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SHAKING LAUGHTER OUT: JACK SMITH'S DECOMPOSING CREATURES*

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ABSTRACT: The essay establishes laughter as a formal process in the queer cult classic *Flaming Creatures* (1962–1963). The trope of shaken genitals and the rarely discussed but recurrent abstract images in the film convey how Jack Smith's camera movements and the performers' shakes embody laughter. George Bataille's writings elucidate the relationship of laughter with eroticism, alienation, base matter and philosophy. A close reading of its reception history shows that traded notions on the film's representation of violence, sexuality, and gender are more precisely accounted for through laughter. The relationship of laughter to Smith's lack of compositional hierarchy as well as the role of formal and material decay in *Flaming Creatures* fleshes out the aesthetics of decomposition.

KEYWORDS: Decomposition – Laughter – Queer & Critical Theory

ABSTRACT: Der Essay führt ‚Lachen‘ als formales Verfahren für die Analyse des queeren Kultklassikers *Flaming Creatures* (1962–1963) ein. Anhand der Trope der geschüttelten Genitalien und der selten diskutierten sich wiederholenden abstrakten Filmbilder wird dargestellt, wie Jack Smiths Kamera-bewegungen und die sich vor Lachen schüttelnden Darstellenden Gelächter verkörpern. Mithilfe von George Batailles Schriften wird das Lachen im Verhältnis zu Erotik, Entfremdung, „niederem Materialismus“ und Philosophie erläutert. Eine genaue Lektüre der Rezeptionsgeschichte des Films demonstriert, wie Vorstellungen über dessen Darstellung von Gewalt, Sexualität und Geschlecht durch das Lachen präziser erfasst werden können. Das Verhältnis des Lachens zu Smiths fehlender kompositorischer Hierarchie sowie die Rolle des formalen und materiellen Verfalls in *Flaming Creatures* konkretisieren die Ästhetik der Zersetzung.

SCHLAGWÖRTER: Zersetzung – Lachen (Gelächter) – Queere und Kritische Theorie

Rire

Rire et rire
du soleil
des orties
des galets
des canards

de la pluie
du pipi du pape
de maman
d'un cercueil emplí de merde.

Georges Bataille (1942?)¹

Jack Smith (1932–1989) has been discussed in the context of avant-garde cinema, especially the New York underground, and queer studies. *Flaming Creatures* (1962–1963) is a 42-minute black-and-white odyssey bringing together several performers, whom Smith called creatures. In a decadent and absurd drag party, the creatures put on lipstick, pout and pose (smirching sequence), jiggle each other's genitals (shaking trope), dance and run around (chase sequence), survive a rape and an orgy (earthquake sequence). The film concludes with a dance-off and is roughly divided into these

¹ Bataille 1976, p. 13.

vignettes. Its final scenes feature Mario Montez (né René Rivera, 1935–2013), the underground superstar incarnation of María Montez (1912–1951) and Smith's partner at the time.² Smith's renaming of Rivera as Montez goes in line with the many references to early Hollywood movies in *Flaming Creatures*. Such citations led Susan Sontag to call the film "a rich collage of 'camp' lore," which misplaces the motif of decay and fails to account for the film's abstracted images.³

This essay argues for the importance of shaking as a metaphor for laughter, a pervasive and often misplaced motif responsible for the film's abstract images. An analysis of art and film criticism conveys how traded readings of the shaken genitals as a break in gender and sexual representation neglect Smith's camera work and the film's recurrent, blurred, and frayed images. These formal elements pervade the film's erotic and violent scenes, visualizing laughter in its diegetic and extradiegetic registers. The shaking trope cannot be separated from laughter, or from the rape scene or the film's orgiastic moments – but also not from the film's reused, overexposed, and ageing celluloid. I read laughter as formal and performative.

Laughter is a bodily phenomenon characterized by the shaking motions of the mouth, face, and stomach typically associated with humor. This essay understands laughter not in relation to comedy, but instead as the embodiment of intellectual limitations and eroticism. This understanding arises from a close reading of George Bataille's writings on laughter, tracing a relationship to base materialism and Juliane Rebentisch's critical melancholia.⁴ This theoretical framework emphasizes the importance of laughter for understanding formal and material decomposition, thus enabling new interpretations on the film and a serious consideration of Smith's remarks that before it was defended as a celebration of deviant sexuality, *Flaming Creatures* elicited laughter.

² Montez was a famous Dominican actress who rose to fame in the 1930s and 1940s in commercial movies. Smith adored her acting. He gave Rivera the name of Mario Montez in tribute and wrote her an ode that works as a type of artistic credo (Smith 1997b). For a discussion of the role Montez had in the gay subculture of the USA in the 1960s, see Haase, Siegel 2014. For a historical reading of Montez in Dominican popular culture and politics, see Méndez 2018.

³ Sontag 1967, p. 231. Sontag famously started the discussion of the term in her *Notes on Camp* (1964), while also explicitly identifying the film in a review of the film as camp.

⁴ Lisa Trahair observes that there is no cohesive Bataillean theory of laughter since his writings on the subject are spread throughout his work (cf. Trahair 2001).

Then the Writings Started ...

“These are ‘creatures,’ flaming out in intersexual, polymorphous joy,” wrote Sontag, thus establishing a predominant reading of *Flaming Creatures*.⁵ The Supreme Court of the USA banned the film due to sexual content. The obscenity charges hold to this day in some states. Sexually explicit films like Barbara Rubin's *Christmas on Earth* (1963) or Carolee Schneemann's *Fuses* (1967) were not censored because “sexual roles and identities remained clear throughout;” moreover, contemporaneous erotic gay cult films such as Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising* (1963) and Luchino Visconti's *The Damned* (1969) did not respectively feature women in leading roles and queer gender performances so that, unlike *Flaming Creatures*, critics confused its female performers for drag queens.⁶

In 1978 Smith said: “My life has been a nightmare because of that damn film. That sucked up ten years of my life.”⁷ He meant the film as something else. “The first audiences were laughing from the beginning all the way through. But then the writing started – and it became a sex thing [...] there was no more laughter.”⁸ Referring to the writings of critics, Smith anecdotically situates laughter outside the film as an audience reaction *lost* in the film's critical reception. For Juan A. Suárez, Smith meant to imply “that the main effect of his film was its ineffability,” later suggesting that because the film was “far from clearly nameable” it comes closer to “the nonverbal response of laughter.”⁹ He does not interpret laughter as comedic or “lost” to scholarly writings but as to why the film resists categorization. He over-interprets Smith, neglecting his astute opposition of laughter to intellectual writings.

For Bataille, laughter becomes a response to an experience, thought or situation that exposes the limits of the intellect. He writes:

As soon as the effort at rational comprehension ends in contradiction, the practice of intellectual scatology requires the excretion of unassimilable elements, which is another way of stating vulgarly that a burst of laughter is the only imaginable and definitively terminal result – and not the means – of philosophical speculation.¹⁰

⁵ Sontag 1967, p. xx.

⁶ Suárez 1996, p. 186.

⁷ Smith 1997c, p. 110.

⁸ Smith 1997c, p. 108.

⁹ Suárez 1996, p. 187, 196.

¹⁰ Bataille 1985, p. 99.

This is Bataille's attack on intellectualism, in which laughter is the "end" of philosophy as well as its only possibility. Arguing that Bataille should not be considered a philosopher, Benjamin Noys asserts, "philosophy, and the philosopher, is dissolved in laughter by Bataille."¹¹ Such understandings of laughter enable another interpretation. For Suárez laughter metaphorizes the film's uncategorizable representation of sexuality, while for Smith it is an audience reaction lost due to "the writings" of, for instance, Sontag. Bataille's notion of laughter gets closer to both the "unassimilability" that Suárez comments and the film's intellectualization Smith criticizes. Laughter is not lost but instead the most viable framework to discuss what is not rationally comprehensible in the film, namely its queer erotics.

Regarding the film's queerness, Marc Siegel critiques how scholars ultimately turn a blind eye to its importance "as an act of self-representation, as a form of documentation."¹² The creatures' performances come to be *in* the film and oscillate between the depiction and creation of queer culture. It might seem as if *Flaming Creatures* provides access to a secret world behind closed doors, but this particular enactment of queerness emerges *through* the film's production context. Siegel observes, "[t]here is no attempt to depict or appeal to a belief in an objective social reality. Instead, there is only the suggestive power of the creature's movements, a complex 'visual truth' that elicited laughter from some and violence from others."¹³ According to Siegel, laughter exists outside the film as a documentary but fictive creation of queer culture. Yet, laughter also exists *in* the film. It might seem like the opposite of eroticism, but laughter is in fact its apposite. Siegel pointedly describes the film's eroticism as "gender and sexual play," inviting the following questions.¹⁴ What is more playful than a laugh? Or than the creatures' movements, consisting mostly of shaking genitals? A visual analysis conveys how the shaking trope embodies laughter.

Expanding the Shaking Trope

The shaking trope usually describes genitals being shaken by another creature. The resulting images are part of group shots or zoomed-in "solos." These genital portrayals

¹¹ Noys 2000, p. 39.

¹² Siegel 1997, p. 100.

¹³ Siegel 1997, p. 98.

¹⁴ Siegel 1997, p. 100.



Fig. 1: Jack Smith, *Flaming Creatures*, 1962–1963, film still,
Copyright Jack Smith Archive,
Courtesy of Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels

are far from pornographic. Neither the penises nor nipples are erect or engaging intercourse but instead shaken like baby toys, a connection Smith made explicit in later work.¹⁵ The film shows shaken flaccid penises parallel to other events, such as make-up application (smirching sequence) (fig. 1). Here the shaking seems to be an attempt to “activate” a penis and is not specific to the earthquake, orgy, or rape but recurs throughout. The shaking in *Flaming Creatures* brings the body to shake in spastic movements resembling laughter.

As a form of play the shaking trope queers not only gender performance but also the mechanics of erotic attachment. Stefan Brecht qualifies the film as “the ball that a bunch of transvestites are having,” thus hinting at playfulness and drag.¹⁶ He describes the shaking “as a jiggling motion, an automotion, more harmonious and more powerful

¹⁵ In *No President* (1967–1970) genitals are shaken throughout the film, particularly in a scene when the penises of creatures holding toys next to a baby carriage are shaken. The film is also a black-and-white odyssey moving through different performer constellations and mixing found footage.

¹⁶ Brecht 1986, p. 25.

than anything.”¹⁷ Similarly, Ken Kelman observes in his 1963 review of the film “the ultimate confusion of male and female flesh, the breast and penis shaken interchangeably.”¹⁸ Moreover, Dominic Johnson interprets the shaking's recurrence as “a space of – or gap in – representation”, mirroring the ambiguity of sexual expression that ought to shake assumptions regarding the “bodies, desires and sexual practices of others.”¹⁹ Although the transgressive representation of sexuality is often noted, the relationship between shaking genitals and camera movements remains unexplored.

The shaking trope is rarely discussed in relation to the earthquake sequence when the entire frame shakes. The earthquake is rendered by Smith's handheld camera and movements. The shaking does not interrupt the orgy, but actually accelerates the creatures' frenzy, rendering the moment playfully absurd. The camera starts to shake, the whole set shakes, bells ring ominously as Francis Francine (as himself) continues to shake the breast of Delicious Dolores (played by Sheila Bick). The camera moves nervously without lingering anywhere. Smith zooms in on all the creatures. He shoots an “exotic” lantern swinging, a recurrent motif. In these scenes the jiggling genitals mirror the camera jitters creating the sensation of an earthquake. The trope ought to include the film's shaken frames and not only the shaken genitals. The expanded shaking trope encompasses both the creatures' performances and Smith's camera work.

To read both these shakes as laughter casts a different light on the film's representation of eroticism. For instance, the shaking of genitals becomes an erotic and playful laughter, thus coinciding with Bataille's playful assertion that, “[f]ate has decreed that man shall laugh at his own reproductive organs.”²⁰ The *filmic representation* of shaken genitals becomes synonymous with laughing at them, while the *performance* of shaking genitals brings these into a spastic state similar to laughter's. Like a laughing body changes “from a tranquil state to a convulsive state,” genitals shake.²¹ Bataille's understanding of laughter suggests the film's radicality stems not only from its representation of sexuality and gender but also from how laughter performs the ambivalence of the creatures' eroticism.

¹⁷ Brecht 1986, p. 25.

¹⁸ Kelman 2000, p. 283.

¹⁹ Johnson 2012, p. 105.

²⁰ Bataille 1986, p. 265.

²¹ Bataille 1997, p. 62.

In the final chapter of *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality* (1957), Bataille claims laughter “points the contrast between pleasure and pain” and becomes therefore inseparable from eroticism and death because it “indicates their essential common nature.”²² For him laughter pleasurable and painfully performs an orgasmic *petite mort*. This understanding renders erotic relations, and therefore laughter, as usually necrophilic, at times sadistic, and highly ambivalent. Yet Bataille’s perspective on the relationship between eroticism and laughter varies. For him “[l]aughter is an attitude of compromise adopted by man when some repugnant but not apparently important factor confronts him. If eroticism is taken seriously or tragically it is overwhelming.”²³ Elsewhere, laughter is not opposed to eroticism and instead shares with it “the moment of violent contact, when life slips from one person to another in a feeling of magical subversion.”²⁴ Although at times misleading, Bataille entangles eroticism and death through laughter. Smith’s *Flaming Creatures* conveys such entanglement, foregrounding its “magical subversion” while also speaking to laughter’s ambivalence and violence. Such an understanding of the shaking trope as laughter sheds light on the film’s contentious rape scene.

Rape, Performativity and Shaking

The scene’s performativity and relationship to shaking come to light through the lens of laughter. The film’s chasing sequence rapidly becomes the rape scene. Francine envelops Bick from behind, who lowering her fan reveals a coy smile that quickly turns to horror (fig. 2). Her screams remain inaudible. Francine avidly plays with Dolores’s breast while other creatures pin her down. She rolls out of Francine’s grip and a compilation of screams plays over a love song sung by Yoshiko Yamiguchi from the film *China Nights* (1940). Her naked breast is brought again into a gelatinous shake. None seems to lock her into position. She covers her eyes, shaking her head. The scene’s soundtrack – a polyphony of screams asynchronous to the images – heightens the violence of this six-minute-long scene, but also its performativity.

²² Bataille 1986, p. 265.

²³ Bataille 1986, p. 266.

²⁴ Bataille 1997, p. 61.



Fig. 2: Jack Smith, *Flaming Creatures*, 1962–1963, film still,
Copyright Jack Smith Archive,
Courtesy of Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels

Brecht calls the scene mock-rape: “That it is mock-rape is made *clear*: by the metronomic, loose swinging of the girl’s free right arm, a visually invalidated gesture of helpless warding off [...]. The girl finds relief in Lesbian Love [sic]. This is the only discernible story-element in the film.”²⁵ After the rape, Bick melts into the arms of Judith Malina, who reclines her on a divan. As they lie down they start to kiss. Malina caresses Bick, as if soothing her. Petals fall onto them. Here the “mock-” refers not to a parodical representation of rape but to the scene’s performativity and lesbian consolation. On the other hand, for Jennifer Doyle the rape scene in *Flaming Creatures* portrays women as subjects – and not just objects – of camp. Her argument for reading the rape as Bick’s self-authored camp performance does not tend to the scene’s formal aspects and reads the film within the general context of the “gay underground film-

²⁵ Brecht 1986, p. 25 (emphasis in the original).



Fig. 3: Jack Smith, *Flaming Creatures*, 1962–1963, film still,
Copyright Jack Smith Archive,
Courtesy of Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels

making of the 1960s.”²⁶ Her reading neglects the film’s awareness of its own staging, its sense of *mock* – exemplified by the scene’s asynchronous soundtrack and obvious cuts that convey the film was shot over several weekends with varying cast members. Moreover, Doyle neither explains what the scene parodies nor mentions shaking genitals.²⁷

A frame of Dolores undoing her dress strap and pulling out her right breast is cut by another of her breast being shaken (fig. 3). The shaking breast accompanying the scene functions as the rape’s performative catalyst. The playful shake triggers the violent scene. It also marks the beginning of the earthquake, recreated by Smith’s intense camera shakes. The presence and recurrence of shaking genitals before, during, and after the rape scene speak to its particular form of queer performativity, which Brecht locates in the creatures:

²⁶ Doyle 2006, p. xxiv.

²⁷ This echoes Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s favoring of queer performativity as shame over “the notion of parody” to navigate the phenomena and artworks grouped under camp (Sedgwick 2003, p. 64). A reflection exceeding the margins of this essay is the relationship between shame and laughter.

The queers preen themselves. This involves on the one hand the mock-coy, mock-shocked, mock-anxious, mock-sorrowful swivellings of their eyeballs, a soulful itinerary through the movies, with the camera moving in under in complementary, opposite curves, on the other, lip-gymnastics, a mock-sensuality derived from the pout, demonstrating the lips' flexibility, humifiability and suction-power, a visual paean to cock-sucking, grand rivalry for the cock of mouth with cunt [...].²⁸

His poignant descriptions of mouth movements as mocking – and performative – and inseparable from genitals could also describe the gesticulations of laughter. The creatures laugh but so does Smith. Laughter operates inside and outside the film. Reading the camera shakes as laughter could lead to misinterpretations – as if Smith himself, holding the camera, would be laughing at the rape. Yet, as the analysis of Brecht enables, to read the shaking breast as laughing would in turn attribute laughter to Bick, thus establishing her as a subject – and not mere object – in the scene. On the other hand, regardless of her subject status, if understanding Bick's shaking as something that is done to her – like a tickled laughter is done onto someone – the fellow creatures would become the tickling instigators, while Smith's camera work exacerbates and magnifies the shakes of laughter.²⁹ The metaphor of tickling, not unlike the source of this laughter and the rape scene's performativity, remains ambivalent.

For Bataille, the laughter of tickling behaves like other forms of laughter but not without consequence. Bataille describes tickling someone into laughter as rupturing alienation that reduces the one who's tickled “to the impersonal state of living substance.”³⁰ Tickling – like shaking genitals – forces laughter onto someone. Bataille claims that “the laughter of tickling” is produced by “sharp contact – a rupture of a personal system.”³¹ A tickled laugh alienates the body itself. The control loss typical to laughter is exacerbated. The rape scene performs an alienating laughter that turns to tears in the blink of an eye. The rape scene's performative ambivalence and violence renders laughter as the process of formally shaking out the affiliation of eroticism and death.

²⁸ Brecht 1986, p. 25.

²⁹ Although speculative, it is imaginable that Smith's laughter made the camera shake while perhaps making the creatures laugh and vice versa. It seems feasible that laughter, infectiously present during the shoot, became formally captured in the film.

³⁰ Bataille 1997, p. 62.

³¹ Bataille 1997, p. 62, 60.

Decomposition, Abstraction and Melancholia

Decay is prevalent in Smith's *Flaming Creatures*. His crumbling sets, worn props, crafted outfits, repurposed trash, the disheveled creatures, ageing divas, and their faded splendor speak to decay. Juliane Rebentisch identifies an "obsession with decay" in Smith's aesthetics.³² The motif is nonetheless rarely related to the film's recurrent abstract images and how these are formed through shaking, image composition, and decaying film material. The merging of formal with thematic and figurative aspects of decay is here subsumed under decomposition to cast light on laughter's melancholy.

During the earthquake sequence, several images of decomposition come to be. At its height, the camera is almost vibrating, an effect Smith achieves by shaking it so hard that he abstracts concrete images into scales of gray. Camera shakes yield laughter and image decomposition. The shaking of the camera makes an image of a creature licking a foot become an abstracted shot of grays. The multiple shakes create many such scenes. As previously mentioned (cf. fig. 3), the contours of Bick's breast blur, fade, and take over the frame, shaken into decomposition. The visuals of laughter have been defamiliarized and estranged into abstraction. This aestheticizes laughter and engenders image decomposition. Laughter relates to decomposition not only through abstraction but also as a process of image composition.

The creatures exist at the same level as the fabrics, flowers, and other objects, which decompose the visual hierarchy distinguishing subjects from objects. The camera fetishistically focuses on different body parts, isolating them from the whole as if "grabbing" them. Smith alternates between images of individually shaken breasts or penises and shots of shaking genitals among a sea of bodies. In the latter genitals stand out as much as the creature's fashion, feet, or elbows. J. Hoberman observes, especially during the earthquake: "Any single frame of the sequence is a dense arrangement of eyes, legs, hands, and genitalia." In this profusion of things and body parts, genitals seem like just one of the many things to project desire onto. The image composition laughs at hierarchies of arousal, rendering the images blurred and indistinguishable from their decomposed materiality.

In the vampire scene, after the climactic earthquake, a shot of a fly announces a decaying corpse. A coffin opening is shot several times. The first take portrays Our

³² Rebentisch 2014, p. 269.

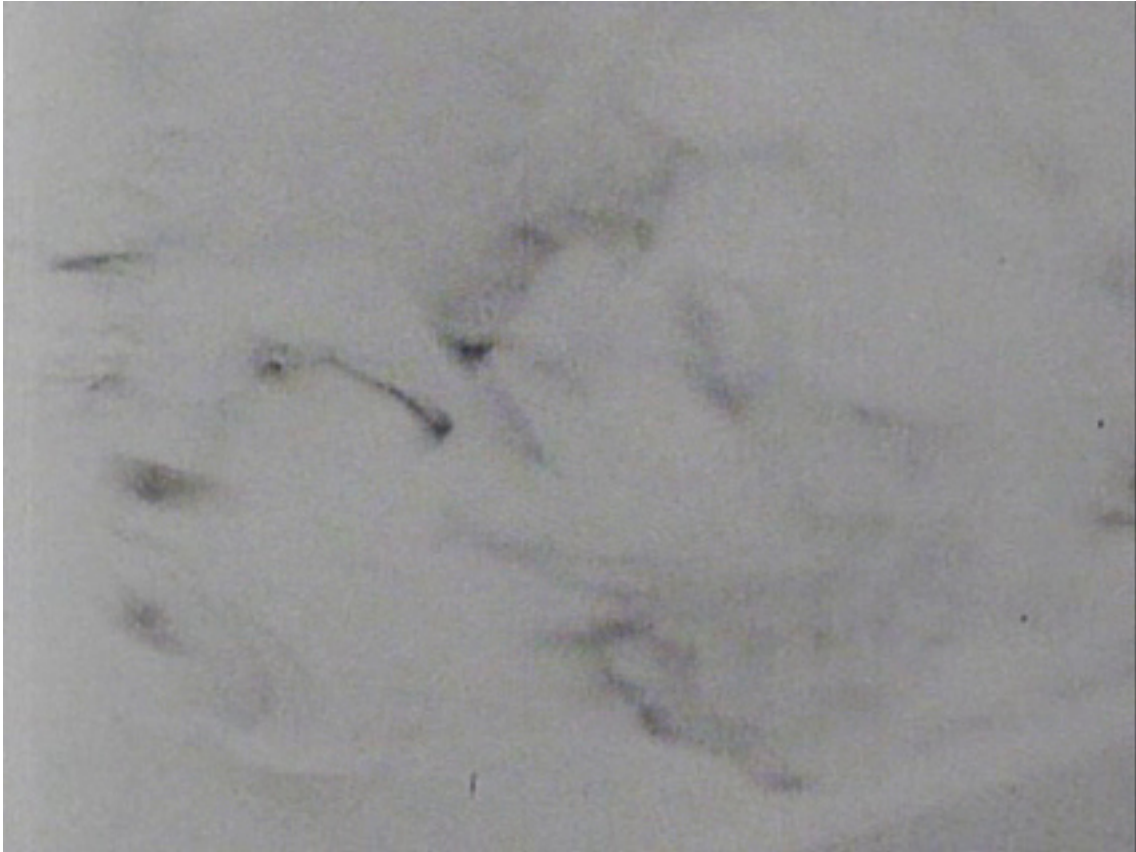


Fig. 4: Jack Smith, *Flaming Creatures*, 1962–1963, film still,
Copyright Jack Smith Archive,
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Lady (the monroesque vampire played by Joel Markman) in a glamorous chiaroscuro shot, while the second abstracts her portrait into shades of gray. The image is so exposed that the figure seems unrecognizable, as if unravelling into sheer dissolution (fig. 4). This effect cannot be solely attributed to poor conservation. Smith intentionally reused from the onset 16-mm film, recording over old, inexpensive material and therefore appropriating a financial limitation that accelerates material decay, lending the film its grainy, overexposed, nearly translucent qualities.³³ Smith composed images about and through decomposition. That Our Lady is a vampire, a being treading life and death, strengthens the overall theme of decomposition, whereas Smith's inclusion of overexposed frames on reused and ageing celluloid material, its formal aspects.

³³ Filmmakers and artists Ken Jacobs and Jonas Mekas both note *Flaming Creatures* always had this faded look. According to Smith's film-conservator Jerry Tartaglia the only extant copy of the film is a camera original reel, meaning it was probably never projected or used, and left as an eventually forgotten lab copy (cf. Censi 2016).

This confluence of formal and material decomposition, as well as Smith's image composition and abstraction, relate to laughter inasmuch as laughter relates to Bataille's base materialism and Rebentisch's merging of it with critical melancholia. This draws attention to Smith's melancholic laughter. According to Bataille, base matter disrupts hierarchies by showing how the "high" suppresses the "low," its base. A good example is Bataille's *The Big Toe* (1903), where he describes how the foot, because it holds the body upright and "high," working as its base, is as such abhorred, constrained, and hidden. Bataille's materialism makes "reason [into] the limit" thus refusing "to be reduced to the great ontological machines."³⁴ Similarly, Rebentisch's materialism "aims at 'disconcerting the human spirit and idealism' [...] to expose 'the helplessness' of seemingly 'superior principles.'"³⁵ These materialisms resemble the earlier discussion of laughter as a response to philosophical and intellectual limitations.

Like laughter, base materialism interdicts the production of knowledge through its predilection of lowness. From this perspective, laughter enacts Bataille's base materialism. Rebentisch identifies in Smith a criticality that is related to the same base matter laughter enacts. She argues that Smith's predilection for decay conveys "a double recognition of history in nature, and *nature in history*," and thus "opens history to nature [through] transience."³⁶ For example, not only Smith's subjects die and decay but also his objects are affected by natural phenomena. To read both categories dialectically is melancholic – enabling Smith to see beauty in decrepitude. Moreover, if "read[ing] historical phenomena as ciphers of their own perishability," Rebentisch writes, then "a certain coincidence of critical stance and melancholia" is at play.³⁷

Bataille's laughter seems problematic in view of Rebentisch's criticality, in which philosophical speculation incorporates its own transience. There is no escape from its conundrums. Contrastingly, Bataille sometimes characterizes laughter as escapist: "Laughing at the universe liberated my life. I escape its weight by laughing."³⁸ Smith's laughter on the other hand is far from escapist and like "a spasmodic laugh carries joy to its summit."³⁹ Similarly, Rebentisch's melancholia identifies a joy of interpretation in the perishability of all things. For her, the critical stance of melancholia consists in joy-

³⁴ Bataille 1985, p. 50, 51.

³⁵ Rebentisch 2014, p. 270.

³⁶ Rebentisch 2014, p. 262 (emphasis in the original), 259.

³⁷ Rebentisch 2014, p. 267.

³⁸ Bataille 1988, p. 16.

³⁹ Bataille 1985, p. 22.

fully and not narcissistically observing that everything passes. She writes, “for secularized critical theory, the utopian perspective only emerges via an insight into the perishability, deficiency, and fallibility of mere being.”⁴⁰ Smith's laughter becomes melancholic when it instigates decomposition without recurring to escapism, and instead critically – and joyfully – decomposes the apparent intransigence of material reality.

Smith's laughter shakes out the decomposition of the creatures, the images, and their genitals. Laughter's confluence of dehierarchized compositions, of abstracted flesh – and matter – is decomposition. Smith's lively camera movements suffuse his images with intense abstraction, aestheticizing laughter, formalizing the process of decomposition, and abstracting images of flesh. The film's abstracted images have a formal relationship to decomposition. The aesthetics of decomposition describe how to compose images about decay through laughter's melancholy.

Losing Form and Laughter

In *Flaming Creatures* laughter becomes a formal and conceptual practice to flesh out decomposition. Material and thematic decomposition converges with filmic and performative elements to conform the aesthetics of decomposition. In his representation of shaking genitalia Smith poses laughter as the response to eroticism, which relates to death and laughter, challenging cognition, the intellect, and the body. The shaking trope agitates flesh into abstraction. The lack of hierarchy between subjects and objects, the attention to the textures in his tableaux, and his seemingly improvisational ruinous sets all speak to the aesthetics of decomposition. The creatures' embrace of pleasure – and not work – operates like a seductively contagious burst of laughter.⁴¹ The concomitant visuals of the shake, with their tendency toward abstraction, the confusion of flesh, and the overall eroticism, are in themselves the formalization of laughter. This aestheticization of laughter remains playfully erotic. *Flaming Creatures* engenders a decompositional laughter that shakes out the creatures' decay, revealing Smith and the creatures as critical melancholics. Yet for all the critical joy of laughter, there are undeniable ruptures in decomposition.

⁴⁰ Rebentisch 2014, p. 264.

⁴¹ For Bataille work is what interrupts or puts an end to eroticism (Bataille 1961, esp. p. 41–44).

Although efforts have been undertaken to cast Smith's exoticism in a positive light,⁴² the film's use of Arab and Asian stereotypes seems – like the rape scene – ambivalent. Perhaps it has more to do with my own ambivalence toward the social and material reality of asymmetrical power relationships: how violence affects some bodies more than others, and how artistic or cultural representations engage and produce these asymmetries. Violence is an undeniable part of life and social phenomena, and one that captured in a film or elsewhere often feels outdated and excessive. At the same time, *Flaming Creatures* is not racist or misogynist; it resembles much more a queer filmic space that, despite all of its ambivalences and contradictions, manages to shake laughter out, as if laughing at how an apparently unshakeable reality loses form with time.

Smith's laughter oscillates between abstracting and objective, hilarious and dead serious, pleasurable and violent, hopeful and nihilist, erotic and comedic. The laughter of *Flaming Creatures* favors those bodily shakes and gesticulatory trembles that, the more compulsive and recalcitrant they are, the more ambivalent, violent, and infectious the laughter. Toward the end the camera shakes, and another creature reclines while shaking her breast, which moves to the song's beat, bringing the film to a close with an image of shaking breast. An often desperate or shameful laughter seems in certain moments like the only possible answer or action. *Flaming Creatures'* commitment to the pleasures and pains of decomposition sustains the shared laughter of the creatures, always becoming while losing form.

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⁴² See Suárez 2014.

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