrely uncampy now — it seems almost desperately sincere. Jack Smith has an obvious fondness for men's mouths, and the endless lipstick shots aren't played for laughs; they're obsessive visions of sexual transformation. And the way he keeps focusing on body parts that detract from — indeed, destroy — the illusion of feminine perfection is a jarring strategy. The glimpses of chest hair, grimy legs, and large, male feet are there not to mock the element of impossible wish fulfillment in a transvestite's charade but to suggest the galvanizing friction of forces at work. There are men wanting to be women, and not succeeding, and then, somehow, succeeding — through the sheer orchestrated madness of their disguise (and erotic madness is what the film

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celebrates).

I think Smith succeeded in creating, on some very artless, instinctual level, an effective poetic fantasy. Sometimes it's ugly to look at, sometimes eerily attractive, but what "Flaming Creatures" has (and what so many underground films of the period don't) is rhythm, an endless, roiling visual rhythm that gives even its showiest conceits a kind of cinematic integrity. No Andy Warhol lethargy epic this: the people on screen are busy, thriving; they more than live up to the movie's title. If the word "flaming" was intended, perhaps, as a gay double-entendre, it also has an obvious libidinous meaning. The passion of these "creatures" is febrile and sustained — they seem magnetized by eros and lit from within. Smith's influence on John Waters (particularly on his early films, *Mondo Trasho* and the apocalyptic *Multiple Maniacs*) is obvious. More intriguing are the audio-visual similarities between "Flaming Creatures" and some of the more electric moments in Martin Scorsese's live-wire masterpiece, *Mean Streets*. Kenneth Anger, of course, also helped pave the way for Scorsese with his use of a teen-dream rock soundtrack in "Scorpio Rising." But when you see "Scorpio Rising" now, with its single joke of biker gangs made at once iconic and harmless, what's so crashingly disappointing about it is what an *unmusical* filmmaker Anger actually is. His soundtrack choices may have been inspired (and his use of the Electric Light Orchestra's *El Dorado* helped turn *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome* into one of the cinema's purest expressions of impassioned homosexual aestheticism). Visually, though, he's a choppy amateur. "Flaming Creatures" has the delirious flow — the pungent visual rush — that was one of the '60s

avant-garde's key contributions to modern moviemaking.

Then again, one of the righteous follies of '60s criticism was to see films like this one as having all form and no content. In 1986, after the sexual convulsions of the past two decades have settled, it's clear that nothing could be farther from the truth. If anything limits "Flaming Creatures" as art, it's the movie's undercurrent of propaganda, its implicit advertisement for gay/transvestite eroticism as the epitome of free love. In an essay published in 1964, Susan Sontag wrote that "Flaming Creatures" expressed "an exhilarating freedom from moralism," adding that "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." The moral underpinnings of "Flaming Creatures" may have been radical for the time, but they were there, and in its showy celebration of hedonism mixed with perversity the film takes a very deliberate position: it says that a transvestite orgy is freer, more *abandoned* than other (presumably heterosexual) forms of erotic activity; it says that the mingling of male and female sexuality liberates people from orthodox roles. But of course men and women aren't simply "roles," and a New York transvestite isn't any more liberated from society-sanctioned images than a heterosexual Iowa farmer is; if anything, he's more of a slave to them. The fantasy underlying "Flaming Creatures" isn't just one of freedom but one of control, of mastering and giving form to the erotic impulses that erupt from within. It's the buried fantasy that homosexual desire is something one chooses — not the other way round. □