

## A Feast for Open Eyes

Susan Sontag

Editor's Note: As stated in the editorial "Flaming Censorship" in *The Nation* of March 30, *Flaming Creatures* is one of two films recently seized by New York City police on the grounds of obscenity. The other is Genet's *Chant d'Amour*. Jonas Mekas, editor of *Film Culture*, was arrested at the showings, the trials for these two films have been scheduled for April 6 and 13 respectively.

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 it makes it hard simply to talk about this remarkable and beautiful 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, romantic love and vampirism—to the accompaniment of a sound track which includes some pop Latin favorites (*Siboney*, *Amapola*), some rock-'n-roll, some 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. Even 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; Smith's 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. Smith's images of sex are alternately childlike or witty, rather than senti-

mental or lustful. But even if *Flaming Creatures* were pornographic, that is, if it did (like the film Jean Genet made in 1950, *Chant d'Amour*) have the power to excite sexually, I would argue that this is a power of art for which it is shameful to apologize. Art is, always, the sphere of freedom. In those difficult works of art, works which we now call *avant-garde*, the artist consciously exercises his freedom. And as the price the *avant-garde* artist pays for the freedom to be outrageous is the small numbers of his audience, the least of his rewards should be freedom from meddling censorship by the philistine, the prudish and the blind. Apart from the wrongness of censorship itself, there is no need to worry what will be the social consequences if *Flaming Creatures* ever plays at Radio City Music Hall because it won't. Smith's film, involving as it does certain esoteric assumptions about experience and beauty, is obscure, precious, intimate. It would be as lost on today's mass audience as a puppet theatre is on a huge stage.

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, the Underground Cinema, whose house organ is the magazine *Film Culture*. Everyone should be grateful to and come to the aid of Jonas Mekas, who almost single-handedly, with tenacity

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*Susan Sontag, whose first novel The Benefactor (Farrar, Straus) was published last fall, writes book, film and theatre criticism; she also teaches philosophy and theology at Columbia University.*

and even heroism, has made it possible to see Smith's film and a number of other new works. Yet it must be admitted that the pronouncements of Mekas and his supporters are shrill, and often positively alienating. Mekas is wrong to argue that this new group of films, of which *Flaming Creatures* seems to me, by far the most successful, is a totally unprecedented departure in the history of cinema, and makes everything else, in comparison, worthless. Such truculence does Smith a disservice, making it unnecessarily hard to grasp what he has accomplished in *Flaming Creatures*. For *Flaming Creatures* is a small but very important work in a tradition, the great tradition of the *avant-garde* cinema—along with Bunuel's *Le Chien d'Andalous* and *L'Age d'Or*, Cocteau's *Le Sang d'un Poete*, Artaud's *Le Coquille et le Clergyman*, parts of Eisenstein's first film *Strike*, some of the recent Polish and Czech shorts, the films of Kenneth Anger (*Fireworks*, *Les Eaux d'Artifice*, *Scorpio Rising*), etc., etc.

The older *avant-garde* film makers in America (Maya Deren, James Broughton, Kenneth Anger, et al) turned out short films which were technically quite studied. Given their very low budgets, 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 Markopolous and 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 aleatoric performance now as well as composition, and new sources of sound and new ways of mutilating the old in-

struments: in painting and sculpture, there is the favoring of impermanent or found materials, and the transformation of objects into perishable (use-one-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 (when 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, a density of images, of different types of textures. And then, there is an extraordinary charge and beauty to his images, even when the effect of the strong ones are weakened by the ineffective ones, the ones that might have been better through planning. Often today indifference to technique is 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, represents 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 are). 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*

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*Creatures*—a sensibility based on indiscriminateness, without ideas, 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 extraordinarily moving beauty and modernity. *Flaming Creatures* is a lovely specimen of what now, 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. The 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.) Pop art really transcends the old nonsense of choosing between approving or disapproving of what is depicted in art—or, by extension, experienced in life. (This is why all sociological sneering at pop art as a symptom of a new conformism, a cult of acceptance of the artifacts of mass civilization, is so obtuse.) Pop art lets in wonderful and new mixtures of attitude, which would before have seemed contradictions. Thus *Flaming Creatures* is a brilliant spoof on sex and at the same time full of the lyricism of erotic impulse. Technically, too, as I have suggested, it is a wonderfully inventive contradiction. Very studied visual materials (lacy effects, falling flowers, tableaux) are introduced into disorganized, clearly improvised scenes in which bodies, some shapely and convincingly feminine and some scrawny and hairy, tumble, dance, make love.

It is easy to see Smith's film as having, as 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

A piece of the action from *Newsweek*:

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pity or curiosity of the perverse, but the glory, the pageantry of Transylvania 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 *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 are interchangeable with each other.

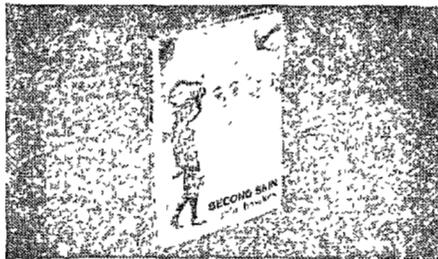
Bosch had a strange, aborted, ideal nature against which to situate his nude figures and androgynous visions of pain and pleasure. Smith has no literal background (it's hard to tell

in the film whether one is indoors or outdoors), but instead the thoroughly artificial, invented landscape of costume, gesture, and music. The myth of intersexuality is played out against a background of corny songs, ads, clothes, dances, and above all, the repertory of fantasy drawn from corny movies (Another beautiful recent work, this time for the theatre, the play *Home Movies*—written by Rosalyn Drexler, music by Al Carmmes—has this same delicious range.) 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 *Sheik of Araby* with reclining men in burnouses and an Arab temptress stolidly exposing one breast, a scene between two women, re-

clining on flowers and rags, which recalls the dense, crowded texture of the movies in which von 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 still 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.

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### Jose Yglesias

These two novels have taken thirty years to reach us since their first publication in Spanish. A pity. First novels by "committed" writers, they might have shown American writers of the thirties how, among other things, an effective style can give enduring life to works whose primary inspiration is indignation with social injustice. They might, even, have made the writers and critics of the forties and fifties less inclined to turn their backs on literature thus inspired.

Although Asturias — a descendant of the French symbolists and surrealists — writes in sophisticated poetic language and Icaza in a simple, idiomatic style, each in his way deals boldly with the horrors and degradation of the life he describes. So boldly, in fact, that in the United States, at least, they could have been assured of uncensored publication only in the last five years. They feel no need to

idealize the oppressed and are happily free from prudish and Pollyannaish attitudes that crept into left-wing writing. Both are modern novelists in the original, the translations, I'm afraid, are another matter. But perhaps it is more useful to rejoice that history is making us less provincial about the literature of Latin America and allowing us to discover a major writer like Asturias and a pioneer storyteller of Indian life like Icaza, both of whom the Europeans have long known.

In one way Asturias and Icaza are luckier than their North American contemporaries of the thirties: we've gone from the depression to the Augustan age of affluence, but the military dictatorship of *El Señor Presidente* and the Indian peonage of *The Villagers* remain unchanged in Latin America. The content of both novels consequently has a relevance and immediacy that can help you understand this week's news headlines. Each starts with a simple action. Asturias' *Presidente* decides to move against a political enemy in his army and assigns to a favorite the job of arrang-

*Jose Yglesias is a novelist (his first book, A Wake in Ybor City was published last year by Holt, Rinehart & Winston) and a translator of modern Spanish fiction.*

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