

sexualities outside of the heterosexual-vanilla-missionary-position 'norm' – the film is refused certification. The economics for the underground filmmaker, and any potential distributor, do not allow for the 'luxury' of having a film cut or banned.

Censorship means that few films emanating from the Cinema of Transgression, and prior generations of underground filmmakers, could pass the censor uncut. While some venues – thanks to their quasi-privileged status as an arts venue or cinema club – are able, or willing, to risk screening un-cut or uncertified movies, the number of such venues is low. Underground films are consequently forced to exist either in the twilight regions of cinema, banished to the few cinema clubs that exist in major cities, or as dodgy video copies.

The unavailability of films, especially by the less well-known associates of the Cinema of Transgression, adds to the gaps within the second section of this book. All of the those filmmakers interviewed mentioned other filmmakers whose work was worth investigating, but the work of these filmmakers is totally unavailable and consequently they could only receive a passing mention. Spatial concerns also mean that these filmmakers certainly receive less coverage here than I would have liked. Needless to say, there are gaps enough for a continued investigation into the territory of cinema and performance inaugurated by the Cinema of Transgression, and the few artists who could be said to be related to it.

This book's final chapter deals briefly with the influence of the Cinema of Transgression and the growth of, for want of a better phrase, post-Cinema of Transgression filmmakers: filmmakers who have begun producing films which continue the explorations of taboo and transgression which were consciously inaugurated by the original Cinema of Transgression.

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—Jack Sargeant, July 1995.

NOTES

1. Zedd, *Bleed*, p.58.
2. Zedd and Kern stand alone, as a degree of notoriety has at least granted them some recognition and minimal distribution. Many other filmmakers are far less 'lucky'; to my knowledge Casandra Stark's films have only been briefly available, while the other Cinema of Transgression filmmakers included within this book have never had work freely available.

CHAPTER ONE: FROM TRASH TO TRANSGRESSION

1. DEFINING THE TRASH AESTHETIC

"Is there a lipstick that doesn't come off when you suck cocks?"

(—Jack Smith, *Flaming Creatures*)

The Cinema of Transgression may have been the first underground film 'movement' to expressly articulate an aesthetic of transgression/confrontation via the pages of *The Underground Film Bulletin*, but various other directors had created similarly transgressive films. East Coast American underground cinema produced several filmmakers whose work must be viewed as paving the way, as demarcating a terrain, which the Cinema of Transgression filmmakers would themselves later explore.

The wildest figure of underground film production, who played a central (if unpredictable) role in '60s, '70s and '80s film, was Jack Smith. Born in Columbus, Ohio in 1932, Smith moved to New York in the '50s where he became involved with experimental theatre (studying dance with Ruth St. Denis, and direction with Lee Strasberg) and film (appearing in films by Ken Jacobs such as *Little Cobra Dance: Saturday Afternoon Blood Sacrifice* [1957] and *Blonde Cobra* [1959]). Jack Smith began making his own movies, with the – uncompleted – *Buzzards Over Baghdad* (1951/56), *Overstimulated* (1960), and *Scotch Tape* (1961). Smith's movies were influenced by the glorious-but-tacky Z-grade Arabian Nights and Atlantis movies produced in the '40s and '50s, and rich in his own iconography of faded glamour.

"Jack Smith is an anarchist, and his films break all the rules of film art. They go too far, and they do it on purpose. They are too scratchy, too nervous, too vulgar, and at times, too beautiful."¹

In 1963 Smith made his masterpiece, *Flaming Creatures* ("Creatures" being the people featured in his movies, the term being part of Smith's personal vocabulary), a film which was shot on a bright day on outdated celluloid, resulting in a finished product that appears bleached out (an appearance which is added to by the director's use of muslin and gauze filters). The film itself depicts a Dionysian revelry, shot on the roof of an abandoned building; it pictures various transgressive sexual acts and reaches its climax with a transvestite orgy and simultaneous earthquake. The casual sexuality of the film is emphasized with the exotic attire (drag seems too simple a term) of the protagonists and the erotic flashes of genitals and flesh which serve to confuse the viewer, seducing them into a state in which gender becomes meaningless in the face of a playful sexuality.

When the film was first screened it was seized by the New York Police, and condemned as obscene. Jonas Mekas' (who founded the Filmmakers' Cooperative in 1962) lawyers began defending the film, but the case was dropped, and this resulted in the film being permanently banned in New York. Smith felt that Mekas had exploited him by dropping the case, and also by stealing his films, and began to refer to Mekas as 'Uncle Fishhook' and/or 'Uncle Roachcrust'. As Smith stated in an interview with *Semiotext(e)*: "My life has been made a nightmare because of that damn film. That sucked up ten years of my life. For a while I was betrayed on an average of about twice a week to Uncle Fishhook. It was like being boiled alive."²

Nick Zedd summarized Smith's weltanschauung in *Bleed*: "he felt the image of lobsters being boiled alive was a perfect metaphor for man's existence". Smith continued to work in underground film, commencing the unfinished *Normal Love* and producing other fragments subsequently screened under such titles as *Slave President*, *In The Grip Of The Lobster Claw* and *Zombie Of Uncle Pawnshop*.



Flaming Creatures

In the 1970s/80s Smith became involved with the 'para-punk' cinema, appearing in Beth and Scott B's *The Trap Door*, as well as Ela Troyano's *The Bubble People*, and forming an uneasy friendship with Nick Zedd. Shortly before his death due to AIDS-related illness in September 1989, Smith was still acting, appearing as the Spirit of Death, in Ari Roussimoff's *Shadows In The City* (1990).

While Jack Smith both influenced, and worked with, various Cinema of Transgression filmmakers, other '60s underground filmmakers can be regarded as being of similar importance. Perhaps the best known of all the underground filmmakers to emerge from '60s New York was pop artist Andy Warhol. Warhol's movies can, broadly, be divided into two distinct periods. The early movies were 'directed' by Warhol (although he would frequently just set up a shot then leave the camera running and walk away) and consisted of virtually static shots of various members of his entourage engaged in various activities. These activities gave the movies their titles, eg. *Kiss* (1963), *Sleep* (1963), and *Blow Job* (1963); in *Mario Banana* (1964), Mario Montez eats a banana, etc.

Warhol's movies presented voyeuristic glances into the taboo-breaking world of his 'superstars', whose outrageous (usually sexually deviant) behaviour became the focus for films such as *Couch* (1964). Warhol's movies were increasingly described as pornographic, partly because of their depiction of sex, but also because of Warhol's uncritical long takes, and apparent lack of editing. These movies served to emphasize the transparency of the real, a transparency emphasized by the shared voyeuristic gaze of Warhol/camera/audience. As Warhol stated, "this way I can catch people being themselves instead of setting up a scene and shooting it... it's better to act naturally than act like someone else because you really get a better picture of people being themselves instead of trying to act like they're themselves".³

Warhol was no stranger to 'camp'; his *Batman Dracula* (1964) starred Jack Smith as Dracula, and was apparently (only stills survive) very much influenced by Smith's own style of filmmaking. Warhol also produced a 'newsreel' of Smith filming *Normal Love*



Mario Banana

which was seized by the New York police along with copies of Jean Genet's *Un Chant d'Amour*. Smith also appears in *Camp* (1965) and *Hedy* (1965).

Also a pioneer of 'expanded cinema' events, Warhol would frequently show his movies in multiple projections combined with multi-media events, such as *The Exploding Plastic Inevitable* with The Velvet Underground.⁴ Other films, such as *The Chelsea Girls* (1966) were specifically constructed so as to function as multiple screen experiences.

Warhol's later movies were primarily directed by his protégé/alter-ego Paul Morrissey. Morrissey shared Warhol's voyeuristic tendencies, but pushed the sexual, and (at least slightly) the narrative, aspects of the movies, co-producing films such as *My Hustler* (1965) and *Flesh* (1967) with Warhol, both of which emphasize the beautiful bodies of their respective stars, Paul America and Joe D'Allesandro.

When asked if his cast were degenerates, Warhol replied that "not all the people – just 99% of them." But these 'degenerates' were also Warhol's superstars: "I use superstars in my movies so they can be superstars, portray their spontaneous talents on the screen". This emphasis on the superstar – articulated so well via Warhol's texts – is an emphasis which many of the underground filmmakers in this chapter (and the rest of the book) share, an emphasis in recognising, and celebrating the diverse elements of humanity, and creating their own mythology, their own stars.

Especially adept at conjuring their own hermetic celluloid universe were the Kuchar brothers. Twins, George and Mike Kuchar were born in the Bronx in 1942. As teenage cinephiles, both began producing films based on their own version of Hollywood movies, and especially the melodramas of Douglas Sirk⁵, as well as down market exploitation and horror pictures. Casting their films with friends and aspiring stars ("who were fat, but they wanted to be Marilyn Monroe") the twins produced a string of low budget interpretations of Hollywood movies read via their own Bronx upbringing, with titles such as: *The Thief And The Stripper* (1959), *I Was A Teenage*



Hold Me While I'm Naked

Rumpot (1960), *A Tub Named Desire* (1960) and *Pussy On A Hot Tin Roof* (1961). Their aesthetic was primarily one of Hollywood-in-the-Bronx, and the Kuchars' films are luridly coloured hymns to visual excess.

The Kuchars began to operate separately in 1961, with Mike producing *Born Of The Wind* (1961), amongst others, before moving into 16mm with the science fiction melodrama *Sins Of The Fleshapoids* (1964). George meanwhile produced a string of 8mm movies, beginning with *A Town Called Tempest* in 1961, before he moved into 16mm with his most famous film, *Hold Me While I'm Naked* (1964), which starred regular lead Donna Kerness. The Kuchar brothers became involved with the New York underground scene in 1963, when they began screening their movies at filmmaker Ken Jacobs' apartment; soon after they were picked up by Mekas who would write about them in *Film Culture* and *The Village Voice*.

The Kuchars' films, and especially George's, emphasise the sexual tension inherent in melodrama, creating a parodic (but never a cynical) view of Hollywood's genre movies. This emphasis is created via the use of obscure melodramatic music, which blares out underlining key moments of the film. George similarly uses objects to underscore the psychological traumas of his characters (such as an absurdly phallic hose in *A Reason To Live*, or a kewpie doll in *Forever And Always*). George offers various tips on film production; "Never dress your stars in current fashion mode. Always mix styles in reckless abandon as this way the film will never become dated but will retain a sort of ambiguous freshness".⁶ When the amateur actors who populate George's movies have difficulty in expressing themselves George suggests that the "emotions can be drawn on the face by changing the contours of the eyebrows for each scene". The Kuchars' movies, like Jack Smith's, suggest a camp re-reading of Hollywood, via personal iconography. Where they differ from Smith's is in the sheer volume of their output (both brothers continue to make films to this day), and in their overt stylisation.

All of these films gleefully emphasize the trashy camp aesthetic as both a result of, and inspiration to, the films' low budgets.

George Kuchar also starred in *Thundercrack!* (1976), directed by his protégé Curt McDowell; this outrageously deranged 'haunted house' epic features virtually every perversion and sexual transgression imaginable (including homosexual bestiality), and was only rivalled in the '70s by the visions of one man – John Waters.

Baltimore-born Waters was profoundly and irreversibly affected by the visionary, trashy aesthetic of the '60s underground, especially the Kuchars, who Waters insists "...made me want to make films. THEY are the reason". His films were also influenced by the low budget exploitation pictures of directors like Russ Meyer and Herschell Gordon Lewis⁷. Like the '60s underground filmmakers, Waters used a regular cast of friends (the Dreamlanders – after Waters' production company) which included Divine, Edith Massey, Mary Vivian Pearce, Mink Stole and Cookie Mueller, all to become trash stars/icons.

Waters' first feature was *Mondo Trasho* (1969), and emphasized Waters' star discovery; an overweight drag queen who went under the name Divine⁸, who appears as a Jane Mansfieldesque blonde bombshell in the movie (the shaved hairline and excessive eye make-up which would later become Divine's 'look' courtesy of Waters' regular 'ugly expert' Van Smith weren't introduced until Waters and Divine travelled to San Francisco to promote *Multiple Maniacs*). The movie also introduced such Waters' favourites as; shrimping, nude hitchhiking, rock and roll and go-go dancing, all set against the background of white trash Baltimore. Waters' next project was a tribute to Herschell Gordon Lewis. *Multiple Maniacs* (1970) was the first film to feature Divine in the exaggerated, quasi-insane Divine persona which he would maintain throughout the '70s.

Realizing he did not want to continue to produce films and live in poverty, Waters knew there was only one thing to do, and the rest is cinematic legend. Waters' nihilistic 'epic' *Pink Flamingoes* (1972) follows the competition for the title 'The Filthiest People Alive'; on one side is Divine's incestuous quasi-family, on the other are the murderous, perverted Marbles. The film climaxes with the infamous dog-shit eating scene, in which Divine eats real doggy shit in order to prove she is the filthiest person alive. The scene was shot on one take, no edits could be allowed because, to be truly shocking and funny, the audience must know that it was real shit, "Divine's gotta scoop it right up still warm off the street"⁹. Undoubtedly Waters' greatest publicity gimmick¹⁰, it is also a shock gesture he has continually been forced to live up/down to (especially in his '80s output, much of which was criticized on release for not being extreme enough by some of Waters' old fans).

Pink Flamingoes was the first of what would become known as Waters' "trash trilogy", three films which follow an escalating theme of crime, lawlessness, rebellion, sexual 'deviancy' and transgression. The second of the trilogy was *Female Trouble* (1974), a film which followed a deranged version of the rags to riches myth of the American dream, focusing on the criminal exploits of one Dawn Davenport (Divine). The last of Waters' trilogy was *Desperate Living* (1977) – a deranged fairy story in which hysterical housewife Peggy Gravel and her maid Grizelda flee to Mortville – a kind of Oz for the criminally insane – after murdering Peggy's dumb husband.

In the trash trilogy Waters announced his aesthetic of bad taste: a celebration of everything that isn't family entertainment, and a rejection of all of the supposedly 'positive' values espoused by the '60s hippies. Waters' and his regular cast were pre-punk punks, and other than the criminal rebellion of the more extreme hippies, such as the Manson Family or SLA, Waters' weltanschauung is antithetical to that of the hippies, liberals and the conservative right wing (he reserves a particular loathing for pro-lifers); he celebrates crime¹¹, exploitation movies, and violence¹²; Waters was



Desperate Living

a punk before punk existed. The trash trilogy represent many of the same nihilistic non-values as punk and transgress every boundary, each offering a pleasure in the 'shocking' and in bad taste. In *Pink Flamingoes* there is not just dog shit eating but also in scenes in which chickens are squashed between a fucking couple, a puckering asshole mimes to *Surfin' Bird*, etc. In *Female Trouble*, a greasy scumbag named Gator tries to seduce his step-daughter, we see a massive shit-stain in Divine's pants, etc. In *Desperate Living* a cop masturbates in women's underwear, a sex change penis is hacked off with a butcher knife, and homicidal lesbians are everywhere, etc. The trash trilogy is a blueprint for punk aesthetics and behaviour, with the emphasis on the screeching desperation of the protagonists, anxious to annihilate every value.

Waters' '70s movies pushed the personal vision of the underground into a zone in which it was deliberately confrontational, and openly celebrated this confrontation. His films must be viewed as central to the aesthetic values espoused by the Cinema of Transgression.

2. NEW WAVE CINEMA, B-MOVIES AND BEYOND: THE WORLD OF BETH B

Beth B is frequently cited as a 'member' or 'founder' of the Cinema of Transgression, yet her work emerged from a different milieu, and reveals a more direct political engagement than the Transgressive filmmakers with whom her name is often associated. Lydia Lunch, an actress for both Beth and Scott B as well as for Richard Kern and ('unwillingly') for Nick Zedd, stated that the Bs: "Came from a more politicized background. They were doing films that were more in line with what I was doing in spoken word a few years later. Dealing with social issues instead of social rejects, which is some of what Transgression dealt with. I don't know if they felt related to it or not... why should Beth B take responsibility for the kind of films Nick Zedd makes?"¹³. Further into the '80s B's work developed in both style and dissemination through a wide variety of media, ranging from television to installations, alongside video, 16mm and 35mm film, placing her in a more advantageous position than the filmmakers of the Cinema of Transgression. Nevertheless the Bs' films did begin to chart a territory of punk filmmaking which would be adapted by various filmmakers.

Beth initially began working in collaboration with partner Scott Billingsly, the abbreviated B of their collective surname representing their enthusiasm for low-budget B-movies and directors, B-movies themselves signifying a generalized thematic of violence, crime and melodrama as well as implying a "certain amount of creative control"¹⁴. Another aspect of their shared initial, and the collaborative nature of their work, was an attempt to break down the notion of single star/artist as the source of textual truth and to challenge the individualistic nature of artistic practice.¹⁵ The Bs both came from academic arts oriented backgrounds, but both felt dissatisfied with the relatively small audience for, and context of, object-based art. Beth B describes her move to film as a result of: "Frustration with the arts, and the fine arts in particular. I went to artschool and ended up feeling like it was incredibly limited; where you could show and who would end up seeing it, and film seemed so much more expansive and all inclusive in terms of the arts and someone could pay, at that time, \$5 to go see a movie." Film allowed the Bs to work within a context that was not strictly art-world and would ensure a larger – and more diverse – audience. The Bs' collaborations were frequently harsh, yet amusing, political films, although not necessarily political in an easily apparent or preaching context. As Scott B stated: "In a sort of Brechtian sense we want people to have fun while they're watching our films at the same time feel the burr that will make them think. We want to encompass the intellectual and the entertainment domains."¹⁶ Inspired by, among other things, film noir, B-movies and television soaps, the Bs produced *G-Man*, *Black Boy*, *To Dad*, *The Offenders*, *The Trap Door* and *Vortex* before parting company and pursuing separate careers in 1984. The central thematic focus of the Bs' work (both in collaboration and separately) was that of the power relationships and exchanges located within and between various individuals and/or groups in society. For Beth and Scott B these relationships become most manifest in the themes of crime, mind control, manipulation, sexuality and

The Bs' films (both in collaboration and their separate work) present a thesis of power which is similar to that delineated by Michel Foucault in the binary nature of the hypothesis that power exists in a