

# Radio Daze:

Why



Ken Jacobs'

*Blonde Cobra*

Still Matters

*by* Ara Osterweil

“For most of the wireless age,” radiomaker and audio artist Gregory Whitehead muses, “artists have found themselves vacated (or have vacated themselves) from radiophonic space; thus, the history of radio art is, in this most literal sense, largely a history of nobodies.”<sup>1</sup> Affectionately described as “the worst film ever made,”<sup>2</sup> Ken Jacobs’ experimental film *Blonde Cobra* (1963) is an elegy for such nobodies. He constructed the film out of the surviving footage of two parodies of Hollywood movies shot in the late 1950s and then abandoned, by his friends Bob Fleischer and Jack Smith. Picking up what would have seemed to any other filmmaker like worthless ruins, Jacobs used an inane voiceover recording by Smith as well as a live radio in the audience to reanimate these cinematic corpses. By doing so, Jacobs transformed the surviving footage of two “catastrophic remakes”<sup>3</sup> into an ecstatic meditation on failure and the idiocy of mass media. As we hobble along in one of the bleakest seasons yet of American electoral politics, I find myself compelled to return to the film’s insights about “how it all went wrong.”

As one of the pioneering multimedia works of the post-war avant-garde, *Blonde Cobra* was central to a group of Underground Films, made in New York City in the early 1960s, which transformed what it was possible to see, feel and hear on American screens. The film had its public debut alongside Jack Smith’s *Flaming Creatures* (1963) at the Bleecker Street Cinema in April 1963. That May, filmmaker, critic and avant-garde cinema champion Jonas Mekas described both films in the *Village Voice*, as works of an emerging “Baudelairean” cinema of poetry, “at once beautiful and terrible, good and evil, dirty and delicate.”<sup>4</sup> Borrowing from a host of artistic influences, including the disruptive techniques of Bertolt Brecht’s epic theater, John Cage’s embrace of chance operations and indeterminacy, and Marcel Duchamp’s transformation of everyday objects into art, Underground cinema was as formally innovative as it was sexually outrageous. Films by Ken Jacobs, Barbara Rubin, Jack Smith, Jonas Mekas, Stan Brakhage, Kenneth Anger, Andy Warhol, Taylor Mead, George and Mike Kuchar, Bruce Conner and Ron Rice, among many others, not only flagrantly transgressed the censorship laws that still governed American film exhibition and constrained Hollywood, but re-imagined how corporeal pains and pleasures could be shown onscreen. These films were polymorphously perverse to the core. They celebrated “deviant” forms of sexuality, while bending the fraught relationships between everyday life and art, identity and performance, and sound and image.

*Flaming Creatures* quickly became the most notorious film associated with the movement. In February 1964, screenings of the film at the New Bowery Theater were met with charges of obscenity, police seizures, theatre shutdowns, and the arrests of exhibitor Mekas; projectionist Ken Jacobs, his partner and soon-to-be wife, ticket-seller Florence Karpf; and usher Jerry Sims (Smith’s co-star in *Blonde Cobra*). As a New York City court trial drew public intellectuals such as Susan Sontag and Allen Ginsberg to the film’s defense, Smith’s ragged masterpiece became a *cause célèbre* of the downtown set. Amid that media circus, *Blonde Cobra* was neglected. Yet it actually epitomized Mekas’ description of a Baudelairean cinema. As Mekas gushed, Jacobs’ film was “hardly surpassable in perversity, in richness, in beauty, in sadness, in tragedy.”<sup>5</sup>

I had no idea what to expect when I first saw the film. I rented it for a class I was teaching on “Trash Cinema” as a 22-year-old graduate student instructor at the University of California, Berkeley. I knew of the film from hanging around on the outskirts of the experimental film scene in New York City, where I was from, but had never actually had the chance to see it. What better way to spend the university’s

modest budget than to rent a 16mm print of a hard-to-see film? When my boyfriend at the time, an avant-garde film know-it-all, volunteered to play the radio for me during the screening, I had no idea what he was talking about. I wouldn’t dare let on about my ignorance and nodded knowingly. I was a typical graduate student in that respect, at least. To my great delight, the opening scenes of film were so extraordinary that I wrote that they looked like “outtakes from a knockoff Dietrich picture made by a bunch of Martians”:<sup>6</sup>

Costumed in the tropes of classical cinema, an unusual-looking group of men sit, smoke, dance, ape and masquerade in the crumbling tenements of the Lower East Side. Other than Jack Smith, who convulses in the equally unconvincing guises of gangster and goddess, their performances are attenuated to the point of exhaustion. At different intervals throughout the film, we see Smith, festooned in sequin dress, silky headscarf, long dangling earrings and grotesquely applied lipstick, languishing in the debris that constitutes this film’s “set.” With his beaked nose and beady eyes, Smith is one part gypsy, one part flapper, and one part whatsit. This mutant Marlene seems utterly incongruous in the cluttered apartment in which he lolls, indifferent to whatever absurd genre plot is plodding along.<sup>7</sup>

I was, however, not prepared for what happened next: the image suddenly blacked out. Disorientation, and – since I was in charge of the screening – panic. *Had I broken the equipment? Had the celluloid snapped? Was this blackout supposed to happen, or was it just the most recent casualty of my technical incompetence? Why had anyone allowed me into the projection booth? Who let me teach a class on films I hadn’t yet seen?*

Although the image quickly returned (at least the first time), it soon became clear to me that this was no mere technical error. For one thing, a quick glance at my boyfriend, a cinema nerd, found him bobbing his head in some sort of rapturous recognition of kindred loserdom. His ecstasy quelled my anxieties, and I soon realized that failure, boredom and decrepitude were at the very core of Jacobs’ film. *Blonde Cobra* appropriates failure as a means of detonating the slick fantasies of an American dream that excluded us all. “Why shave when I can’t even think of a reason for living?” Jack Smith ponders, before stamping this aphorism with its inconsequential origin and authorship: “Jack Smith, 1958. 6th Street.” I was a long way from the East Village, but he was speaking for both of us.

During most of the film’s many blackouts, we hear Jack Smith babbling nonsensically. Jacobs had encouraged Smith – who has since become an icon of queer performance art following his death from AIDS in 1989 – to provide a voiceover for the film two years after their friendship fell apart. Among the stories and adages Smith narrates, his impersonation of a gaggle of hysterical nuns as well as their Mother Superior “Madame Nescience” stands out. They engage in a grotesque sexual orgy involving torn habits and a defiled statue of Jesus. Smith’s depraved ventriloquism defies easy categorization. Although critic Roland Barthes famously mused on the unique quality, or “grain of the voice,” as a bodily emanation whose meaning registers beyond the values of language or music,<sup>8</sup> Smith’s articulations reach into another realm altogether. “Picture the glittery stuck-o sandcastles plopped upside-down on the ceiling of a Chinese restaurant” and you will begin to imagine its texture.<sup>9</sup> Within the conventions of theatrical film exhibition, speakers placed behind the screen deliberately create the illusion of actors’ voices emanating from, and grounded in, the bodies depicted onscreen. In *Blonde Cobra*, however, there are no visible bodies during the screen’s prolonged black

interstices, and Smith's voice flutters around the room like a moth suicidally navigating a chamber of searing lights.

Smith's outrageous story is made all the more vivid by Jacobs' ironical decision to keep it off screen, or "obscene." Had the sacrilege described by Smith actually been filmed, the courts would have almost certainly found *Blonde Cobra* even more obscene than Smith's own *Flaming Creatures*. Yet without an image to ground Smith's disembodied voice, audience members are compelled to imagine the perverse spectacle for themselves. By refusing to deliver the goods, Ken Jacobs thus makes the audience complicit in the authorship of Smith's transgressions. In doing so, he reminds us of how mass media (like radio and cinema) require us to consent, physiologically and mentally, to our participation. Of course, if we can be seduced by the ravings of a lunatic, we will consent to just about anything – as long as it gives good play.

Jacobs' resurrection of the abandoned footage finds its complement in his use of sound as an *objet trouvé*. The two abandoned films that comprise the film conspicuously fail to achieve either the opulence of classical Hollywood or the tawdry glamour of the B pictures they emulate. This disjunction – between the film's impoverished means and its luxuriant aspirations – not only lends the footage pathos and poignancy, but also creates the very need for its formal and conceptual innovation.

By cutting through the amateur aesthetics of home movies with the *Verfremdungseffekt* of the avant-garde theatre, *Blonde Cobra* severed any comfortable relationship between reality and representation. Though Smith was a "midwestern Catholic queer"<sup>10</sup> with a penchant for drag, and Jacobs a Socialist Jew from Brooklyn with a penchant for moralizing jeremiads, their asynchronous collaboration in post-production demonstrated the inherent queerness of all forms of artistic kinship and hybridization. As in Robert Rauschenberg's mid-century Combine sculptures, and many of John Cage's musical compositions, both artists made non-standard use of a variety of media – radio, screen, camera, body, noise and voice – in order to expand their audience's perceptions. Whereas Kenneth Anger had used audio-visual counterpoint to brilliantly calculated effect in his 1963 film *Scorpio Rising* by pairing pop songs ostensibly about heterosexual desire with homoerotic images of bikers and sadomasochistic ritual, Jacobs cultivated an improvisational disharmony. He used the disjunctions between sound and image as a way of pulling the viewer into and out of the film world; he activated the tensions and dynamic conflicts that the German-American abstract painter Hans Hofmann theorized as the "push and pull" that give an artwork a sense of depth and motion. That the 29-year-old Jacobs employed such a technique is hardly surprising. (*How* he did it is astounding.) During the late 1950s, after serving in the U.S. Coast Guard off the coast of Alaska as a way of avoiding military deployment to Korea, Jacobs became a student at the un-accredited Hans Hofmann School of Fine Arts in Lower Manhattan.<sup>11</sup>

A radio, planted in the audience, is one of *Blonde Cobra's* signal innovations. Ken Jacobs provides very specific instructions as to how to play the live radio that accompanies projection. They can be found in the canister of the 16mm film available for institutional rental from the Filmmakers Cooperative in New York City, and from the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre in Toronto. He tells the exhibitor precisely when to shut it on and off, how to wiggle among the channels, and when to drift into the white noise of static. The use of radio not only transforms the exhibition experience, but radically alters this film's relationship to the ontology of cinema. Traditional theatrical exhibition of sound cinema presumes that the artwork remains stable

while the audience changes, unlike very early silent films where reels were often re-cut and reordered during screenings. Yet Jacobs maintains both audience and artwork in a state of flux. As in the Happenings of the late '50s and early '60s, *Blonde Cobra* insists that artworks are not dead things to hang or screen on a wall and accumulate value, but living, breathing works that can only be fully activated by thoroughly embodied participation and by incorporating chance elements from the environment. The instructions for playing the radio constitute a conceptual score that must be interpreted by a projectionist in her role as performer. As Jacobs explains, *Blonde Cobra* "happens when you watch it, happens wherever and whenever it plays."<sup>12</sup>

The filmmaker's most precise instructions call for the projectionist to snap off the live radio immediately when Smith's character, dressed and babbling like a baby, smashes an onscreen radio with a hammer. Up until this point, it is just possible that audience members may have not even consciously registered the radio's static, or thought of it merely as ambient irritation. However, when the live radio falls silent at precisely the same moment that Smith destroys its onscreen facsimile, the umbilical cord between the real and the representation manifests itself suddenly, and just as suddenly is severed. In this surprising moment of multimedia simultaneity, the antics of a madman are shown to have actual, if bewildering, effects. Beyond the turgid fantasies of screen and airwave, there is, Jacobs insists, a world of unavoidable consequence.

In my book on sexually explicit experimental film of the 1960s and '70s, *Flesh Cinema: The Corporeal Turn in American Avant-Garde Film*, I discussed the ways in which Jacobs choreographs what is not seen, or *the unseen scene*, as an allegory of the difficulty of making sexually provocative films in an era in which such representations were legally prohibited. However, Jacobs was not interested in cinematically illustrating Smith's irreverent sexual fantasies. Instead, Smith's verbal shenanigans support Jacobs's "optic antics"<sup>13</sup> as desperate responses to an oppressive, militaristic culture. Although the luscious dark matter of Jacobs's black screen may vibrate like an Ad Reinhardt "black" painting from roughly the same period, it also serves as a means of conscientious objection, or *coitus interruptus*, from the mass orgy of media indoctrination.

On the occasion of a recent screening of *Blonde Cobra* in Texas – adopted home of U.S. Senator and one-time demonic Republican hopeful Ted Cruz, as well as former American president George W. Bush – I asked Ken Jacobs a few questions about the film's production and his innovative methods of salvation. He recalled:

Bob Fleischer and Jack had given up on finding a movie in the bits and pieces of film they shot. The filming had been kept secret from me, I don't know why, it was done right after I'd completed filming *Star Spangled to Death*. The footage existed for months before I knew about it. Jack had looked at it repeatedly on a tabletop viewer and then given up and returned it to Bob who never had any ideas about the situations Jack prepared for him to film each weekend. I said I saw a film in the footage and Bob then gave the 10 or 11 100ft camera rolls over to me to do with what I wished.<sup>14</sup>

Lacking any desire to create a normative film, Jacobs began editing the footage in the winter of 1959 with no sound and, as he put it, "no fucking money":

Only Bob drew a steady salary but he was remote, out of it. Flo [Florence Karpf, Jacobs' then-girlfriend and soon-to-be wife] saw the film, again less sound, summer of '61 at the Provincetown Playhouse in Provincetown where



Ken Jacobs, film still from *Blonde Cobra*, 1963, 33 min.  
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

I was futilely [sic] trying to raise finishing funds and Flo henceforth was mine. Soon after the summer, with our friendship over, Jack and I got together and in two sessions I taped him for the track, stuff I'd heard him say, stuff in his style, and the improvised songs and stories.<sup>15</sup>

Ken Jacobs was justifiably irritated at my plan to thematize his use of radio in *Blonde Cobra* in the recent Texas screening. It didn't help his mood to learn that I had programmed his film alongside Barbara Rubin's erotic masterpiece *Christmas on Earth* (1963), a film he despises, and one whose maker may have borrowed Jacobs' idea of using a live radio as its soundtrack. (As avant-garde scholar P. Adams Sitney has suggested, Jacobs himself may have been inspired by performance artist Taylor Mead's irritating habit of finding a "soundtrack" off his boom box during the screening of silent films at the Film-Makers' Cinematheque at the Gramercy Arts Theater, where Jacobs often projected.<sup>16</sup>) "What else did you expect?" he chided me over email:

You plan to highlight the radio that I wanted to surprise viewers. Just as I wanted the black spaces with voice alone to be jolting. Death is coming, folks, the end of the movie concurrent with the death of Jack and these are warnings. The life of a movie is as chancy as a person's. *Blonde Cobra* looms out of poverty with hardly any chance of existing. Just like Jack.

By deliberately thwarting audience expectations, Jacobs aimed to startle viewers into sudden recognition of their desperation and delusions. While radio had originally promised to be a form of universal communication bursting with democratic potential, such promise was inevitably betrayed by the inextricability of all modern media from the war machine. In 1933 – incidentally the same year of Jacobs'

birth – Italian Futurists F.T. Marinetti and Pino Masnata wrote a manifesto praising "La Radia" for abolishing time and space and any sense of today or tomorrow. Dreaming of the "metallization of the human body and the purification of the life spirit as a machine force," they celebrated radio as a way of severing contact with all tradition, including the "strangled stifled fossilized and frozen" knowledge contained in books.<sup>17</sup> Meanwhile, on the other side of hell, Adolf Hitler and his Minister of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda, Joseph Goebbels, used radio broadcasts to whip listeners of the Third Reich into a frenzy of nationalism and racial hatred. As Goebbels believed, "What the press has been for the Nineteenth Century, radio will be for the Twentieth."<sup>18</sup> In other words: the instrument by which popular media could betray the interests of the people it was said to represent.

Popular media's ability to speak to everyone and to no one in particular simultaneously helps to disguise its complicity in technologies of annihilation. "Ubiquitous but fading without a trace," radio is "forever crossing boundaries but with uncertain destination; capable of the most intimate communion and the most sudden destruction."<sup>19</sup> Although the word "radio" comes from the Latin *radius* and etymologically carries forth an emphasis on irradiation and illumination, radio has often functioned as a dark sorcerer. Though "voiced by multiple personalities, perfect for pillow talk, [and] useful as an antidepressant," radio is, as Gregory Whitehead reminds us, "also deployable as guiding beam for missile systems. [...] Just beneath the promise of a lightning connection to a world of dreamy invisible things lurks a darker potential for spotlessly violent electrocution, for going up in smoke, or going down with the ship."<sup>20</sup>

*Blonde Cobra* attempts to break through the penchant of American audiences for mindless self-destruction by suddenly withdrawing the opiate of entertainment. As Jacobs explains:

The movie chides the audience: ‘You came for laughs?’ and while Jack tantalizes with his uniquely inventive language and with story (which traditionally lead somewhere) the lights go out and the comfortable confines of visible things are gone. They audience is abandoned in blackness as much as the ignoble subject of the movie, the self-mocking/asserting freak, the blonde cobra. Viewers now must hang on to story for dear life.<sup>21</sup>

While I am habitually skeptical about artists’ explanations of their own work, I was convinced by Jacobs’ explicitly political response to my inquiries:

The decision to go black and to impose passages of radio talk was all part of demonstrating the plight of one fragile conscious existence up against global historical stupidity. A threadbare life, poverty stated as such throughout the work, illustrated by the tendency to give way to blackness. The wonder of radio, communication between conscious lives, a great thing made stupid by our owners, keeping us stupid. It was the Fifties then but even now, just go a little way off what you listen to or watch and learn for yourself why voters vote for the people eating them.

The radio presented the background of our lives, always, reliably degrading. Rampant disease, what we lived against. *BC [Blonde Cobra]* happens when you watch it, happens wherever and whenever it plays, up against mass indoctrination to and reinforcement of stupidity. I will be delighted when it no longer makes sense. The blackness is death but I also wasn’t for the screen competing with Jack’s spoken images.<sup>22</sup>

In his co-edited volume *Wireless Imagination: Sound, Radio, and the Avant-Garde*, Whitehead complains that, “when radio has appeared under the name of art, it is most often under the degraded guise of industrial artifact, with its commercialized cacophony providing one sound source among others. In this reduced state, radio is no longer an autonomous public space but merely an acoustic readymade to be recontextualized, switched on, and played.”<sup>23</sup> On superficial inspection, Jacobs may initially seem guilty as charged. However, by using intermittent interruptions from radio noise and a black screen, *Blonde Cobra* provides a critical meditation on the relationship between media spectatorship and manufactured consent. The “commercialized cacophony” that distracts us is the object of Jacobs’ critique, not a distraction from it.

In spite of the fact that they were not named as such, cinema, radio and television were all part of the “military industrial complex” against which American President Dwight Eisenhower warned the nation in his farewell address in January 1961. Of course, Eisenhower was no dove: a five-star general in the United States Army in World War II, he had served as Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces in Europe. He ran for president on a campaign against communism, Korea and non-interventionism. As the 34th President of the United States (1953–1961), Eisenhower threatened the use of nuclear weapons in Korea – where Jacobs had managed to avoid serving – and engineered military coups in Iran and Guatemala. Though his vice-president wouldn’t win the American presidency until 1969 – Richard Nixon was unexpectedly defeated in 1960 by Junior Senator John F. Kennedy, many argue because of his awkward appearance in the first televised presidential debates – Eisenhower’s empowerment of the young right-wing firebrand eventually led to another evisceration of American democratic process in the Watergate scandal. Although the camera-worthy Kennedy promised a New Frontier when he succeeded

Eisenhower in 1961, his presidency marked the beginning of American imperial involvement in Southeast Asia. No wonder that “there was no thinking/planning” of Jacobs’ decision to “preserv[e] the darkness” of the interstice. In spite of the fact that the nearly universal switch to televisions in the United States by 1962 made *Blonde Cobra*’s use of radio somewhat nostalgic, Jacobs insists to this day that: “it was the way it had to be.”<sup>24</sup>

The cynical and, I believe, ultimately suicidal belief of many contemporary Americans that the difference between the Democratic and Republican parties is akin to choosing between the lesser of two evils, has its bedrock in the era in which Smith and Jacobs lollygaged around on the Lower East Side, making mincemeat of their own potential as worthy subjects of capital. Jacobs’ live radio has the capacity to re-animate these ecstatic apparitions from a bygone era, providing us with opportunity to meditate on the way their subversive antics might irradiate the spectral idiocies of our own dark daze. Contemporary entertainment continues to disguise the death drive of the mass audience in a blitzkrieg of blazing screens. Yet even in such dire straits, I remain inspired, if not consoled, by the now anarchic, now hopeful musings of a couple of elderly socialist Jews from Brooklyn who are still trying, by whatever desperate means available, to get the American public to stop voting for the people who aim to devour us. To Ken Jacobs, Bernie Sanders, and this expatriate’s chagrin, I’m afraid that *Blonde Cobra* still makes sense.

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#### Endnotes

- 1 Gregory Whitehead, “Out of the Dark: Notes on the Nobodies of Radio Art,” in *Wireless Imagination: Sound, Radio, and the Avant-Garde*, ed. Douglas Kahn and Gregory Whitehead (Cambridge, Massachusetts; The MIT Press, 1994) p. 253.
- 2 David James, *Allegories of Cinema, American Film of the Sixties*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989) p. 127.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 125.
- 4 Jonas Mekas, “Baudelairean Cinema” in *Movie Journal, the Rise of a New American Cinema, 1959-1971* (New York: Collier Books, 1972) pp. 85-86.
- 5 Mekas, “On the Baudelairean Cinema,” in *Movie Journal*, p. 86.
- 6 Ara Osterweil, *Flesh Cinema: The Corporeal Turn in American Avant-Garde Film* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2014) p. 1.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 1–2.
- 8 Roland Barthes, “The Grain of the Voice.” *Image - Music - Text*, trans. Stephen Heath. New York: Hill and Wang, 1977; pp. 179-189.
- 9 Osterweil, 3.
- 10 Paul Arthur, “A Panorama Compounded of Great Human Suffering and Ecstatic Filmic Representation: Texts on Ken Jacobs” in *Optic Antics: The Cinema of Ken Jacobs*, ed. Michele Pierson, David E. James, Paul Arthur. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, 25-37; 27.
- 11 Michele Pierson, “Introduction: Ken Jacobs – A Half-Century of Cinema”, in *Optic Antics: The Cinema of Ken Jacobs*, ed. Paul Arthur, David James, Michele Pierson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) pp. 3–24, 5.
- 12 Ken Jacobs, email to the author, February 18, 2016.
- 13 *Optic Antics: The Cinema of Ken Jacobs* is the title of the aforementioned book devoted to the artist’s work.
- 14 Ken Jacobs, email to the author, February 18, 2016.
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 Avant-garde film scholar P. Adams Sitney suggested this inspiration in an email to the author dated February 17, 2016.
- 17 F.W. Marinetti and Pino Masnata, “La Radia,” *Gazzetta del Popolo*, October 1933. trans. Stephen Sartarelli and reprinted in *Wireless Imagination* pp. 265-268.
- 18 Joseph Goebbels, “Der Rundfunk als achte Großmacht,” (“Radio as the Eighth Great Power”) *Signale der neuen Zeit*. 25 ausgewählte Reden von Dr. Joseph Goebbels (Munich: Zentralverlag der NSDAP., 1938), pp. 197–207. <http://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/goeb56.htm>
- 19 Whitehead, “Out of the Dark,” 257.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 256.
- 21 Ken Jacobs, email to the author, February 18, 2016.
- 22 *Ibid.*, bold and italics added by the author.
- 23 Whitehead, 256.
- 24 Ken Jacobs, email to the author, February 18, 2016.