

# CINEMANIC



## Hollywood Creatures Living Only On Film

Jack Smith has become, in recent years, a presence in the independent film making set that is as ghostly as the images that burn in his films. For most audiences, those outside metropolitan New York at least, the only encounter with the incandescent Smith has been in the viewing of two films, *Flaming Creatures* which was made by Smith, and *Blonde Cobra*, compiled by Ken Jacobs.

There are other films which have Smith acting in them, Ron Rice's *Queen Of Sheba Meets The Atom Man* and Ken Jacobs' *Little Stabs Of Happiness*, neither of which have had screenings on the West Coast in some years.

Smith also made two other films following the Baudelerian/R.K.O. induced masterwork that is *Flaming Creatures*, *Normal Love*, a shimmering, sensuous hallucination of Hollywood's most exotic mythological characters: the Mummy, the Werewolf, the Mongolian Child, the Spider, the Mermaid and Smith's alter-persona, the Cobra Woman. His last film made in 1969 and dismantled shortly thereafter, *No President* is an overlay of documentary footage of Wendell Wilkie and



Smith's "Flaming Creatures"

Smith's bizarre array of characters.

In recent years Smith has surfaced sporadically with theatre pieces incorporating slides, film and tableaux which invariably start late and breakdown sometime during the performance.

*Flaming Creatures* (1963) draws on Hollywood "creatures," stereotypical images whose substance rests only in the emulsion. Smith uses these as forms which render feeling, wraiths of emotion exclusive of the rational

whose existence is determined by the bulb in the projector. Smith wrote in *Film Culture* on two people who were for him the personification of cinema: Josef von Sternberg and Maria Montez. In the articles, Smith reveals his idea of film. On von Sternberg:

"People never know why they do what they do. But they have to have explanations for themselves and others.

So von Sternberg's movies had to have plots even tho they already had them inherent in the images. What he did was make movies naturally -- he lived in a visual world. The explanations plots he made up out of some logic having nothing to do with the visuals of his films."

And on Maria Montez films: "The primitive allure of movies is a thing of light and shadows. A bad film is one which does not flicker and shift and move through lights and shadows, contrasts, textures by way of light.

"If I have these I don't mind phoniness (or the sincerity of clever actors) simple minded plots (or novelistic 'good' plots), nonsense or seriousness (I don't feel nonsense in movies as a threat to my mind since I don't go to movies for ideas that arise from sensibleness of ideas). Images invoke feelings and ideas that are suggested by feeling."

And in this final quote from Smith's paean to von Sternberg is the film maker's revelation of himself and his vision:

"His expression was of the erotic realm -- the neurotic gothic deviated sex-coloured world and it was turning a turning inside out of himself and magnificent. You had to use your eyes to know this tho because the soundtrack babbled inanities -- it alledged Dietrich was an honest jewel thief, noble floozy, fallen woman, etc. to cover up the visuals.

"In the visuals she was none of these. She was the V.S. himself. A flaming neurotic -- no-

thing more or less -- Dietrich was his visual projection -- a brilliant transvestite in a world of deliriously unreal adventures. Thrilled by his/her own movement -- by superb taste in light, costumery, textures, movement, subject and camera, subject camera/revealing faces -- in fact all revelation but visual revelation."

This was a verbalization of the impetus of the making of *Flaming Creatures*. Throwing out the narrative but retaining the exotic, glamorous form, Smith plunges into the center of his personal mythology through ten scenes straight out of *Les Fleurs du Mal* via R.K.O. and the East Village that culminate in a frenzy of dancing, writhing creatures which for all its tawdriness is a sort of redemption. "Paradise Regained."

The film was shot with outdated film stock which gives a washed-out soft edge to the image, tones are brought down to a narrow range leaving the image in a world of steamed air.

*Blonde Cobra* (1963) is a title wrought from the titles of Smith's favorite films: Von Sternberg's *Blonde Venus* and Maria Montez' *The Cobra Woman*. The images were shot by Bill Fleishner in 1959 with Smith. Smith was living in extreme poverty on the Lower Eastside with his cat and no gas and electricity. One night the cat knocked over a candle causing a fire destroying most of the footage. Fleishner blamed Smith. Smith said it was an Act of God. The association dissolved.

Ken Jacobs asked for the remaining footage, certain a film could be made. Smith did a dream-telling, extemporaneous song and confession voice-over. The film is a hellish vision of despair with Smith appearing in variations of tawdry, demented drag, his face contorted through every conceivable expression excruciating the facade of emotions,

the terrible demons.

At one point the screen goes dark, black leader running through the gate as "Madame Neuroscience" (Unknowingness) recounts her convent dream with its crucifix sex. There is no image to latch onto, the audience is left with Smith shrieking away in their heads, their dream now. It is a device Chris Macleine used in his rarely seen film *The End*.

The seeds of Warhol's *Chelsea Girls* and *Vinyl* can be found in this film with its unnerving confessions and brutal technique. These two films will be screened this Thursday May 22 at the Canyon Cinematheque in the San Francisco Art Institute, 800 Chesnut, at 8:30.

The Archive's Music In The Movies series continues this week with *Rare Blues & Rare Jazz* showing this Sunday at 2:30 and 7:30 at the Archive in Berkeley and at the Great American Music Hall in S.F. on Monday at 7:30. These films are from the collection of John Baker and they include footage of such blues artists as Lightnin Hopkins, Mamie Smith, Ida Cox, Mance Lipscomb and jazz musicians Duke Ellington, Chick Webb, Louis Armstrong, Eubie Blake and the Miles Davis Sextet with John Coltrane.

On Wednesday, the 21 at Wheeler Auditorium on the University of California, Berkeley, campus will be a different aspect in the benefit series with three films termed *Unusual Rock Films*. John Boorman's (*Deliverance*, *Point Blank*) first feature, *Having A Wild Weekend* with the Dave Clark Five involved in a kidnapping caper. *Head*, a 1968 vehicle for (Don't lose control.) The Monkees.

The final film of the night is Frank Zappa's *200 Motels*.

-- Michael Reynolds