

situations with mythological figures and astrological forces – the bikers as avatars of ‘Scorpio’, the sign of destruction, masculinity and deadliness, but also of illumination and healing. Here, fetishism does not cover up a gap but generates intensities and elaborate chains of affect that connect body parts, costumes and accessories.

These chains of affect bypass the interpersonal and the psychological. Anger’s fetishism is not a conduit for personalised pleasure but an energy that opens up lines of connection and correspondence across the surface of the world. Invoking once more Marcel Mauss’s terminology, we could say that it is a way to pursue *mana*: the generic term for a universally acknowledged force whose name changes across the globe: ‘... a sort of fourth spatial dimension ... power par excellence, the genuine effectiveness of things.’³⁰ *Mana* cures and damages, brings together and separates, may be beneficent or malignant. It is an agency that is concrete and abstract, material and spiritual, that inhabits things but also runs through them and puts them in communication. It may be identified with a place, a subject, an object (a fetish), and with the energy circulating through them under the tutelage of the theurgist, the only one who may channel or understand it. Trying to invoke and apprehend it might be painful at times because it will not always yield to the magician’s will. In this regard, the management of *mana* – which is Mauss’s definition of magic – converges with fetishism and sexuality. Like sex, magic mixes pleasure and the illusion of control with intimations of danger, and it is ritualistic, fetishistic (the term originally referred to an object with magical properties) and suspenseful. It brings the body into play and entails an immersion in the materiality of the world, but is also thoroughly textual and discursive. It involves a careful use of fabrics, images and props, and it is, in addition, fully symbolic, mediated through narrative, incantation and formula – like Anger’s films.

Anger’s cinematic magic, with its sexual and textural accompaniments, stages a grand refusal – as he once put it – of ‘the Cartesian frontal framework’.³¹ It is a defence of alternative systems of cognition and figuration that have been suppressed by hegemonic rationality but have survived in experimental art and film (Maya Deren’s and Harry Smith’s films, as well

as Anger’s and Jarman’s). In addition, magic gave Anger ample license to dwell on over-the-top ‘couture’, exuberant accessorising, deliberate gesture and glossy surface. The filmmaker has always taken great pleasure in showing how the right clothing at the right time may produce the most astonishing images. And magic clothed his sartorial flirtation and heterodox sexuality in transcendent robes.

Research for this paper was funded by the Spanish Ministerio de Ciencia e Innovación: MICINN-Project FFI2008-05614.

28 Benjamin (n 15) [B9,2], 79.

29 Ibid: [B3,8], 69.

30 Mauss (n 24) 117.

31 Anger and Rayns (n 25) 24.

PART III

Fashion, Thrift Stores and the Space of Pleasure in the 1960s Queer Underground Film

Ronald Gregg

In her 1964 review and defence of Jack Smith's film *Flaming Creatures* (1963) in *The Nation*, shortly after it had been confiscated by the police for obscenity, Susan Sontag argues that the film is not pornographic, as its censors claimed, but instead is 'childlike and witty' and 'about joy and innocence'. She notes that Smith is 'visually very generous' – 'at practically every moment there is simply a tremendous amount to see on the screen'. She argues that Smith's Boschlike vision of "creatures", flaming out in intersexual, polymorphous joy' is 'not the space of moral ideas ... there is also aesthetic space, the space of pleasure. Here Smith's film moves and has its being.'¹

Since much recent scholarship on *Flaming Creatures* has focused on its censorship, representation of queer sexuality, or critique of gender à la Judith Butler, it may be difficult for viewers whose understanding of the film is shaped by these debates to appreciate what Sontag means when she claims that the film is 'about joy and innocence' and that it should be seen within 'an aesthetic space, the space of pleasure'. Some scholars in fact dismiss Sontag's defence of the film, claiming that she defangs Smith's radical challenge to gender and sexual norms. Michael Moon, for one, writes: '[O]ne may well be struck rereading her essays by the extreme degree to which they depoliticize the sexual and artistic practices that are their subjects.'² Marc Siegel agrees, taking Sontag to task for her 'denial of the very possibility of sexual politics' in her review.³ Taking a different approach, Juan A Suárez notes that Smith himself eventually came to challenge Sontag, claiming that by locating the film within 'an aesthetic space', she turned it into 'a besieged high art piece' and robbed it of its humour and joy.⁴ In contrast to these criticisms, I would argue that Sontag's nuanced analysis understands and celebrates *Flaming Creatures* on multiple levels: as well as appreciating the film's visual pleasures and the aesthetic critique of the conventions of dominant cinema, she recognises its wit and the challenge it posed to the political and moral conservatism that resulted in its confiscation.

Terms such as 'childlike' and 'innocence' that Sontag used to describe the film had a very particular meaning in the avant-garde circles of the early 1960s. They bespoke a praiseworthy return to a pre-socialised, pre-scripted state of subjectivity, a state where moral rules do not apply and vision and technique have not been

constrained by later schooling. In his highly influential 1963 manifesto *Metaphors on Vision*, the experimental filmmaker Stan Brakhage issued a call for precisely such childlike innocence:

Imagine an eye unrul'd by man-made laws of perspective, an eye unprejudiced by compositional logic, an eye which does not respond to the name of everything but which must know each object encountered in life through an adventure of perception. How many colors are there in a field of grass to the crawling baby unaware of 'Green?' ... Imagine a world alive with incomprehensible objects and shimmering with an endless variety of movement and innumerable gradations of color. Imagine a world before 'the beginning was the word'.⁵

Brakhage urged artists to '[a]llow so-called hallucination to enter the realm of perception, ... accept dream visions, day-dreams or night-dreams, as you would so-called real scenes'.⁶ Brakhage's manifesto calls upon the filmmaker to return to a visionary place like childhood in order to liberate her/himself from the narrowness and restrictions of lingual, artistic and technical conventions. Similarly, in praising *Flaming Creatures*' aesthetic space' and 'childlike' demeanour, Sontag values Jack Smith's own belief that grass was not limited to one colour of green. His 'willful technical crudity', she posits, embodies 'the belief ... that neatness and carefulness of technique interfere with spontaneity, with truth, with immediacy'.⁷

Flaming Creatures was among a number of films to emerge out of the 1960s New York underground cinema that paid little heed to conventions of narrative and spatial as well as temporal continuity. Instead, it focused on and re-created the sensuous pleasures of dazzling, ostentatious fashions, spectacular *mise en scènes* and exaggerated acting associated with a particular period of Hollywood cinema – an approach which was also fundamental to some remarkable colour films of the decade, namely Smith's own *Normal Love* (1963), Ron Rice's *Chumlum* (1964) and Jose Rodriguez-Soltero's *Lupe* (1966). This approach is in line with that of the 'cinema of attractions' whose emphasis on exhibition and spectacle over 'diegetic absorption' and narrative, according to film historian Tom Gunning, dominated the first decade of silent cinema. As Gunning explains, the 'cinema of attractions' was supplanted by an emphasis on narrative in classical Hollywood cinema, but it continued to



A



- 1 Susan Sontag, 'Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures*' in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, Delta, 1966: 226–31.
- 2 Michael Moon, 'Flaming Closets' in *Out in Culture: Gay, Lesbian, and Queer Essays on Popular Culture*, eds Corey K Creekmur and Alexander Doty, Duke University Press, 1995: 289.
- 3 Marc Siegel, 'Documentary that Dare / Not Speak its Name: Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures*' in *Between the Sheets, in the Streets: Queer, Lesbian, and Gay Documentary*, eds Chris Holmlund and Cynthia Fuchs, University of Minnesota Press, 1997: 99.
- 4 Juan A Suárez, *Bike Boys, Drag Queens, and Superstars: Avant-Garde, Mass Culture, and Gay Identities in the 1960s Underground Cinema*, Indiana University Press, 1996: 187.
- 5 Stan Brakhage, 'From *Metaphors on Vision*' in *The Avant-Garde Film: A Reader of Theory and Criticism*, ed P Adams Sitney, Anthology Film Archives, 1978: 120.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Sontag (n1) 228.

A Frame enlargements from *Flaming Creatures*, dir Jack Smith, 1963. Courtesy The Film-Makers' Cooperative.

influence musicals and other genres and erupted again in certain avant-garde films.⁸ Gunning notes:

It is possible that this earlier carnival of the cinema, and the methods of popular entertainment, still provide an unexhausted resource – a Coney Island of the avant-garde, whose never dominant but always sensed current can be traced from Méliès through Keaton, through *Un Chien Andalou* (1928), and Jack Smith.⁹

Smith, together with his star, the actor Mario Montez, and other experimental filmmakers and actors provided a hallucinatory vision of themselves as a 'cinema of attractions', discovering the freedom to ignore professional standards of filmmaking and dominant conventional narrative structures.

Smith's films, Rice's *Chumlum* and Rodriguez-Soltero's *Lupe* marked a departure from much of the queer experimental film production of the previous two decades. Earlier films, such as Curtis Harrington's *Fragment of Seeking* (1946), Willard Maas's *Images in the Snow* (1948) and Gregory Markopoulos's *Swain* (1950), depicted the psychological nightmares provoked by the pressures of gender and sexual conformity. The formal dream-world narrative of this earlier cinema chillingly evokes the moral and psychological oppression of queer desire and polymorphous subjectivity. But *Flaming Creatures*, *Normal Love*, *Chumlum* and *Lupe* transported their audiences away from this despondent narrative into a space of pleasure, via the fantastical world of Hollywood glamour, costuming and B-movie actresses.¹⁰ How Smith and Montez got there is worth pondering.

Like so many artists in the 1960s underground scene, Smith and Montez struggled to pay the rent and feed themselves on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. J Hoberman notes that Smith's 'was a marginal existence lived on the edge of bohemian squalor'.¹¹ In his review of *Flaming Creatures*, Gregory Markopoulos describes Smith's near-poverty. 'He starves,' Markopoulos wrote; 'he subsists on days old oatmeal and fried, sautéed onions' in order to 'suffer and work in New York City'.¹² The Puerto Rican-born drag star Mario Montez also struggled, although his job as an office worker allowed him to furnish his apartment with cheap department and thrift store items.

Both men were outspoken about social inequality. Smith criticised the conspiracy of 'an unholy team of manufacturers, schools, government, and churches' which enforced conformity through dependence and condemned people who didn't play the game to lives of poverty.¹³ Responding to a question about his performance in Ronald Tavel's play *Indira Gandhi's Daring Device*, Mario Montez compared his community's poverty to India's and condemned the rich for ignoring the poor:

Is it fair that people are starving? There are people starving here too. I was almost starving last year. I had a part-time job and I was only taking home about thirty dollars ... I think these people who have money should all get together and put up a fund – a starvation fund – either for India or for the whole world – but they're not considerate – they're greedy.¹⁴

But as poor and embattled as they both were, Smith and Montez refused to live in abjection.

Hollywood spectacle was their inspiration. Rodriguez-Soltero told me that he often watched films with Montez and Smith in Montez's apartment. They were such an inspiration that even when Montez was performing in The Ridiculous Theatrical Company productions, he would run home as soon as he was done to 'see a film like *Gold Diggers of 1935* [Busby Berkeley, 1935] or *The Barefoot Contessa* [Joseph L Mankiewicz, 1954] on television'.¹⁵

Smith and Montez's immersion in Hollywood spectacle inspired both to turn their everyday existence into lives of Hollywood fantasy. Both decorated their apartments in a faux-luxurious style inspired largely by Hollywood epics, particularly the shadowy, lavishly textured films of Josef von Sternberg and the Technicolor orientalist and South Sea spectacles produced by Universal Studios and starring Maria Montez. In *Arabian Nights* (John Rawlins, 1942), *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* (Arthur Lubin, 1944), *Cobra Woman* (Robert Siodmak, 1944), *Sudan* (John Rawlins, 1945) and other Montez vehicles, Universal set designers created a sensuous backdrop of brightly coloured, jewelled interiors full of tapestries, curtains, tiles and columns inspired by an orientalist fantasy of Moorish design.

Jack Smith and Mario Montez enthusiastically imitated the excess of these films. But while Hollywood designers had enormous budgets to create sets and costumes, Smith and Montez had to rely on thrift shops and trash heaps to realise their fantasies. Like the assemblage artist Joseph Cornell, who scoured the used bookshops and record stores of Fourth Avenue to find bric-a-brac, engravings, books,

postcards, photographs, films and movie magazines, both Smith and Montez became masters of the found object, the throwaway, the vintage and the forgotten. Both seized upon the ephemeral, the mass-produced, the childlike and the mouldy and used these to emulate the worlds created by von Sternberg and Universal's designers. They furnished their rooms, as Smith's biographer Edward Leffingwell puts it, 'with pickings from the invisible department store of the street'.¹⁶ Smith frequently outfitted his apartment so that it could serve as a fantasy set for his photographic shoots, films, and theatrical productions. Montez also adorned his apartment in bold colours and spectacular décor. For several years, it featured a bathtub covered with two gold plastic laminated boards, a dining table with lion's feet, a maroon carpet and chartreuse sofa, and rainbow-coloured curtains. The centrepiece of his living room was the television, his *entrée* to Hollywood, which he decorated by placing a pearl necklace around the screen.¹⁷

Smith in particular learned from the films of von Sternberg that he didn't need colour or a large, expensive set to create a sumptuous, exotic visual world. As Andrew Sarris has noted, von Sternberg needed very little space to create his *mise en scène*, which was 'not the meaningless background of the drama, but its very subject, peering through nets, veils, screens, shutters, bars, cages, mists, flowers and fabrics to tantalize the male with fantasies of the female'.¹⁸ Smith filmed the black-and-white *Flaming Creatures* on the rooftop of the Windsor Theater, a Lower East Side movie house, with outdated film stock, giving it a faded, ghostlike

8 Tom Gunning, 'The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde' in *Early Cinema: Space-Frame-Narrative*, ed Thomas Elsaesser, British Film Institute, 1990: 57.

9 Ibid: 61.

10 Such referencing of Hollywood cinema's iconography and glamour, marked by flamboyance and exaggeration, perhaps most aligns this work to that of another queer experimental filmmaker, Kenneth Anger. Yet, theirs are two strikingly different forms of 'confrontation' with Hollywood.

11 J Hoberman, *On Jack Smith's Flaming Creatures and Other Secret-Flix of Cinemaroc*, Granary Books, 2001: 18.

12 Gregory Markopoulos, 'Innocent Rivals', *Film Culture*, vol 33, Summer 1964: 43.

13 Edward Leffingwell, 'Jack Smith: The Only Normal Man in Baghdad' in *Flaming Creature: Jack Smith, His Amazing Life and Times*, Serpent's Tail, 1997: 70.

14 Gary McColgen, 'The Superstar: An Interview with Mario Montez', *Film Culture*, vol 45, Summer 1967: 20.

15 Ibid: 18.

16 Leffingwell (n 13) 71.

17 McColgen (n 14) 18.

18 Hoberman (n 11) 22.

B Maria Montez in *Arabian Nights* (frame enlargement), dir John Rawlins, 1942.

C Maria Montez in *Cobra Woman* (frame enlargement), dir Robert Siodmak, 1944.





D

19 Jack Smith, 'The Astrology of a Movie Scorpio' in *Wait for Me at the Bottom of the Pool: The Writings of Jack Smith*, eds J Hoberman and Edward Leffingwell, High Risk Books, 1997: 55.

20 Jack Smith, 'The Perfect Filmic Appositeness of Maria Montez' in *ibid*: 32.

21 Jonas Mekas, 'The Great Pasty Triumph', *Film Culture*, vol 29, Summer 1963: 6.

22 P Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde, 1943–2000*, 3rd edn, Oxford University Press, 2002: 338.

23 Smith (n 20) 27.

24 'Conflict Pictured as Spur in Field of Style Creation', *Los Angeles Times*, 26 January 1940: 10.

25 Vera West, 'Hollywood Now Leading Style World', *Los Angeles Times*, 18 September 1940: B7.

26 Vera West, 'Dress Moods to be Away From War', *Los Angeles Times*, 19 February 1941: B15.

D Jack Smith, *Untitled (Mario Montez)*, c 1964. Black and White Photograph. © Estate of Jack Smith, courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York.

E Marlene Dietrich in *Blonde Venus*, dir Josef von Sternberg, 1932. Courtesy BFI.

quality. He painted a single backdrop of a large vase of flowers, but created the impression of a richer, multidimensional set through his varied compositions and camera positions, moving from a static *tableau vivant* to swirling actors dancing like dervishes, shot from overhead. The exoticism of the set, costumes and actors was heightened by Smith's choice of orientalist and pop music for the soundtrack.

After *Flaming Creatures*, Smith shot *Normal Love*, the 'lovely, pasty, pink and green color movie',¹⁹ as he described it, which drew upon a 'whole gaudy array of secret-flix'²⁰ including Hollywood horror films and Maria Montez and Busby Berkeley spectacles. Jonas Mekas called it Smith's 'pink-yellow Chinese-Arabic dream'.²¹ Here Smith shifted from black and white to colour, and from an urban rooftop to plein-air settings on Fire Island and in Old Lyme, Connecticut, and other rustic areas within striking distance of New York. *Normal Love* (or at least the footage remaining from the unfinished project) also replaced the fast, almost chaotic editing of *Flaming Creatures* with a more languorous pace. The film is a series of *tableaux vivants* which focus the viewer's attention even more on the glamour of his actors' costumes and poses.

Ron Rice's colourful and sumptuously textured film *Chumlum* was influenced by Smith's *Flaming Creatures* and especially *Normal Love*, which was being made at the time Rice began working on his film. Most of the scenes in *Chumlum* were shot in Rice's own loft apartment and featured Smith, Montez and other members of Smith's cast who often appear in costume

E



from shooting *Normal Love*.²² Following Smith, Rice created an extravagant orientalist aesthetic consisting of swinging hammocks, brilliant fabrics and exotically dressed and bejewelled characters in various poses and movements. But *Chumlum* departs from *Normal Love* in several ways, above all in composing its dazzlingly rich images as multiple in-camera superimpositions where moving bodies, jewellery, costumes, curtains and hammock netting all fuse into one. The superimposed scenes, often seen from different viewpoints, create vibrant, colourful layers that make the film more abstract and psychedelic than theatrical.

Smith and Montez drew upon the same Hollywood sources when they designed costumes for their film and theatrical productions. The costumes designed for Maria Montez by Universal's costume department, headed by Vera West, were especially influential. Smith was certainly aware of West's contribution, noting that her suicide in a swimming pool was one sign among many that the Montez era was over.²³ West's designs for gowns worn by actresses both on and off screen used bold colouring and alluring designs to counteract the darkening mood in the United States in the late 1930s and '40s as it witnessed the fascist march towards power and war in Europe. West embraced the approach defined by *Vogue* magazine editor Edna Woolman Chase in a talk on 'Fashions in Wartime' before a Los Angeles luncheon attended by West and other leading Hollywood costume designers in 1940. 'War doesn't stop fashion,' Chase declared; 'it stimulates and creates styles. The men look so attractive in their uniforms, the women want to look more alluring than ever. Everyone thinks, well, if it's a short life, it might as well be a merry one!'²⁴ Indeed, in Tay Garnett's film *Seven Sinners* (1940) West covered Marlene Dietrich in 'striking' jewellery and feathers, although Dietrich thought these accessories made her look 'junked up'.²⁵ A year later, the designer called for '[e]xtreme femininity of style ... to offset the severity of war'. She favoured green, with continued 'interest shown in bright flame red, and for softer tones, coral dust, beige and bleached pink'.²⁶ And she found inspiration in the East, arguing that Hollywood designers were 'called upon to do a great deal of research for period gowns or costumes typical of Bali or Java'; research they could use to produce 'style



F



G



influences which can be modernized and afford striking and original designs'.²⁷ Noted for adding exotic touches to her costumes, West hoped she would influence fashion off-screen. Trying to counteract the wartime gloom, she thought that the times required a more creative approach to fashion. In her own costume designs for Universal Studios, she typically spiced up simple dress designs with bold accessories such as hair, arm and ankle pieces, glittering jewelled pins, alluring multi-coloured headscarves, veils and elaborate turbans,²⁸ all of which complemented the spectacular sets designed by Russel A Gausman and Ira S Webb.

It is worth noting that while the settings, costumes and characters of the experimental filmmakers align themselves with Universal's commercial productions, in that they too evoke the romanticised, pre-modern world of the

Arabian Nights and other Eastern fantasies, there are distinct differences in terms of how the two forms of cinema deploy orientalism. Although Universal captured the orientalist, fairytale visual style, its formulaic narratives tended to posit this style in opposition to everything Western. In contrast, Smith and his coterie reclaimed orientalist fantasies in a much more radical way – by immersing themselves in their tableaux, by living them, with an ever-present sense of joyful absurdity. Becoming ostentatiously and luxuriously dressed harem girls, magicians, slaves, sheiks and other such archetypes, they lingered in the imagined idyllic pleasures, in the eroticism (at times transformed into something distinctly unerotic), in the narcissism, violence, polygamy and same-sex intimacy. They teased out these non-narrative moments of play and excess to create an



H



F Frame enlargements from *Normal Love*, dir Jack Smith, 1963. © Estate of Jack Smith, courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York.

G Jack Smith in *Chumlum* (frame enlargement), dir Ron Rice, 1964. Courtesy The Film-Makers' Cooperative.

H Mario Montez in *Lupe* (frame enlargements), dir Jose Rodriguez-Soltero, 1966. Courtesy The Film-Makers' Cooperative.



I



J

imaginary location for their experiments in subjectivity and to break from the West which, they felt, oppressed their queer imagination. By doing so, they complicated and suspended the East-West divide in a way that Universal's films couldn't and didn't, in spite of their lush imagery.

Although filmed in black and white, *Flaming Creatures* portrays a spectacular collection of 'flaming creatures', many of whom were men who posed, promenaded, put on lipstick, and danced in the exotic costumes, make-up and 'junked up' accessories inspired by designs such as West's. Francis Francine played an elegant Arabian woman, dressed in a turban, brocaded Moorish dress and long white gloves. Joel Markman played an alluring vampire with a Marilyn Monroe blonde wig, arched eyebrows and a simple, slinky form-fitting dress. Rene Rivera became Dolores Flores (later changing his

name again to Mario Montez), a Spanish dancer complete with a lace mantilla, fan, comb and flower in his mouth.

In *Normal Love*, Smith expanded his cast of exotic creatures to include Mario Montez as the Mermaid, Beverly Grant as the Cobra Woman, John Vaccaro as the White Bat, Tony Conrad as the Mummy, and other members of his creative circle as still more iconic creatures and characters from Hollywood's fantastic universe. Like *Flaming Creatures*, the film depends on a thrift-store aesthetic. Its astonishing costumes cheaply but creatively allow Smith's cast to approximate the look of Hollywood's own creatures.

Drawing on the same Hollywood imaginary, Mario Montez created costumes for many of his later film and theatrical roles using the vintage clothing, fabrics, make-up and accessories he found in thrift shops and dime stores. Like many

women of his generation, he learned to stretch his clothing budget by sewing new and re-styling existing garments. Montez developed a discerning eye for cheap dresses and accoutrements that could be transformed into the marvellous. By 1967 he would boast:

I don't like cheap things. Of course, most of the time I design and sew my own costumes, but when I go to thrift shops I don't pick up just any old thing. The gown I bought the other day, for example, was a Ceil Chapman, and it was quite expensive. I insist on looking my best in front of the camera.²⁹

By the time of Jose Rodriguez-Soltero's *Lupe*, Montez had established his own 'costume house', Montez-Creations, which made some of the costumes for the film and The Ridiculous Theatrical Company productions. His imagination knew no bounds, even if his budget did. In 1969, he told *Queen's Quarterly* that he spent \$50 a year on costumes and \$20 on make-up. Charles Ludlam and other Ridiculous Theatrical Company members claimed that it was Mario Montez who taught them about make-up as well as how to use glitter and sequins to create the fantastic.³⁰

The space of pleasure referred to by Sontag in her article was open to the community that came together to create these fantasy worlds. They produced the sets together, performed together, and dressed and put on make-up together, extending the pleasure in each activity that seemed as important as the finished work. After his first visit to the rooftop set of *Flaming Creatures*, Tony Conrad commented on his surprise 'when it turned out that people took three hours to put on their makeup' and 'when people took several more hours to put on their costumes'.³¹ Andy Warhol witnessed a similar scene on the set of Smith's *Normal Love*: '[P]reparations for every shooting were like a party – hours and hours of people putting makeup on and getting into costumes and building sets.'³² According to Markopoulos, Smith 'spent hours, a whole night' before shooting *Normal Love*, 'arranging, changing, shifting, replacing, placing objects, people, cheese cloths, fabrics about a prefabricated moon pool'.³³ As Stefan Brecht commented on the community that came together in The Ridiculous Theatrical Company, 'while the framework of reference of conventional theater experience is the individual presentation of the play, in this theater

it is the [collective] production of the play – the series of presentations, rehearsals, composition of the script ... the performance gives a glimpse into a process of personal interactions within a continuing community, everyone contributing personally.'³⁴ Or, as Michael Moon puts it, this community of performers created a 'voluptuous fringe'³⁵ – the creative excess of which *Flaming Creatures* and *Chumlum* document so brilliantly.

But there were also individual pleasures to be found in this collective enterprise – those of becoming one's own flaming creature. One major source of inspiration was of course Maria Montez. After working hard to achieve success as a fashion model in New York, Dominican-born Montez became an actress at Universal during the Second World War, starring in a number of Technicolor sand and sandal spectacles, which later made her a gay icon. Her career declined after the war, and in 1951 she drowned at the age of 39 after suffering a heart attack while taking a hot bath with reducing salts. Smith pays tribute to her screen magic in his article 'The Perfect Filmic Appositeness of Maria Montez', noting that it wasn't her acting that was important:

Maria Montez was remarkable for the gracefulness of her gestures and movement. This gracefulness was a real process of moviemaking. Was a delight for the eye – was a genuine thing about that person – the acting was lousy but if something genuine got on film why carp about acting – which HAS to be phony anyway – I'd RATHER HAVE atrocious acting ... Her real concerns (her conviction of beauty/her beauty) were the main concern – her acting had to be secondary ... M.M. dreamed she was effective, imagined she acted, cared for nothing but her fantasy ... Those who credit dreams became her fans.³⁶

Smith similarly inspired his actors, allowing them to become their own projected fantasies. 'The characters [in *Flaming Creatures*] were my friends', Smith explained, 'and my friends the characters.' He was '[d]etermined to discover the source which constituted his friends' fantasies, those unuttered, unintelligibly modulated images which existed in their minds'.³⁷

Mario Montez admired Maria, too, and emulated her conviction in the parts she played. Besides adopting her name for his stage persona, Mario Montez effused that 'she does everything with such fire – nothing is pretended'.³⁸ Joel Markman claimed that Mario Montez (to whom he referred as she)

27 West (n 25) B7.

28 Vera West, 'War Brings Practicality into Fashion Picture', *Los Angeles Times*, 17 September 1941: C6.

29 Montez cited in John Gruen, 'The Underground's M.M. – Mario Montez', *New York / World Journal Tribune*, 22 January 1969: 29.

30 David Kaufman, *Ridiculous! The Theatrical Life and Times of Charles Ludlam*, Applause Theatre and Cinema Books, 2002: 66.

31 Hoberman (n 11) 26.

32 Andy Warhol and Pat Hackett, *POPism: The Warhol '60s*, Harper & Row, 1980: 32.

33 Markopoulos (n 12) 44.

34 Stefan Brecht, 'Family of the f.p.: Notes on the Theatre of the Ridiculous', *The Drama Review*, vol 13 no 1, Autumn 1968: 125.

35 Moon (n 2) 284.

36 Smith (n 20) 34–5.

37 Markopoulos (n 12) 41.

38 McColgen (n 14) 19.

I Maria Montez, publicity photograph, 1941. © Universal Pictures Co, courtesy George Eastman House Motion Picture Department Collection.

J Lupe Velez, publicity photograph, 1930s. Courtesy George Eastman House Motion Picture Department Collection.

walks seemingly past the mirror but when exactly in line with the glass her head snaps around as if magnetized and she faces herself; hypnotically she is drawn to the mirror. All previous concerns forgotten. She stands there for a moment, arranging her vision ... She lives in a world where she is actually the greatest and most desirable actress of all time.³⁹

Underground playwright Ronald Tavel noted that Mario Montez ‘sometimes could approximate [Maria’s] belief when he was in a movie scene that it was not a movie-shoot at all, but the real thing’.⁴⁰ Montez was sure that his performance transcended his ‘thrift store couture’ and his lack of formal training in dancing and acting. He was the Spanish dancer in *Flaming Creatures* and he was Lupe in Rodriguez-Soltero’s *Lupe*.

Lupe, an homage to another Latino actress, the Mexican-born Lupe Velez, displayed Mario Montez’s capacity for self-transformation more than any other film. Like Maria Montez, Velez’s B-movie career and tragic end led to her becoming a gay diva (Velez committed suicide in 1944 after becoming pregnant by a younger lover; she was unable to face having the baby out of wedlock). Velez became a star in the late 1920s and a major focus of the tabloids due to her high-profile romance with Gary Cooper and subsequent marriage to Johnny Weissmuller. At the end of her film career, she starred in the B-movie ‘Mexican Spitfire’ comedy series at RKO, playing a stereotyped fiery Spanish woman.

Rodriguez-Soltero’s film stands in sharp contrast to another *Lupe*, also released in 1966, made by Andy Warhol and starring Edie Sedgwick alongside Billy Name. While Warhol focuses on the sad, lonely and sordid end of Velez’s life, Rodriguez-Soltero and Montez celebrate the actress’s operatic-like successes and tragedies. They portray her as choosing and experiencing a life of excess, and even in her death they show her body and soul ascending to a saintly, inspirational place. In contrast to Warhol’s deadpan aesthetic, with its improvisational, long take structure, Rodriguez-Soltero’s *Lupe* is what Sontag would describe as ‘visually very generous’. Filmed on Ektachrome-EF and printed on Kodachrome-II stock, it contains explosions of Vera West-like reds and greens and stunning superimpositions shot in the camera. Much of the film’s lavishness and exuberance derives from Rodriguez-Soltero’s loving attention to

Montez’s costumes and make-up. While Warhol’s film depicts the self-destruction of the star, Rodriguez-Soltero’s *Lupe* celebrates the freedom and pleasure of Montez’s transformation into a cherished actress, relishing his ascension out of ordinary life – a life constrained by political, moral and economic strictures – into an alternative space.

By creating an unfettered ‘cinema of attractions’, Smith, Montez and their coterie of friends appropriated Hollywood excess in order to construct and perform their own utopian fantasies. Their glamour and gestures, generous visuals, and vibrant music created spaces of pleasure for both audience and performers. They enabled a group of impoverished filmmakers and actors to affirm their lives and their right to existence. Anything but abject, they became the alluringly exotic, wild and transgressive Scheherazades and Cobra Women.

PART III

Dressing Pink Narcissus

Ryan Powell

³⁹ Steven Watson, *Factory Made: Warhol and the Sixties*, Pantheon, 2003: 54. Watson also notes that Montez didn’t like the term *drag* and preferred instead *going into costume*.

⁴⁰ Ronald Tavel, ‘Notes on Screen Test II’, Summer 2001 (accessed from ronald-tavel.com, November 2010; no longer available).