

EXPRMNTL 3 / Knokke-le-Zoute 1963

Flaming Creatures, Raving Features

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A discussion of Flaming Creatures' exhibition and reception at EXPRMNTL 3 / Knokke-le-Zoute 1963. An effort is also made to sort out the conflict between the competing roles of key figures in the controversy.

The Miraculous One was Raging and Flaming.
Those are the Standards for Art.

- **Jack Smith**, on his idol Lola Montez

DARK-CELLAR-FILMS IN A GHOST TOWN¹

On Christmas day 1963, EXPRMNTL 3 opens its doors. It is the third version of what started as a showcase for experimental film in 1949 as part of a bigger international film festival followed by a second more specific experimental film festival in 1958 as part of the World Exhibition in Brussels. In 1963, film lovers, filmmakers, artists, intellectuals, journalists and visitors got together in the Casino of Knokke-le-Zoute for the first true version of EXPRMNTL.² There were about 500 people in total. They attended the film screenings, concerts, exhibitions, theatre plays, lectures, debates, and everything else that made EXPRMNTL 3 an (ad)venture taking over the local casino for one week, but extending far beyond it and for long afterwards: 'EXPRMNTL 3 fut un véritable traitement de choc, un magnifique lavage du cerveau, la révélation d'une impressionnante variété d'écritures personnelles qui nous étaient jusque-là inconnus et que l'on découvrirait avec passion' (Lethem, 1990: 156).

EXPRMNTL was founded and organized by Jacques

Ledoux, who was, at the time, conservator of the Belgian National Film Archive (also known as the Cinémathèque) in Brussels. It is in a class of its own as both a film festival and as a cultural manifestation. Or in the words of Simon Hartog: 'if the new Cinema has a European crib, it is Knokke. If it has a mage it is Jacques Ledoux, the festival director' (Hartog, 1969: 24). EXPRMNTL showed, promoted and debated experimental cinema as it was never done before, and would never happen after.

What other festival aspires to so much significance? Cannes and Venice are producer's fairs, dedicated to superficiality and determined by politics. New York and London present more "dignified" festivals, but their orientation as showcases of other festivals classes them outside of the priestly gatherings that the European spectacles are; they are cram sessions to catch up on the commercial cinema rather than festivals in the vulgar sense. Knokke-le-Zoute on the other hand, stands as the sole gathering of international avant-garde film-makers. (Adams Sitney, 1968: 7).

From its first edition in 1949 to its swansong in 1974, the five editions of this festival were the main meeting place for experimental filmmakers from the entire world, and there is still no similar events dedicated to this specific 'genre' in film.³ (Garcia Bardon, 2002 :6; Storck, 1990: 159) In 1963, the festival took place during the week between Christmas and New Year in the Casino of the bourgeois Belgian seaside town Knokke-Le-Zoute, a drafty rainy place with grim grey skies that plunge into an even greyer North Sea. Jonas

Mekas, cynically opened a column about Knokke with a comment on the gloomy character of the place: 'I was told that the Vikings avoided Knokke-le-Zoute, a lonely and desolate place to be caught in. I don't remember if I saw the sun during the week I stayed there. In any case, I am not sure about it' (Mekas, 1964:111). Henri Storck, a Belgian documentary filmmaker who was also involved with the Belgian Royal Film Archive at the time, explains the reasons for the move to Knokke after the 1958 edition of the festival which took place in Brussels (as part of the World Exhibition):

Parce qu'on y avait commencé le grand festival en 1947, et que le directeur du casino voulait des événements culturels dans son établissement. Lorsque les recettes des jeux sont dépensées à organiser des concerts ou des expositions, cela permet certains allègements de taxes. Knokke-le-Zoute est une plage de grand luxe pour les gens aisés et il était très heureux de pouvoir faire de la publicité pour son casino en hiver. Les hôtels étaient disponibles, et Ledoux avait un gros budget pour bien loger ses invités. (Storck, 1990: 159)

In short, the casino director seized the opportunity to attract the bourgeoisie to Knokke during the depressing winter season; motivated by tax benefits and free publicity, he happily lent his upper class establishment to an underground spectacle. He got publicity all right!

FLAMES OVER KNOKKE AND IN ITS DARK CELLARS

A posteriori, EXPRMNTL 3 is generally considered a try-out festival, an event that was still searching for its true calling and shape. Yet it takes on mythic proportions because of the historic, intercontinental confrontation between the American Underground and The French New Wave, two movements competing for and debating the meaning of 'experimental film': Jean-Luc Godard and Jonas Mekas inflamed the discussion over the economic and creative criteria for define experimental film as a genre. But the most explosive topic to arise from the 1963 festival was definitely the film *Flaming Creatures* (Jack Smith, 1963). This film and the scandal it caused in Knokke-le-Zoute are still part of its celebrity today, and the film has contributed to the festival's fame (Garcia Bardon, 2002: 19 and 32).

Jack Smith (1932-1989) is a central figure of the American Underground. He plays in some 'classics' of the American Underground and he made about 20

films himself. *Flaming Creatures*, is a film best known for its many problems with authorities. The film could not pass New York City censorship requirements, in 1964 the police shot down the Gramercy where it was shown, and when Mekas found another venue, detectives turned up to interrupt the screening and seize the film. Mekas was prosecuted and convicted for showing the work (Bordwell and Thompson: 591). Hence Thompson and Bordwell (1994) simply label it 'the most notorious underground movie'. They explain:

In about forty minutes, transvestites, naked men and women, and other 'Flaming Creatures' enact a rape and an orgy. Shot in a jerky, awkward style and harshly overexposed, *Flaming Creatures* created the underground's noisiest scandal. After the first screening, the theatre management cancelled all underground shows. *Flaming Creatures* could not pass New York City censorship requirements, so it was screened free at the Gramercy Arts Theatre while donations were solicited. At the 1963 Knokke-le-Zoute festival, the film was denied screening, but Mekas seized the projection booth and ran the film until authorities cut the power. (Thompson & Bordwell, 1994: 591)

What exactly happened in Knokke is actually a more elaborate and cheeky story, described with varying details in most of the reports about EXPRMNTL. The commotion had to do with the daring content of the film. But *Flaming Creatures*, although overtly sexual in content, is not a pornographic work. It is more a contestation of Hollywood aesthetics and, as most critics agree, it convincingly breaks a number of taboos:

Smith was raised on Hollywood kitsch, and the imagery of the 1940s movie monsters, and especially his patron saint Maria Montez – to whom he built an altar and prayed... After a screening of one of her films, he told a friend: "The Miraculous One was raging and flaming. Those are the standards for art." Smith's own standards for art let him refashion Montez and the whole ethos of tinny Orientalia, low-budget intrigues, and what he called "Universal's cowhide thongs and cardboard sets" into Dionysian revels that were both wild camp and subtle polemic in upsetting an overflowing apple cart of norms: heterosexuality, narrative, social and sexual and aesthetic repressions. (Morris, <http://www.brightlightsfilm.com>)

Flaming Creatures revolts against the sentimental and

sexual hypocrisy of Hollywood as Jack Smith saw it:

Flaming Creatures deliberately manifests what he finds implicated in Maria Montez's and Von Stroheim's films, and without the interference of a plot. When he brings to the fore what has been latent in those films – visual texture, androgynous sexual presence, exotic locations – and at the same time totally discards what holds these films together (elaborate narratives), he utterly transforms his sources and uncovers a mythic center from which they had been closed off. (Adams Sitney, 1979: 353)

As such the film is also a perfect example of Pop-art:

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. Simply in a visual sense, too, it is full of contradictions. Very studied visual effects (lacy textures, falling flowers, tableaux) are introduced into disorganized, clearly improvised scenes in which bodies, some shapely and convincingly feminine and other scrawny and hairy, tumble, dance, make love. (Sontag, 1964: 230)

Nevertheless the film did make some critics uncomfortable at the time. Paul Davay in *Beaux Arts*, who called *Flaming Creatures* earlier 'un film manifeste' and 'une protestation provocatrice' admits that:

'pour ma part, je regrette un peu que cet ouvrage ait opté avec obstination pour l'exhibition pédérastique en y joignant une note de vulgarité, d'autant plus que Smith n'a pas le talent de Genet. Cependant, ce qui confère à cette entreprise scabreuse un ton incontestablement artistique, c'est le lyrisme baroque dans l'emploi de la caméra et un climat sonore rigoureusement irréaliste.'

He continues on a more personal note:

'Bien sur, provocation pour provocation, je préfère celles des surréalistes selon Breton, axées sur la sexualité féminine. Je n'ai pas l'humeur de Cocteau, ni celle de Julien Green, je m'en excuse. Mais, je ne me permettrai pas de juger du tempérament de certaines, même si mes préférences vont ailleurs. (Beaux Arts 1964).

Jacques Ledoux had discovered *Flaming Creatures* when visiting New York to preview work for EXPRMNTL3, and was deeply touched by the work. He brought it to Brussels, where it stunned the jury and was unanimously selected for the festival. But once programmed, the film raised legal problems for the organizers as it shows the actor's sex organs excessively. At the time (in Belgium) this was enough ground to raise complaints of obscenity and prohibit (future) screenings of the work. Although just a hypothetical problem at this early stage, it would pose a major problem for Pierre Vermeulen, then director of the National Belgian Film Archive and thus coorganizer of the festival, who in 1963 was also the national Minister of Justice (Garcia Bardon, 2002: 28). In the end, without invoking an 'official' embargo but fearing a possible scandal and far reaching consequences for the Royal Film Archive, its director and the festival, the selection jury decides that *Flaming Creatures* will not be presented to the public. The projection of this film was just too risky, even for an underground festival. In the festival program it reads:

'During its final deliberation, the selection jury decided to state explicitly that the majority of its members recognized the aesthetical and experimental qualities of the film *Flaming Creatures* by Jack Smith (USA, 1963) but had to ascertain unanimously that the showing of it was impossible in regards to Belgian laws' (Festival Program EXPRMNTL 3).

Clearly the organizers reckoned without their host. Jonas Mekas, producer and promoter of the film, was also a jury member for the festival's international film competition. Jonas Mekas had gradually become a central figure of the American Underground, both as filmmaker, a film critic and as pioneer of a parallel network for production and distribution of Avant-Garde work in the USA. He was co-founder of both the magazine *Film Culture*, the New York Film-Maker's Coop and the Anthology Film Archives (Sitney, 1979: 347). That is how he met Jacques Ledoux who invited Jonas Mekas to be a jury member for the international competition (not of the selection jury), which is questionable as the competition included several works of 'his' film pool, and because Mekas himself encouraged various people to send their films to Knokke. Mekas was delighted with the selection of *Flaming Creatures*, and the subsequent withdrawal made him furious. The before mentioned text of the official program didn't reassure Mekas who, as soon as he arrives in Knokke, sets everything in motion to preserve and present the banned film.

Jonas Mekas' main argument was that the festival regulations did not mention any legal restrictions, only artistic ones, and that once a film was selected it *had* to participate in the competition. He addressed his fellow jurors, who at that point had no idea what had happened, and announced his resignation from the jury. He insisted his colleagues on the international jury do the same. In support of his argument he presented them letters from other filmmakers of the American Underground (Brakhage, Breer, Markopoulos, Vanderbeek and Anger) who gave him written permission to withdraw their films if *Flaming Creatures* was not shown (see annex). (Garcia Bardon, 2002: 29) Mekas' actions didn't fail to have an effect. Nervous that the competition jury might indeed step down, the festival organizers tentatively asked the selection committee to replace them.

But the replacements were not needed. Mekas' fellow jury members decided to stay on the job. However, they did issue a statement expressing their opposition to the interdiction of *Flaming Creatures*. Interesting enough, it was also a statement against the pressure from the film's defenders. Moreover, they recommended that the other films participate in the competition and suggested that in the event that they won an award, they refuse it out of protest. In the end, neither Stan Vanderbeek (Prix Bell Téléphone, 2000 US\$) nor Gregory Markopoulos (Prix Baron Lambert, 2000 US\$) actually gave up their awards. (Garcia Bardon, 2002: 28 ; EXPRMNTL 3 Festival Documents)

After this preliminary uproar around *Flaming Creatures*, a bigger tumult happened during the festival itself. This saga was recounted in detail by one of its main actors, Jonas Mekas. Once home, he published his version of the riotous events in the *Village Voice*:

I went to the Third International Experimental Film Exposition as one of the jury members. By now most of you know what happened: that I had to reject the jurorship, that I had to take a stand against censorship. Last week's report in the *Voice*, although fragmentary, covered some occurrences at Knokke. I myself am not sure about what really happened at Knokke during that stormy, confused, disappointed, sad, desperate week. It did different things to each of us. And there will be conflicting reports about it for years to come, about the Flames over Knokke-le-Zoute; about how we smuggled FLAMING CREATURES into the projection room in the can of DOG STAR MAN; about our screenings in the hotel

cellar amidst dusty old furniture, cobwebs, old newspapers; about how, on New Year's night, we stormed the Crystal Room and took over the projector, how the lights were cut-off, and how I ran to the switchboard room, trying to push off the house detective, holding the door, trying to force the fingers of the bully who was holding the switch.

"People, do you want to see the film?" Barbara Rubin shouted from the projector platform, fighting like a brave general.

"Yes" answered the people.

It is too confusing what went on after that. Much pushing and shouting as the switch changed hands between me and the cop. It was about this time that the Minister of Justice arrived. The riot was getting more and more out of hand. The Minister made an attempt to explain the Belgian law. But then if we asked if there was such a law forbidding the showing of films, he said there was no such law. "Then fuck you", shouted Barbara to the Minister of Justice of Belgium. We made another attempt to project *Flaming Creatures* right on his face, but the light was cut off again. Later I was told that the Minister of Justice in his speech gave his word that the Belgian laws on this matter will be changed. (...)

Our reactions (by "our" I mean Barbara Rubin, Paul Adams Sitney and myself) at Knokke-le-Zoute were motivated by our feelings against the suppression of any film or any aesthetic expression. During our press conference, as well as at other occasions, we made it clear that we were not fighting for this particular film, but for the principle of free expression. (...) If Knokke left any lasting impression on me, it is the realization of the dishonesty of artistic "freedom" that is related to clubs, societies, membership groups. That includes the Love and Kisses to Censors Film Society. Some Belgians told me: "we thought that there was no censorship in Belgium. Now, after Knokke, we know that there is." (Mekas, 1964: 111-112).

Questions of censorship and freedom of expression are central to a genre that often deals with taboos, and it will remain an issue for Knokke. *Flaming Creatures* was a major test case for Belgian law (and mentality), but, ultimately, with all the improvised screenings in

Mekas' hotel room or in dirty basement of the hotel (see above) and with lots of ad hoc press conferences, *Flaming Creatures* became the 'most discussed and most often shown film of the festival' (Broughton, 1964: 14). With all the fuss, everybody was curious and wanted to see the film. 'Mekas, Sitney and Rubin ont décidé d'exploiter le scandale et c'est une réussite. Ledoux lui-même semble enchanté par la tournure que prennent les événements' (Garcia Bardon, 2002: 30).

FLAMING AND RAVING CREATURES

All in all FLAMING CREATURES became an ambassador for the festival (and vice-versa). The film attracted the attention of the public to a kind of cinema and to a kind of festival that was 'different' to say the least. It was different in a formal sense, but also different in content. For Stephen Dwoskin the festival was as such one of the most important stimuli for the spread of independent film in Europe (Dwoskin, 1985: 61). And Garcia Bardon points out, that the whole event also inspired the growth of many non-traditional screenings afterwards (Garcia Bardon, 2002: 32). The improvised screenings of *Flaming Creatures* at EXPRMNTL3 were precursors to the growing underground movement which soon exploited all kinds of (non traditional) locations to screen films: bars, university class rooms, private homes, church basements etc. as Jonas Mekas had already begun in the US. P. Adams Sitney in a conversation with Annette Michelson about EXPRMNTL 5, explains that this actually had the averse effect on the festival and contributed to its decline. 'In the seven years that have passed since the last competition, the situation of the American filmmaker has changed. The development of the Filmmaker's Cooperative has expanded distribution. Then too, many filmmakers have followed the poets and painters into the universities. Film education is beginning to absorb their work into a canon, so that Knokke no longer represents that unique opportunity for the American, not simply to show his films, but to make them known to an international audience.' (Sitney, 1975:63- 64). The first and foremost effect of the tumult caused by?? *Flaming Creatures*?? though, was actually a major boost for the festival: the next edition in 1967 attracts many more participants, all made curious by the scandal of 1963.

It is worth noting that the story of *Flaming Creatures* at EXPRMNTL3 exists in conflicting (and thus complex and confusing) versions because both Pierre Vermeulen and Jonas Mekas played double roles. As the Minister of Justice at the time, it was difficult for Pierre Vermeulen

to assert his roles as director of the Royal Film Archive and co-organizer of an experimental film festival, and that is how he became the main target of Jonas Mekas (see the text from his movie journal above). He was indeed caught between two fires. One should also keep in mind that Belgium (especially Flanders) is a catholic country, and the province where the festival was held was a particularly strong pillar of the church. Henri Storck confirms this: 'le president (Jacques Ledoux, gjc) pensait qu'il était trop risqué de projeter un des films de Mekas (à contenu érotique), car Knokke-le-Zoute dépendait de Bruges, ville très catholique ou les substitutes étaient très sévères pour tout ce qui était pornographie, érotisme' (Storck, 1990: 159). Although Pierre Vermeulen was a member of the socialist party, he had to reckon with the power of the catholic party and, in particular, with local politicians and judges.

Jonas Mekas on the other hand, is a central figure of the American Underground. He was given (and still is) one of the most dedicated (pro)motors of the American Avant-Garde. Given his favoritism for *Flaming Creatures*, one should then question his objectivity as a jury member for a competition that included several works from 'his' film pool. There are indeed reasons for skepticism about his objectivity. *Sleep* (Andy Warhol, 1963) was programmed as the closing film for the non-competitive part of the festival. The film was announced in the official program of the festival, but with the warning: 'if the film arrives'. It never did. Instead, the New York Film-Coop (by mistake?) sent the film *Flaming City* (Dick Higgins, 1963) (Garcia Bardon, 2002: 27). This film belongs to the American Underground Cinema, but is now relatively unknown compared to Warhol's film. There is neither an obvious reason nor a clear explanation for why this swap happened. But, the fact that it did raises suspicion of favoritism *within* the New York Film Coop itself. The resemblance between the two titles only strengthens this idea.

Besides, other sensitivities played as well. The American Underground Cinema should be distinguished from the American Avant-garde. The later was largely linked to the New York Film Coop. The former originated from the artistic revolt and experimentation of the Beat generation in the 1950s, which happened both in San Francisco and New York. Andy Warhol is a key figure of this latter group (and of the American Pop Art Movement). Moreover, Warhol openly criticized many of the Avant-garde films (especially the films of Stan Brakhage), and his films were often parodies of contemporary avant-garde style and avant-garde filmmakers' pursuit of a personal signature (Rees, 1999:

69). In the light of Jonas Mekas' enthusiastic promotion of Avant-garde films from 'his' Film Coop, this must have rubbed him the wrong way. Objectively though, the differences between the works of these two groups are contestable and inconsistent. Besides, Jonas Mekas himself (and many others) mix the terms 'avant-garde' and 'underground' all the time, despite the irony and different style of the Underground films (most notably, their remarkably lighter tone). This interchanging of terms can be explained by the fact that Stan Vanderbeek, a filmmaker more affiliated with the group around Jonas Mekas coined the term 'underground'.

All in all, Mekas' presence at EXPRMNTL 3, his influence over the course of the event and the large selection of new American work, revealed to the European public that a strong new film movement was growing across the Atlantic with major standard bearers such as Jonas Mekas and Paul Adams Sitney. The latter of these two later dedicated his infamous book *Visionary Film* to Jacques Ledoux, suggesting the sympathy was mutual. Moreover, the formal 'radicalization' of the festival in 1963 was in major part due to the presence of the American Avantgarde and Underground. Of the 364 works sent, the selection jury retained 107. 'La plupart proviennent des États-Unis, ou l'expérimental est particulièrement vivace: le renouveau vient d'outre-Atlantique' (Garcia Bardon, 2002: 20).

FLAMING AND RAVING FILMS

Ledoux's selection was a nice cross section of works, with films by all the key authors: Stan Brakhage, Ed Emshwiller, Kenneth Anger, Gregory Markopoulos, Bruce Conner, Stan VanDerBeek and Robert Breer, many of them with more than one film. In the history of Cinema these works show a major shift. Their filmmakers were disappointed in American Cinema and decided to make and show work in the shadow of dominant film. Their works were radically different both in form and content, with a strong engagement on both a poetic and a political level (Garcia Bardon, 2002: 20) all of which Mekas had hoped for in the early stages of the American Avant- Garde:

Every breaking away from the conventional, dead, official cinema is a healthy sign. We need less perfect but more free films. If only our younger film makers – I have no hopes for the old generation – would really break loose, completely loose, out of themselves, wildly, anarchically! There is no other way to break the frozen cinematic conventions than through a complete

derangement of the official cinematic senses. (Mekas, February 4th, 1959: 1).

At EXPRMNTL 3, we see the results of these young American filmmakers breaking loose, and their search and concerns are echoed in the three major disputes of the festival: the selection by the first jury, the prize winners chosen by the competition jury, and the reactions in the press. The story about what happened with *Flaming Creatures*, which was a perfect example of this new movement both in form and content, serves as a major instance of these conflicts. In Knokke it successfully melted the 'frozen cinema conventions' and inflamed the frozen cinema experts.

Both the selection and the awards appalled the critics and the press. Strangely, the specialized press, most particularly the French *Cinéma 64*, *Positif* and *Les Cahiers du Cinéma*, were not capable of seeing anything good in the American Avant-Garde. In a way they answered back to Mekas' axiom for 'free films'. Commenting on the bad weather in Knokke, one writer for *Les Cahiers du Cinéma* is as somber about the festival as about its setting. He writes that besides never seeing the sea through the casino windows because of the mist, he also didn't see much enlightening on the big screen: 'A part de ça, le reste fut du tout venant. Nullités sur nullités, on finissait par s'enthousiasmer sur un plan ici, seize images là, ou quelques mesures de musique!' (Weyergans, 1964: 50). Raymond Bordé in *Positif* (1964) add: 'le salopage était considéré comme la marque du génie' and the films he describes as 'trépignements d'enfant gâté, du Godard en encore plus gamin, plus pisse-partout'. About Stan Brakhage he writes that he is a clown, who wildly moves his camera around: 'son mépris total pour le métier de cinéaste lui assure l'audience des amateurs "beats". L'appareil se dandine, l'objectif est ouvert, captant n'importe quoi, et cela donne un film' (cited in Garcia Bardon, 2002: 22).

Strangely enough, the regular press likes the selection of works and reacts completely different and more understanding. *La Libre Belgique* (a major Belgian News Paper) states: 'Une oeuvre expérimentale réussie ne doit pas nécessairement répondre aux critères classiques de la réussite esthétique' (Jean Colette). Countering the harsh comments of the French on Stan Brakhage's work, this journalist finds that he definitely confirms his talent and this for every aspect of his work. About *Window Water Baby Moving* he just claims that this is without doubt his best production, that is: 'filmant fidèlement – et en ce sens ce serait déjà un parfait documentaire classique – l'accouchement de sa femme,

il montre dans cet exercice une maîtrise très grande de la camera' (JC 4/5 January). This writer does not hail all films that he considers experiments, but nevertheless he seems to have a good take on what is going to survive the teeth of time.

Xavier Garcia Bardon explains the violent reactions of the specialized press by the 'shock de découverte' (2002:20). But then contrast between a regular newspaper and the specialized press should have been opposite. The reaction of the Belgian newspaper and the French magazines reveal mostly national sensibilities, especially as it is the French Nouvelle Vague which is most under fire by this new more radical film movement. Eliot Stein who writes for *Sight and Sound* confirms this suspicion at the occasion of the next edition of EXPRMNTL:

Bq. 'Parisian journalists covering Knokke were patronizing in the extreme (in France it is standard practice to treat Belgium as a sort of cultural poor relation), but although this was not a vintage year at Knokke, the breath of free expression enjoyed there would be unthinkable anywhere in Gaullist France, publicly or privately, and least of all, as is in this case, with government sponsorship' (Stein, 1968: 72 and 73)

Overall the festival did get a lot of attention from the local and international press, and most journalists seem to acknowledge its importance as a cultural event. There is also unanimous praise for two future "classics" of the genre: Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising* (1963) and *Twice A Man* (1963) by Gregory Markopoulos. The last also received an award. Why *Scorpio Rising* didn't, remains a mystery, especially as the both the public and the press liked it so much. Elliott Stein in the Financial Times: 'Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising*, (...) was the most passionately discussed film of the festival. Its wild talent, prodigious montage and extraordinary colour effects echo the greatest moments of Eisenstein's *Ivan The Terrible*. And thus Mekas rightfully sighs: 'How SCORPIO RISING missed the prize, nobody knows. One of those strange mistakes that juries commit. Together with *Twice A Man* and *Window Water Baby Moving*, *Scorpio* was the festival's most liked, most discussed, and best received film' (Mekas, 1964:114).

Scorpio Rising is a good example of the fact that, in addition to a formalist radicalism, the American underground also produced work with radical content (an issue that will become a hot topic during EXPRMNTL4 in 1967). 'Dans le troublant *Scorpio Rising*, des icônes casquées traduisent la fascination homosexuelle de Kenneth Anger pour les motards et un

certain *comportement fascisant*. Devant ce film au propos difficile, baigné d'un érotisme sombre, la presse est dithyrambique' (italics are mine; Garcia Bardon, 2002: 21). It is worth noting here that *Scorpio Rising*, *Twice A Man* and *Flaming Creatures* are all three now recognized as the artistic expressions the homosexual movement's coming of age (Garcia Bardon, 2002: 21, footnote 12). Its representatives were very present and welcome at EXPRMNTL 3, which thus after all, was a festival truly celebrating all kinds of ruptures with conformity, despite its oppressive environment of depressing grey skies and catholic doom.

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To end, many of the awarded films didn't stand the test of time as well as *Scorpio* or *Flaming Creatures* did. The prizes at EXPRMNTL 3 were an obvious compromise between conflicting concepts of experimental film. All these debates show how EXPRMNTL 3 was a major meeting place, where experimental film was discussed and defined, where opinions clashed, and different kind of freedoms were negotiated. Maybe the best scene in the story, for both Jack Smith and for the history of experimental film in 1963, is its surprise happy ending: *Flaming Creatures* received a unique, symbolic award at Knokke-le-Zoute, which further strengthened its reputation as the most notorious underground film ever: 'le Prix Spécial du Film Maudi_t' (EXPRMNTL 3: Official Program).

FIGURES

Figure 1.0: Original poster design, by Pierre Alechinsky (from *Exprmntl. Festival hors normes. Knokke 1963, 1967, 1974, Revue Belge du Cinéma*, 43 (Décembre 2002).)

Figure 2.0: : Smith's application to compete in the festival (from *Exprmntl. Festival hors normes. Knokke 1963, 1967, 1974, Revue Belge du Cinéma*, 43 (Décembre 2002).)

NOTES

1 For this title I let myself be inspired by the words of Werner Nekes about the Experimental Film Festival that 'Ledoux called the ghosts from everywhere and the ghosts started to dance' (cited in Garcia Bardon, 2002: 6) and the even greater appraisal from Lewis Jacobs in *Film Culture* at the occasion of the second edition: 'It has been kind of dark-cellar in nearly every country of the world, until called into the daylight of open

recognition on the 27th of April 1958'. I owe a great deal to Xavier Garcia Bardon, who has written, as far as I know, the only complete history of EXPRMNTL in 1999 as his M. A. Thesis in History at the Catholic University of Louvain. His work was later published as a special issue of the *Revue du Cinéma Belge* in 2002, an important source of information for anyone interested in this event: GARCIA BARDON, Xavier. *Exprmntl. Festival hors normes. Knokke 1963, 1967, 1974, Revue Belge du Cinéma*, 43, décembre 2002, p80.

2 Since its third edition, the International Experimental Film Festival of Knokke-le-Zoute is titled EXPRMNTL, a letter word that already appeared on the official program in 1958. The organizers chose to drop the vowels of the word 'experimental' because it thus can be deciphered in French, Dutch, German, Spanish and English without confusion.

3 I am conscious of the debates about whether experimental film can be considered a genre, but as this is how most of the critics of EXPRMNTL write about the films presented at the festival, I decided to keep the term for now. For an in depth discussion of this issue, and a definition of several 'sub-genres' see a. o. SMALL, Edward (1994). *Direct Theory: Experimental Film/Video as Major Genre*. Carbondale & Edwardsville, Southern Illinois University Press.

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