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A HISTORY OF FAILURE

Ann Reynolds

Blonde Cobra begins with silence and a still black-and-white image. After several seconds, a voice asks, “What are your favorite Gershwin songs?” This voice seems to prompt movement within the image, as well as the sound of a second voice quickly rattling off a list of songs in response: “I’ve Got Rhythm,” “Liza,” “S’Wonderful,” . . . and “Of Thee I Sing.”¹ The first voice interrupts the second’s recitation with the observation that most of these songs are in the movies as the second voice continues to suggest a few more songs. Then the conversation turns to Victor Moore, an actor in the Broadway musical *Of Thee I Sing* (director George S. Kaufman, 1931).

FIRST VOICE: “And Victor Moore is dead.”

SECOND VOICE: “Yeah. I’m sorry.”

FIRST: “Who’d he play? What was the part he played?”
“Ta ta tum ta tuttlebaum . . . Tuttlebaum. Tuttlebaum.
Throttlebottom.”

SECOND: “What? What was Throttlebottom’s first name?”

FIRST: “How did the song go?”

SECOND: “What was his first name, Throttlebottom? Faster,
Robert faster.”

FIRST: “I give up.”

SECOND: “Alexander.”

FIRST: “Alexander Throttlebottom.”

SECOND: “What part, position did he have, did he play in?”

FIRST: "The Vice President."

SECOND: "Correct Robert."

This rapid exchange continues for a few more seconds with the two voices asking and answering questions or offering each other additional bits of information about *Of Thee I Sing*, including its date—1931—and the fact that it “won the Pulitzer Prize, didn’t it?” Then, after repeating an earlier question—“How did the songs in it go?”—the second voice begins to whistle, and both voices then vocalize the tune and ultimately some of the lyrics to one of the songs from the musical: “Bum bum bum bum bumbabum . . . Wintergreen for President, da dada dadadada.” And then the first voice asks, “What’s the other one?” The voice of Ginger Rogers singing the title line from “Let’s Call the Whole Thing Off” provides a response, the figure on the screen moves toward the camera and quickly fades out of focus, handwritten numbers indicating the end of a reel appear, and then the screen goes black for quite a while, long enough to tempt uninitiated viewers into thinking that maybe this “last line” was meant to signal the end of the film or at least to potentially describe an attitude toward the film project as a whole: a collaboration doomed to failure.²

Blonde Cobra did not, in fact, come easily. At a number of points, it came dangerously close to being abandoned because of severely strained personal relationships among its collaborators. Bob Fleischner shot the footage for what he and Jack Smith initially intended to be two light monster comedies during the winter of 1959. Soon afterward, a fire in Smith’s apartment destroyed some raw stock that Fleischner had been storing there. Fleischner insisted that Smith repay him for the ruined stock, which was an unrealistic demand since the cause of the fire, Smith’s cat knocking over a candle, was indicative of the fact that Smith had no money. Con Edison had already turned off his electricity for nonpayment. Smith and Fleischner had a falling out, and Fleischner gave the unedited footage—one color and ten black-and-white, silent, hundred-foot 16-mm rolls—to another filmmaker, Ken Jacobs, in the hopes that he could salvage something from it.³ Jacobs claimed that his ignorance of Smith and Fleischner’s original intentions for the project provided a distinct advantage: “Having no idea of the original story plans I was able to view the material, not as exquisite fragments of a failure, of two failures, but as the makings of a new entity. Bob gave over the footage to me and with it the freedom to develop it as I saw fit.”⁴ Jacobs edited the footage, adding some short color sequences that he had previously shot of Fleischner, Smith, and Jerry Sims, who also appears in the original *Blonde Cobra* footage, and a soundtrack, completing the film

in 1963.⁵ Both the soundtrack and the editing provided a second opportunity for collaboration, although Jacobs made the voice recordings with Fleischner and Sims separately from the ones he made with Smith.⁶ He recalls his work with Smith:

Jack came over to record some lines I fed him, mostly things I'd heard him say over the years, and to improvise generally. The songs indicate the man's genius. I had a small collection of early 20th century 78 rpm discs and Jack brought over his Arabic 78s. Rene Rivera/"Mario Montez" lent a phonograph and I had a stereo tape-recorder that I recorded mono with to save money on tapes. Jack would listen to the beginning of a record, signal for it to start again and exuberantly break into song. No repeats, no correcting mistakes (we lived for mistakes, understood as divine intervention).⁷

Although the completed *Blonde Cobra* contains plenty of visual and acoustical evidence of the individual contributions of everyone involved in making the film, Jacobs's editorial decisions translated all of this fragmentary evidence into an entity that, in a traditional sense, is essentially his film. Smith's reaction confirms this: he found the film too heavy and embarrassing, and eventually he tried to suppress it.⁸ But despite Smith's desire for disassociation and the many other disagreements and conflicting aims that characterized its making and completion, *Blonde Cobra* also offers sustained evidence of another, more fundamental relationship among all of these men—a relationship that Jacobs did not create, even if his soundtrack, particularly in the film's opening sequence, does call attention to it. Most of the music included on the soundtrack and all of the songs mentioned or included in the opening section—Fleischner's is the first voice heard on the soundtrack; Sims's is the second—date roughly from the Great Depression era, the late 1920s through the 1930s, and, as Fleischner establishes through his initial question, all of these songs were written by George Gershwin, in collaboration with Ira Gershwin or Gus Kahn, for Broadway or Hollywood musicals produced during this period. Since Fleischner and Sims, as well as Jacobs and Smith, were all born in the United States during the mid-1920s to early 1930s, this was a popular musical culture that they were all born into. In discussing and sampling recordings of this culture for *Blonde Cobra*'s soundtrack roughly thirty years later, they all also acknowledge that it continued to be relevant to them in some fashion, and their shared musical and cinematic

memories made it possible for them to quiz one another effectively about details related to specific musicals and for Smith, genius aside, immediately to recall lyrics and improvise after hearing only the beginnings of particular songs.

Possessing personal childhood memories of Depression-era mass culture would not, of course, have been unique to these four individuals circa 1959–63. Such memories, to varying degrees of specificity, would have been shared by a generation of individuals born during the 1920s to early 1930s and still living in the early 1960s. Some of the songs included or referred to on the soundtrack have continued to be popular well beyond the 1930s and thus would also be familiar to many individuals born after the 1930s, but these individuals might not be aware of the songs' historical and ideological roots in the Great Depression. The relationship of Fleischner, Smith, Sims, and Jacobs—and their generation—to these songs and the films and Broadway shows they are a part of would have been more self-consciously historically inflected through the specific circumstances of their biography, conjoining their individual experiences of childhood, US popular culture of the late 1920s through the 1930s, and the Great Depression. This culture was part of their lived past and, more broadly speaking, a specific historical past, and not just representative of the past in general, as it would more likely be for later generations. In revisiting this culture in the present, all of the film's collaborators point to a specific historical and biographical continuum that is shared among them, a continuum that illuminates the particular nature of their collaboration and its lived relationship to failure. Their relationship to this cultural history and, ultimately, their failure to collaborate may have been personal, but, through their collaborative efforts, each of these men also collectively engaged with a broader, shared popular culture of Depression-era musicals that was itself dedicated to overcoming obstacles and ultimately avoiding failure, usually by way of one of Hollywood's preferred models of collaboration—namely, marriage.

The “thing” referred to in the lyrics to “Let's Call the Whole Thing Off”—a George and Ira Gershwin song from the 1937 film *Shall We Dance?*—is a prematurely failed marriage—premature because the couple singing the song, Peter P. Peters (Fred Astaire) and Linda Keene (Ginger Rogers), are not actually married, just presumed to be married, and failed because of the seemingly irreconcilable differences between them. Peters, an American ballet dancer working in Paris, secretly wants to develop dance routines in collaboration with a modern jazz dancer, and when he sees a photograph of Keene, a tap dancer, he falls in love with her. He contrives a meeting, but she is uninterested. They meet again on a ship

returning to New York City, and a rumor that they are married begins to spread aboard the ship and then circulate in the newspapers. Unable to dispel the rumor, Peters and Keene decide to marry and then quickly divorce. The “Let’s Call the Whole Thing Off” sequence immediately precedes this decision, and their New Jersey marriage follows. So what appears to be a moment of crisis is actually the beginning of its resolution. The rest of the film charts a predictable arc of minor conflicts that dissolve when the couple acknowledges their love for each other through a final professional collaboration: a spectacular theatrical dance number. Their false and then temporarily failed marriage becomes a genuine and genuinely happy one, the promise of the initial publicity is fulfilled, and everyone appears destined for a happily ever after.

If the initial instance of Rogers singing “Let’s Call the Whole Thing Off” is meant to signal the potentially premature failure of *Blonde Cobra* as a film, the song’s return toward the end of the thirty-three-minute film is embedded within a broader set of visual, acoustic, and socioeconomic references that suggest failures that are more personal, more socially determined, and more directly related to the lived circumstances of the film’s collaborators. In this sequence, the song is prefaced by some spoken dialogue between Astaire (Peters) and Rogers (Keene) that Smith interrupts several times with his own dark aphorisms:

ASTAIRE: “I guess it would look kind of funny if we denied the marriage now, wouldn’t it?”

ROGERS: “I don’t know what to do.”

ASTAIRE: “I don’t know either.”

ROGERS: “The word is eether.”

SMITH: “Why shave . . . when I can’t even think of a reason for living? Jack Smith, 1958. Sixth Street.”

ASTAIRE: “Alright, the word is eether. No use squabbling about it. That will get neither of us anyplace.”

ROGERS: “The word is neether.”

SMITH: “Life is a sad business, Greta Garbo, yes. Yes, O truly spoken O Greta. Yes.”

Although the contrast between the tone and content of Astaire and Rogers’s exchange about minor—and in the case of Rogers, self-conscious—class

and region-based differences in pronunciation and Smith's defeatist and depressing statements is immediately striking, the two sequences of shots that accompany this three-way dialogue on the soundtrack evoke another contradiction found in both films: the contrast between a stated life crisis and its undercutting by mundane domestic activities and circumstances. The first sequence consists of Smith, wearing a fedora and a sequined dress over a tailored striped shirt, opening kitchen cupboards, retrieving a carton of milk or juice from the refrigerator and pouring it into a cup, and looking at himself in a small mirror while drinking from the cup. In the second shot, Smith wears a suit, complete with a cravat and the same fedora, and he drinks from a mug and eats a portion of a muffin or breakfast pastry while reflected in a second, smaller mirror resting on a table. The camera scans the surface of this table to reveal a cluttered assortment of other generic domestic items: a box of Lipton tea, a bottle of spices, and finally a cheap ceramic Madonna and child in an elaborate niche. At one point, Smith momentarily rests his mug on the top of this ceramic niche, peers out at the camera from under the rim of his fedora and nods, and then continues drinking and eating, accompanied by his voice on the soundtrack declaring that "Life is a sad business."

Smith's clothing also appears disjunctive: it is eclectically anachronistic thrift-store fare, suggestive of two different genders, and, in part, a bit too glamorous, even if dated and a bit worse for wear, for the decrepit and cramped space of the kitchen he occupies.⁹ These "inconsistencies" of historical era, gender, and class are echoed in the overall *mise-en-scène* in the second sequence of shots. Just as Smith's recitation of the Garbo aphorism ends, Astaire and Rogers begin to sing "You say eether and I say either. You say neether and I say neither," and the scene shifts to Smith and Sims dancing together. Smith is wearing the same suit, hat, and cravat that he wore in the previous shot, and Sims is wearing a light-colored, satin dress with an elaborate flounced skirt and a headdress that suggests a bridal veil but clearly is not one. The camera follows their movements from a variety of different vantage points. In all of these shots, the camera is relatively close to the two men's bodies or clothing to the extent that one never sees a complete image of them either together or individually. And because even the fleeting glimpses offered of a profile, torso, ruffles on a skirt, an isolated gesture, or dancing feet go in and out of focus, it is often difficult to discern whether the camera or the figures are configuring the movement—whether the camera remained stationary while the figures moved toward and away from it, or whether both were in motion, and the camera randomly captured Smith and Sims passing in front of it. While the images of Smith and Sims and their movements go in and out

of focus, are fragmented, abstracted, tightly and self-consciously circumscribed, and ultimately self-consciously reconfigured in terms of the flat surface and framing edge of the camera's visual field, it is still possible to discern that many of their movements and gestures also deliberately paraphrase an amalgamation of popular dance forms from the 1930s, including jive, jitterbug, and the Lindy Hop.¹⁰

Because the length of this almost two-minute sequence roughly conforms to the length of Astaire and Rogers's song, one cannot help but compare it to the dance sequence—technically a dance on roller skates—that accompanies this song in *Shall We Dance?* In this sequence, as in most dance sequences in Astaire and Rogers films, image and figure, surface and depth, man and woman are all clearly differentiated and readable because of the gender-specific costuming, the subtle synchronicity between the camera and the dancers' movements, and the consistent use of long shots and single takes that provide a seemingly neutral distance from and space around the dancing couple, almost as though one were watching them from the safe, anonymous distance of the audience in a proscenium theater.¹¹ And the space in which Astaire and Rogers's dance was shot, a sound stage meant to represent New York's Central Park, appears to be quite spacious and elegant. Smith and Sims's dance and the concomitant dance of the camera are circumscribed by and underscore the cramped, cluttered space of Smith and Sims's apartments, affording no safe distance or luxury of means or effect.¹²

The relatively carefree lives of musical and cinematic characters such as those played by Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire in *Shall We Dance?* were intended to inspire hope or, more realistically, distraction, amidst the formidable and pervasive social and economic crises of the Depression. The promise offered by these lives held scant potential for resolving the troubles of the majority of their audience, so the starkest contrast these films and musicals provided was one between life as lived in the movies and life as lived outside the movie theater. *Blonde Cobra's* concluding dialogue, which is spoken by Smith, seems to directly acknowledge this disparity between the movies and life and the former's impossible promises, but it does so in a context in which both of these seemingly contradictory viewpoints and all of their accompanying attributes are entangled by the film's collaborators and their lived circumstances as depicted within the film: "A Mother's wisdom . . . ahhh! A mother's wisdom has dragged me down to this! A crummy loft! A life of futility! Hunger! Despair!" Smith intersperses this bitter monologue with vocalizing and whistling, transforming it into a type of a song, similar to the attempts by Fleischner and Sims to recall lyrics and tunes from musicals at the beginning of the film.

During this monologue, one sees Smith, wearing a satin dress and a hat tied to his head by a scarf secured under his chin, frenetically dancing. He waves and aims a gun at the camera while holding a small hand mirror in his left hand. His clothing, dance gestures, and the camera work all recall the previous dancing scenes with Sims, who also appears in the background of portions of this sequence but now dressed more conventionally in a shirt, V-neck sweater, and jeans. At one point, Smith raises the gun to his right temple and grimaces, tightly squeezing his eyes closed. The scene cuts to a view of old tombstones in a cemetery and then quickly cuts back to Smith, who slowly sinks out of the frame. Sims moves into the frame in an extreme close-up, the camera pans down to a sign he is holding that reads FIN, and the film ends with Smith's voice asking a final question: "What went wrong? What went wrong?"

In revisiting their shared cultural past throughout the making of *Blonde Cobra*, Smith, Jacobs, Sims, and Fleischner did not simply subsume their personal histories into their shared historical cultural landscape of mass-produced innocence, optimism, and distraction.¹³ This past, underscored by Jacobs's soundtrack and editing, becomes a context in which their current social and economic circumstances are placed in dialectic relation to the bright illusions of simple conflicts and happily ever afters proffered by the popular culture of their childhood. By acknowledging and even embracing disillusionment and failure, the very conditions that Depression-era musicals were predicated on—even if their primary goal was to overcome or deny these conditions—*Blonde Cobra's* collaborators, on the one hand, use the culture of their collective past to create ways of living in front of the camera in the present while revealing, on the other hand, how this past culture could, as Jacobs later claimed, "literally take over and make it impossible to live."¹⁴ The contradiction that constituted the distinction between the movies and real life in the 1930s is transformed into a set of contradictions internal to the movies, or at least to this movie, that connote how a shared set of past cinematic experiences sets this group of collaborators up for failure. To paraphrase Smith at the end of the film, "It is a mother's wisdom gone terribly wrong."

Throughout *Blonde Cobra*, Smith tells stories about or stages images of childhood, slipping aspects of his own biography into these scenarios, in one instance, at the very last minute. Early in the film, Smith tells of a lonely little boy, less than seven years old, who lived in an enormous house with ten rooms and waited desperately every day for his mother to return home. At very end of this story, Smith admits that he knew that the little boy was less than seven "because we didn't leave Columbus until I was seven." Through this sudden pronoun shift from third to first person,

Smith reveals that he is the little boy, and his story becomes, in retrospect, explicitly autobiographical.

During this and a number of the other stories Smith tells in the film, one has to visually imagine the characters and events he describes because no visual images are offered: his voice is accompanied by black leader. Smith—like so many filmmakers before him, especially those with origins in silent film—privileged the visual aspects of film, although he acknowledged that, in the United States, movies are known by their stories:

It is accepted on all levels, even “the film is a visual medium” levels by its being held that the visuals are written first then breathed to life by a great cameraman, director. In this country the blind go to the movies. There is almost no film an experienced & perceptive blind man couldn’t enjoy.¹⁵

In choosing to present significant portions of Smith’s monologues without images, Jacobs seems to concretize Smith’s claims by making a film a blind man could appreciate, but others suspected that he was up to something else. Jacobs recalls that, at an early screening of *Blonde Cobra*, one walk-out said to him, reacting in particular to the sections of black leader, “I could have stayed home if I wanted to listen to the radio.”¹⁶

* * *

In addition to forcing viewers to use their visual imaginations in ways that they might have when listening to the radio at home, the *Blond Cobra* soundtrack also contains several actual prerecorded radio clips, and, according to the screening instructions and descriptions by some early audience members, two sections of the film were accompanied by live talk radio coming from a radio located in or near the audience.¹⁷ The first instance of live radio begins five seconds into the silent leader at the end of the film’s opening sequence and concludes with the ending of a color sequence that follows the silent interval. The second occurs, toward the end of the film, throughout a series of shots in which Smith is dressed as a baby, wearing a baby bonnet with a small tuft of his hair sticking up and out of an opening in the bonnet’s back. All but one of these shots are accompanied by music that sounds vaguely nursery-rhyme-like—Smith and Jacobs refer to this music as baby-music; J. Hoberman identifies it as a children’s record.¹⁸ In all of the shots, Smith, wearing his bonnet, mimics the gestures and facial

expressions of an infant, sucking on a plastic doll leg, shyly playing peek-a-boo with the camera, and trying to follow and focus his gaze on an object dangling above his head. Although Smith's gestures and facial expressions are quite convincingly infantile, that he is a grown man wearing a baby bonnet is never in doubt. He also smokes a cigarette in several of the shots and uses it to burn holes in some tulle while he's still wearing the bonnet. Midway through this sequence of shots, the baby-music stops when Smith, in extreme close-up, aims a hammer over one of the cathode tubes of an old radio that is missing its outer cover. The tip of the hammer and the tube almost completely blur out of focus because of their close proximity to the camera. Smith strikes the tube, and, when it appears to break during his fifth attempt, the live talk radio cuts out, and the soundtrack remains silent for a few seconds until the baby-music returns.

The practice of playing the radio at film screenings was not unique to *Blonde Cobra*. Other contemporary filmmakers used live radio during screenings of their films. Early screenings of Andy Warhol's 1963 *Sleep*, for example, were accompanied by the sound of a tiny AM radio playing softly in the balcony. Ken Jacobs describes one of these screenings as "atmospheric, New York atmosphere, falling asleep with the radio coming from next door—people asleep with the radio on to remind them there's a world out there."¹⁹ But Jacobs also felt that this radio presence was a mistake—Warhol eventually realized this, too—because it diluted the experience of entering the film's own complex internal time:

To watch this body [of the sleeper] laying across the screen breathing in slow motion, because it was actually projected at 16 frames per second, which is slower than it had been shot. So you had this slower than life of the breathing of the body, and against this slowness was the busy-ness of the grain. It was high contrast black and white that had been pushed, extremely grainy—I'm sure, not conceived of as part of the film. In this case, you really had a sense of a multitude of frames, each with its distinctive grain arrangement, making up this ongoing slow-moving photographic image, and the frames themselves, you could see the pixilation of grain frame to frame, so busy, teeming, this micro-crazy activity against this slow, sinking, heaving . . . it was great.²⁰

Familiar ambient sounds, such as live radio, can serve to collapse distinctions between cinematic and viewing temporalities and spaces; the latter

was the case for the disgruntled *Blonde Cobra* walk-out. This might be why Jacobs felt that the subtle presence of live radio sentimentalized *Sleep* by making it seem a natural part of the larger environment and time of the theater when it was not. In *Blonde Cobra*, the syncing up of the radio's physical demise at the hands of the infantile Smith on the screen with the termination of the live radio sound in the theater has the opposite effect, underscoring the distinct difference between the time and place of the film and the time and place of the radio sound, especially since this syncing up was preceded by a number of other types of radio allusions in which naturalistic relationships between sound and image, time and place, are not clearly established or consistent.

The joining of images of the infantile Smith with an old, broken-down radio, accompanied by the sound of a live radio and the imageless "radio story" of the seven-year-old Smith, like the references to Depression-era musicals, imply an additional set of lived historical relationships: Smith's and, by extension, Jacobs's, Sims's, and Fleischner's collective childhoods and the golden age of radio also coincided with the 1930s. During this decade, radio was one of the cheapest and most pervasive forms of entertainment; many of the stars of 1930s Hollywood and Broadway musicals featured on the *Blonde Cobra* soundtrack, including Victor Moore, were radio and theater stars before they began working in the movies. It was also a medium that demanded an engaged and often collective visual imagination. But by the early 1960s, when Jacobs was completing *Blonde Cobra*, following the development of the portable transistor radio and ultimately television, the programming and experience of radio had drastically changed.

As Marshall McLuhan noted in 1965, "Radio, once a form of group listening that emptied churches, has reverted to private and individual uses since TV. The teenager withdraws from the TV group to his private radio."²¹ Smith—like his collaborators Jacobs, Fleischner, and Sims—was not one of these teenagers. In 1959, he was in his late twenties. His life span included the pretelevision experience of radio as the primary collective, domestic experience, as well as the superseding of this type of radio experience by a more individuated one via the transistor radio; the old radio he cradles under his arm or reclines next to in a number of shots and that he ultimately destroys was not designed exclusively for individual listening or to be portable. Just like the Depression-era music on the soundtrack, it is a cultural relic of the past, and part of Smith's past in particular. His appearance as a baby when destroying it only serves to underscore the relationship between the history of radio and Smith's—and by extension, his collaborators'—personal history relative to it. The radio

one listens to in the theater while watching *Blonde Cobra* is not the radio of that past, either in terms of its technology or its content. The fact that Jacobs stipulated talk radio and not a music station would have served to secure the up-to-dateness of the latter. Radio, just like Depression-era musicals, continues to live in the present, but in different forms, and it possesses distinct content and acoustic and social associations for different generations and types of individuals. Smith's destruction of the radio in the film, the presence and then absence of live radio in the theater, and the failure of imagination on the part of the walk-out all signal these distinctions in literal, spatial, and historical terms.

* * *

Blonde Cobra's biographical dimension was clearly visible to some of those writing or speaking about the film in the 1960s. In a 1967 interview, critic Ken Kelman calls *Blonde Cobra* "probably the only real biography anywhere in cinema that I can think of offhand. Because it is. It is an essential biography. It's also a tragedy, but I can't think offhand of another film that deals with the entirety of somebody's life, . . . the entirety really of a real person's character."²² This "essential biography," according to Kelman, consists of "allusions, symbols in the form of props, and intense visual and sound imagery," but he offers no specific examples. His comments follow Ken Jacobs's claim in the same interview that Jack Smith "is *Blonde Cobra* in the film." Others have noted that "*Blonde Cobra*" refers to two different films—*Blonde Venus* (1932) and *Cobra Woman* (1944)—the first directed by Josef von Sternberg, one of Smith's favorite directors, and the second (Robert Siodmak) starring Maria Montez, the actress that Smith famously idolized throughout his lifetime. Like the Gershwin songs, these films were made for and consumed by a broad, popular audience, but unlike the direct verbal and acoustical references to specific Broadway or Hollywood musicals, *Blonde Cobra* contains no direct or sustained references to either of them or to any other early Hollywood films by Sternberg, such as *Morocco* (1930), *Shanghai Express* (1932), *The Scarlet Empress* (1934), and *The Devil Is a Woman* (1935), or to other films that Montez made at the height of her Hollywood career such as *Arabian Nights* (John Rawlins, 1942), *White Savage* (Arthur Lubin, 1943) and *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* (Arthur Lubin, 1944).

Oblique or fleeting references to any of these films or their stars in *Blonde Cobra*, like the Gershwin songs, do remain markers of possible childhood experiences of these movies, but many of these films were also

continuously screened or frequently featured at a variety of theatrical venues across the country from the 1940s through the 1960s. Ronald Tavel recalls that Smith was nearly twenty at the time of Montez's death in 1951 and working as an usher at the Orpheum Theater in Chicago when the theater took advantage of the publicity surrounding her death by holding an impromptu festival of her films. This was, according to Tavel, Smith's "introduction to the woman who, 'flaming and raging,' would guide his future creativity."²³

Around 1962, Smith notes that up until about five years before that, when they were bought up by television and badly edited, one or another of Montez's films was always playing somewhere in New York.²⁴ And in 1959, the year *Blonde Cobra* was shot, the Museum of Modern Art's film department presented a retrospective of the work of Marlene Dietrich, including all of the films she made with Josef von Sternberg. The relatively unceasing presence of these and other films from the 1930s or 1940s to the present enabled a particular type of evolving personal engagement with them as their broader commercial and critical status and popularity rose and fell. "Having Maria Montez as a favorite star," according to Smith, "has not been gratuitous (tho it was in 1945) since it has left a residue of notions, interesting to me as a film-maker and general film aesthete. No affection can remain gratuitous. Stars who believe nothing are believable in a variety of roles, not to me tho, who have abandoned myself to personal tweakiness." The end result of gratuitous and mercurial fandom, Smith believed, especially in the case of Montez and Sternberg, "cause[s] their downfall (after we have enjoyed them) because they embarrass us grown up as we are and post adolescent / post war / post graduate / post-toasties etc. The movies that were secret (I felt I had to sneak away to see M. M. flix) remain secret somehow and a nation forgets it pleasures, trash."²⁵

This kind of continuous viewing, along with the changing status of particular films, actors, and filmmakers over time is, in part, I think, what Kelman is referring to when he claims that *Blonde Cobra* "deals with the entirety of somebody's life, . . . the entirety really of a real person's character." This entirety is the sweep of a specific cultural history, crystallized in memories and reenactments of childhood, adolescent, or early adult cinematic experience, an ongoing engagement with the life of a cinematic character or world, and the evolving perceptions of this popular culture through the lens of the continuous or ever-present—something secret and secretly beloved—and possibly embarrassing, but nonetheless possible because continually present within the cultural landscape.²⁶

Because they are so subtle, indirect, or partial, however, most of the cinematic allusions to old movies and past stars in *Blonde Cobra*, unlike

many of the musical clips on the soundtrack, could be identified and fully appreciated as such only by others who had put in an equivalent amount of time going to the movies.²⁷ Because of continuous access, such deep familiarity would not have been particularly difficult to come by for New York audiences in the late 1950s and early 1960s. It just required personal commitment. New Yorkers also had access to a broad variety of more recent films—including Hollywood films; B movies; foreign, art, or independent films; the emerging New American Cinema or underground films; and home movies—through numerous established and transient venues. Collectively, these films, both old and new, and their venues, creators, and spectators constituted a set of fluid communities that participated in shared filmmaking and viewing habits that were multivalent and reflexive. The various manifestations of this film culture were, at the very least, *double-sided*, meaning that they were experienced and cultivated both from in front of as well as from behind the camera and from inside and outside the moving image.²⁸ Film theorist and critic Parker Tyler spent much of his career articulating this phenomenon. He called it “moviegoing and moviemaking as rituals of hallucination”:

. . . the freedom to dream and unconsciously interpret figures and events on the screen in purely subjective terms. Through the years the peculiar spell of movie-going has cut across all cultural and intellectual strata with the result that a special nostalgia about things filmic has left a residue of respect, even admiration, among the truly cultivated. . . . In our psychedelic era it has been learned that the mind itself, interpreting the transmuted organism in which it is lodged, *is a film*, and so is the pad, which can be turned into concrete psychedelic environments by actions and a little anti-interior decorating. . . . The old magic-carpet function of the film is now a mental function which the film is used to report in documentary manner.²⁹

Jack Smith claimed that for the “film romanticists” he loved (Marx Bros., Von Stroheim, Montez, Judy Canova, Ron Rice, Von Sternberg, etc.), film was such a physical, mental, and emotional place:

Not the classically inclined conception a strip of stuff (Before the mirror is a place) is a place where it is possible to clown, to pose, to act out fantasies, to not be seen while one gives (movie sets are sheltered, exclusive places where

nobody who doesn't belong can go). Rather the lens range is the place and the film a mirror image that moves as long as the above benighted company's beliefs remained unchallenged, and as far as their own beliefs moved them.³⁰

Smith's acting out of fantasies or evidence of his own ritual of hallucination in such a place might just look like this: In a short, mostly silent shot about halfway through *Blonde Cobra*, the camera slowly pans from left to right across an ambiguous, vertically corrugated surface—a curtain, a screen, or other type of temporary partition—to reveal a deeper space, possibly a bedroom, behind and beyond it in which Smith, wearing a type of women's bathrobe over a sequined gown, long and elaborate earrings, a patterned head scarf, and lipstick that traces an outline well outside the edges of his lips, poses dramatically. Soon after the camera has brought him into focus and centered him within its frame, Smith stands up, adjusts his clothing, scratches himself, and moves toward the camera and ultimately out of focus and out of the frame. As his image dissolves into blackness, the soundtrack returns with what sounds like the speeding up or rapid rewinding of an audio tape.

In a sequence of several shots near the end of Sternberg's *Shanghai Express*, Marlene Dietrich (Shanghai Lily), wearing an elaborate tiered, black lace negligee trimmed with ostrich feathers, stands and walks toward the light, vertically striated wall of her train compartment. She turns to face the camera; it cuts in closer to frame her upper body as she closes her eyes, slightly tilts her head backward, and pulls her blonde hair away from the sides of her face with her hands in a classic Dietrich pose. Then she reaches her arms up and away from her body in a relaxed stretch. She turns to face the door of her compartment, opens the door, steps out into the dark corridor, and fades into this darkness as she pulls the door closed in front of her. The scene cuts to complete darkness, but only momentarily. Dietrich's black silhouette and the details of the train's dimly lit corridor become more and more distinctly articulated as she walks away from the still camera and down the corridor, her negligee swinging from side to side and almost filling the corridor's width as she goes. Once she has traveled about two-thirds of the corridor's length, she turns to face the camera in a moment of indecisiveness and then turns away again. Now the camera tracks her as she walks to the corridor's end and turns to face it and strikes a dramatic pose, left hand on hip, right foot slightly elevated on a railing. She adjusts her robe more tightly around her and crosses her arms in front of her as the camera continues to move toward her. She, too, then moves forward to meet it, finally coming into focus. She then

turns to lean into one of the doorways along the corridor. The shot cuts to a view of the presumed object of her gaze: Clive Brook (Dr. Donald Harvey) sitting at a desk, his back to the camera.

Setting aside the probable coincidence of the striking similarity between the vertically patterned background at the opening of both sequences, the *Blonde Cobra* sequence could be credibly described as a version of the *Shanghai Express* sequence run in reverse. Even the sound, reminiscent of a tape rewinding, heard at the end of the *Blonde Cobra* sequence, could be understood as suggesting such a reading. But these specific resemblances are most likely not the result of a deliberate intention. I want to call what Smith—and Fleischner and Jacobs—are doing in this sequence and throughout *Blonde Cobra*—and in numerous other films that Smith and the others appear in, film, or edit—a loose form of eclectic mimicry. Here Smith, Fleischner, and Jacobs mimic gestures, costumes, physical relationships with the camera, camera work, and visual and sound effects that they have seen in other, predominantly older films. Each of these acts of mimesis has the potential to remind spectators of these other films, other actresses, other filmmakers, but because they are so fleeting, decontextualized, incomplete, willfully disjunctive, or “unsuccessful”—Smith’s lipstick, for example—they produce a transient effect of reference rather than pointing to a specific, readable reference. One senses something is being attempted; a relationship with the past is being drawn. And that sensing becomes the experience, an end in itself. One is watching acts of mimicry as a form of representation, even if this mimicry fails in a traditional sense. Failure, in a sense, is a necessary aspect of the experience and a relative term, since it emphasizes that the relationships being momentarily drawn are between distinct lives that happened in front of the camera at different places and points in time.³¹ Such an experience also conjures previous ones and, before that, repeated viewings of possible source materials for these mimetic acts, and as a result the film itself becomes a place for layered recollections, both personal and shared, but also, potentially, secret and historically specific ones, since only those who grasp what is being documented—not only the fleeting references, but of lives lived in relation to the movies—can truly belong. And at any moment, because of the ever-shifting mimetic gestures invoking different sources and different times, who belongs is subject to change.

In both of the scenes discussed above, a series of successive shots, or in the case of the shot from *Blonde Cobra*, the flow of action within the shot itself, reveal the scene’s artifice, its seemingly internal incoherence, and its difference from what one might call sustained cinematic illusion. The way that artifice is wielded to at once cement and disrupt the

viewer's experience of what constitutes the world of the film provokes an awareness that the more essential aspect of illusion in these films resides elsewhere. What the two sequences most clearly share is a lack of distinction between the creation and dissolution of multiple cinematic personae: Dietrich plays Shanghai Lily playing Dietrich playing Sternberg; Smith plays Dietrich or Maria Montez playing Smith playing Sternberg, etc.³² Even the spaces in these sequences read more as layered allusions to other, more conventional, cinematic representations of space than attempts, even halfhearted ones, to create a coherent representation of external reality. The result is an interplay between life and illusion internalized within the film. Cinematic artifice—illusion—is now, to paraphrase Tyler, *what really happens*.³³ Lives are being lived in front of a camera within the confines of its limitations and with the potential to be played and replayed again and again, even if as a series of failed illusions.

Such an enhanced, and sophisticated, sense of cinematic reality implies a particular experience and conception of history, one that may flicker in and out of its creator's and audience's awareness but, if recognized and shared, can sustain a sense of lives shared nonetheless. Just as Tyler claimed, such evidence can even be and has been understood in documentary terms. Most famously, in 1963, Jonas Mekas screened *Blonde Cobra* and Smith's *Flaming Creatures* at the Flaherty Seminar in Brattleboro, Vermont. That year's seminar was devoted to a retrospective of cinema vérité. In writing about this experience in his 12 September 1963 *Movie Journal* column for the *Village Voice*, Mekas quoted Smith's sense of the relationship between his life and the movies as proof that films like *Blonde Cobra* were actually a new form of documentary: "Movies aren't just something like I came to; they are my life. After *Flaming Creatures* I realized that that wasn't something I had photographed: Everything really happened. It really happened. I—that those were things I wanted to happen in my life and it wasn't something that we did, really lived through it; you know what I mean? And it was really real. It just was."³⁴

* * *

One's grasp of the significance of *Blonde Cobra*'s failures, both of the film and of the character Jack Smith plays, relates to one's level of initiation into the world of the films that Fleischner, Smith, Sims, and Jacobs were drawing from, as well as one's ability to collaborate in their refashioning of these "movie worlds (movies as place)" from the past.³⁵ Both conditions depend to a certain degree on biography. When Smith's image

fades and the screen goes black at the end of the opening section of *Blonde Cobra*, uninitiated viewers may indeed think that its last line, “Let’s call the whole thing off,” signals the end of the film. Such a reaction could reflect the fact that they have never seen *Blonde Cobra* before or their lack of familiarity with how failure works in Depression-era musicals: failure is superficial, something to be overcome. The vocabulary of the film and its allusions do not figure into the entirety of such viewer’s lives.

Shared experiences of 1930s and 1940s US popular culture, whether lived concretely or culturally acquired at some later moment, provide an interdependent framework for the motifs of collaboration and failure for participants in and then spectators of films like *Blonde Cobra*, a framework that rests on an understanding of the interstices of history and identity—that history is something that is collectively experienced by individuals even though these experiences can never be—and never are—precisely equivalent or sustained in the same way by different generations or even within them. A distinction must also be made between these individual experiences and the peripatetic communal worlds and publics they created, depended on, and continuously transformed at any given time. Michael Warner defines a public’s existence as “contingent on its members’ activity, however notional or compromised, and not on its members’ categorical classification, objectively determined position in the social structure, or material existence.” Publics “exist only by virtue of their collective imagining. They are a kind of fiction that has taken on life, and very potent life at that.” Yet, in qualifying this description, Warner adds that “their imaginary character is never merely a matter of private fantasy. . . . They fail if they have no reception in the world.”³⁶

One or more, if not all, of the central terms I have used throughout this essay to describe *Blonde Cobra*—failure, collaboration, innocence, childhood, and biography—were used by Smith and Jacobs and by those who wrote the first critical evaluations of this film in the early 1960s, and they continued to be used later in the decade by Parker Tyler, by P. Adams Sitney in the 1970s, and more recently within retrospective assessments of Smith’s and Jacobs’s films and within the context of queer cultural histories. All of this is evidence that the film has been received. But this shared terminology should not be mistaken for a shared understanding, consensus, or especially for a shared set of stakes. The experience of failure is relative to the relationships that spectators historically have been willing to draw between their lives and life views and the lives that are lived in front of the camera. As I suggest above, *Blonde Cobra*’s vocabulary of failure has a history. And the film’s history of collaboration and failure, in terms of both its creation and reception, is contingent on fleeting and fragile

moments of mutual recognition, as well as mutual and individual opacity, that reveal how complex and elusive the sharing of history truly is.

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NOTES

1. Significant portions of the *Blonde Cobra* soundtrack have been published in Jack Smith and Ken Jacobs, "Soundtrack for *Blonde Cobra*," *Film Culture*, no. 29 (Summer 1963): 2–3; and in Smith, "Soundtrack of *Blonde Cobra*," in *Wait for Me at the Bottom of the Pool: The Writings of Jack Smith*, ed. J. Hoberman and Edward Leffingwell (New York: High Risk Books, 1997), 157–61. Both transcriptions omit the opening sequence under discussion here. Flo Jacobs made a more complete transcript in 2008 that remains unpublished and includes most of this sequence. Since none of these transcriptions is complete, the transcriptions that appear in this essay, although informed by all of these versions, are my own.
2. One might consider the response by Ginger Rogers more evidence of failure, since the song she is singing is not from *Of Thee I Sing*, but from the 1937 Hollywood film *Shall We Dance?* (Mark Sandrich). In developing this essay, I have been inspired by Douglas Crimp's writings on Andy Warhol and collaboration, and in particular his essay "Coming Together to Stay Apart," which appears in his book "*Our Kind of Movie*": *The Films of Andy Warhol* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 46–66.
3. A number of Ken Jacobs's recollections of the making of *Blonde Cobra* have been published. The most extensive one, "The Great *Blonde Cobra* Collaboration," which follows the film transcript, is included in Hoberman and Leffingwell, *Wait for Me* (see note 1), 162–63. Hoberman also provides a brief account of the film's history, including its early screening history in *On Jack Smith's "Flaming Creatures" (and Other Secret-Flix of Cinema-roc)* (New York: Granary Books/Hips Road, 2001), 128–29.
4. Ken Jacobs, "Jack Smith: Movies, *Blonde Cobra*," European Media Art Festival, 11–15 September 1996, Osnabrück, Germany, p. 1, formerly available at *Cinema of the World*, www.worldscinema.com/2011/04/ken-jacobs-blonde-cobra-1963.html.
5. Jacobs completed the editing, less sound, in the spring of 1960 and first screened the film at the Sun Gallery in Provincetown, Massachusetts, during the summer of 1961 with his *Little Stabs at Happiness*; both were accompanied by live 78-rpm records. Jacobs began work on the sound recordings sometime during or after the spring of 1962. Victor Moore died on 23 July 1962, so at least the opening sequence of the film was recorded sometime after that date. See Jacobs, "Great *Blonde Cobra* Collaboration," 162–63; and "Jack Smith: Movies, *Blonde Cobra*," 1.
6. Flo Jacobs, e-mail communication with the author, 23 August 2011.
7. Notes accompanying three underground films recorded on DVD by Ken Jacobs in 2007.
8. Jacobs claims that Smith "set a lawyer on me that I physically scared off" (ibid.). In contrast, according to Jacobs, Fleischner seemed mildly gratified, and Sims just wanted to know when he would be paid for his acting (Jacobs, "Great *Blonde Cobra* Collaboration," 163).

9. A number of critics, including P. Adams Sitney, describe Smith's dress throughout *Blonde Cobra* as drag, but such a term ignores the rich referential flexibility and sexual and historical density that Smith intends his clothing to communicate. Critics such as Parker Tyler were more appreciative of the historical resonances of Smith's costume choices, describing them as simultaneously antiquated and prescient: "Here the true hippie life style is still inchoate: it had not reached its 'fashion' stage, its poise, its implements (such as drugs), its conscious philosophy of love and flowers, or its sense of self-sufficiency" (Tyler, *Underground Film: A Critical History* [1969; repr., Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 1995], 79–80; for example, see Sitney, "Recovered Innocence," *Visionary Film: The American Avant-garde, 1943–2000*, 3rd ed. [1974; repr., New York: Oxford University Press, 2002], 315–45, quotation on 316).
10. This sequence, like the opening sequence, also ends abruptly with the film running out, followed by several seconds of black leader, but this time the effect is quite different.
11. This camera work might also be characterized as *ciné-dance*. Parker Tyler used this term to describe a cinematic approach to dance that was strikingly different from traditional dance documentaries, which aim to reproduce the experience of dance as viewed from a seat and a single point of view in a theater. Ciné-dance creates a totally independent, yet equivalent, expressive form of active collaboration with the dancer. But the movement in ciné-dance remains, as is the case for live dance, exclusively a matter of the medium itself, its physical limitations and capabilities, and, in the case of ciné-dance, its exclusive optical effects. Tyler explains: "[C]hanging only slightly a film camera's viewpoint, from near to far, from above to below, and always implying optical movement, refers to the film's subjective existence, not to the objects being photographed." The results, according to Tyler, may recall other forms of art—namely, drawing and painting or, in this case, dance—but never life. They do not depend on a concrete reality outside themselves for significance, yet they share a sensibility about being in the world (Tyler, "Ciné-Dance," in *Sex Psyche Etcetera in the Film* [Middlesex, England: Pelican Books, 1971], 184–88, quotation on 186).
12. According to Ken Jacobs, Fleischner shot most of *Blonde Cobra* in Smith's apartment except for a few scenes, which were shot in Sims's apartment. Both apartments were on the Lower East Side (Jacobs, "Great *Blonde Cobra* Collaboration," 162).
13. P. Adams Sitney uses detailed discussions of *Blonde Cobra* and a number of other films by Smith and Jacobs to illustrate his sense of their fundamentally ironic attitude toward everything they represent or seek to address, including sexual identity and elements of a recovered past innocence. In *Blonde Cobra*, according to Sitney, this

ironical mode . . . brackets dreams within stories, confuses a character with the actor portraying it, and reveals a sexual despair while mocking sexual despairs. The folding over of guises and revelations deprives the film of a fixed point of reference, the solid presence of content, and makes it into a film object, which fitfully starts and after almost expiring several times, dies with an unanswered question, "What went wrong?" (Sitney, "Recovered Innocence," 319)

In claims like this one and in his use throughout the essay of terms and phrases such as "innocence," "nostalgia," and "a sense of pastness" without any consideration of their particular historical implications or significance in each of the films he discusses, Sitney misses the specific politics, both sexual and social, that many of these films engage. *Blonde Cobra* does employ a number of fixed points of reference—Depression-era musicals is just one—from a specific past: that of the film's collaborators. The innocence these musicals promoted operated within a larger political and social context that routinely promoted fluid social mobility and heteronormativity, although the actual circumstances

and life experiences of many if not most of their viewers bore little relation to the lives depicted on the screen. By placing these historically specific contradictions in the present through the continuum of their own life experience, the collaborators reveal the contradictions inherent in the depictions of innocence that they engage. This is not a display of irony's emotional distancing, but an act of bringing the past and the creation of sexual and social identity close. One could draw a useful analogy here to Michael Warner's distinction between publics and counterpublics:

Dominant publics are by definition those that can take their discourse pragmatics and their lifeworlds for granted, misrecognizing the indefinite scope of their expansive address as universality or normalcy. Counterpublics are spaces of circulation in which it is hoped that the poesis of scene making will be transformative, not replicative merely. (Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* [New York: Zone Books, 2002], 122)

14. Ken Jacobs, interview with author, 27 February 2007. Even though failure is shared, its significance might not have been. According to David James, Jacobs uses failure throughout his entire career "to resist reification or commodification," and "to be a success within the alienation of capitalist culture would be to fail categorically in all other terms." James views *Blonde Cobra* as prototypical of these aims—aims that James believes Smith especially learned from Jacobs. Smith's sense that Jacobs made *Blonde Cobra* too heavy suggests otherwise (James, "The Sky Socialist: Film as an Instrument of Thought, Cinema as an Augury of Redemption," in *Optic Antics: The Cinema of Ken Jacobs*, ed. Michele Pierson, David E. James, and Paul Arthur [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011], 64–88, quotation on 77). My sense of how failure worked for Smith is closer to Marc Siegel's. Siegel argues that failure in films such as *Flaming Creatures* signifies Smith's rejection of the limited range of expressions of erotic relations in everyday life: "Smith's aesthetic is thus not a means of capturing the truth of his erotic life, but of 'composing (on) life in living it and making it'" (Siegel, "Documentary That Dare/Not Speak Its Name: Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures*," in *Between the Sheets, In the Streets: Queer, Lesbian, Gay Documentary*, ed. Chris Holmlund and Cynthia Fuchs [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997], 91–106, quotation on 102–3).
15. Jack Smith, "Belated Appreciation of V.S.," *Film Culture*, no. 31 (Winter 1963–64): 4–5, quotation on 4.
16. See note 7.
17. In the screening instructions for *Blonde Cobra*, Ken Jacobs also suggests that the radio could be plugged into the sound system along with the soundtrack.
18. Smith and Jacobs, "Soundtrack for *Blonde Cobra*," 3; and Hoberman, *On Jack Smith's "Flaming Creatures,"* 128.
19. Ken Jacobs, in Tom Gunning and David Schwartz, "Interview with Ken Jacobs [Flo Jacobs present]," *Films That Tell Time: A Ken Jacobs Retrospective* (Astoria, NY: American Museum of the Moving Image, 1989), 29–61, quotation on 45 (ellipsis in the original).
20. *Ibid.*, 45.
21. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 306.
22. Comment by Ken Kelman in "Interview with Ken Jacobs and Ken Kelman" (1967), formerly available at YouTube, www.youtube.com/watch?v=2l1FTdm9hOk. Jonas Mekas also describes *Blonde Cobra* as "one of the greatest works of personal cinema, so personal that it is ridiculous to talk about 'author's cinema'" (Mekas, "On the Baudelairean

- Cinema," in *Movie Journal: The Rise of a New American Cinema 1959–1971* [New York: Macmillan, 1972], 85–86, quotation on 86).
23. Ronald Tavel, "Maria Montez: Anima of an Antediluvian World," in *Flaming Creature: Jack Smith—His Amazing Life and Times*, ed. Edward Leffingwell, Carole Kismaric, and Marvin Heiferman (New York: Institute for Contemporary Art—PS1 and Serpent's Tail, 1997), 88–105, quotation on 99.
 24. Jack Smith, "The Perfect Filmic Appositeness of Maria Montez," *Film Culture*, no. 27 (Winter 1962–63): 28–36, quotation on 29.
 25. *Ibid.*, 30.
 26. Such a definition of how the past in general, and past cultural objects such as films and popular songs in particular, become integral to the entirety of someone's life is a productive way of addressing the often ahistorical and concomitantly apolitical rhetoric of the discourse on camp, most infamously embodied in Susan Sontag's essay "Notes on 'Camp,'" *Partisan Review* 31, no. 4 (1964): 515–30. By grounding Smith's—and Jacobs's, Fleischer's, and Sims's—choices within his personal history, one recognizes that these choices are not haphazard or just a matter of taste; they have been lived.
 27. The contrast between the directness and specificity of the references on the soundtrack to *Blonde Cobra's* opening section and the indirectness and partiality of the references in the visual imagery included in this section underscores how this distinction works throughout the film. In the final shot in this sequence, Smith fully emerges from behind layers of plastic and slowly turns to face the camera. He holds a round clay object to his nose with his right hand and grasps the brim of his hat with his left; the shot is now tightly framed around his face and slightly below him, and most of the detail dissolves because of the closeness of the camera. Smith then turns away from the camera and, once his head is in profile, what looks like the same plastic sheet or some other sort of translucent fabric comes between him and the camera. His features and left arm almost completely dissolve into a soft pattern of light and gray forms. Then he turns to face the camera again, pulls the brim of his hat close into both sides of his face and frames his face with his hands and the hat, smiles broadly, and again almost dissolves out of focus as Rogers sings "Let's call the whole thing off." Because of the changing angles of the camera and the alternating positions of the sheet of the plastic or, perhaps at certain points, fabric crossing in front of and behind the various incongruous objects and Smith's hand and head, it is sometimes difficult to identify the camera's spatial relationship to what it is filming. It is also often difficult to distinguish between foreground, middle ground, and background; the surface of the image and the surface of the plastic; and whether the image is out of focus because of depth of field or because of the plastic. All of these visual elements occur throughout the rest of the film, but here they seem condensed so as to provide a type of visual sampler of the formal elements to come. The veiling of the figure or objects with plastic or thin fabrics or the use of these same types of materials to suggest layers of cinematic space suggest techniques used by Josef von Sternberg in numerous films including, especially, *The Scarlet Empress* (1934). And Smith's final gesture of pulling the brim of his hat around his face while in close-up evokes a signature gesture of a number of Depression-era Hollywood actors, male and female, from Gene Kelly and Donald O'Connor to Marlene Dietrich.
 28. For a broader discussion of this historical phenomena within a different artistic community, but also with reference to *Blonde Cobra*, see my "A Structure of Creativity," in *Ruth Vollmer 1961–1978: Thinking the Line* (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2006), 48–57.
 29. Tyler, *Underground Film*, 65.
 30. Smith, "Perfect Filmic Appositeness," 30.

31. For Ken Jacobs, moments when illusion breaks down remind viewers of the fact that life happened in front of the camera and of the fact of life's transience in general:

I feel it's enough for me, for ourselves in our moment to see what the truth of transience and vulnerability is. That it's one transience looking at another transience and being able to see a kind of reflection of itself and to feel for that state of transience. (Ken Jacobs, "An Interview with Ken Jacobs," by Julie Hampton, *Millennium Film Journal*, nos. 32–33 [1998]: 131–40, quotation on 138–39)

32. Smith describes these relationships himself:

In the visuals. . . she [Dietrich] was V.S. himself. A flaming neurotic—nothing more nothing less—no need to know she was rich, poor, innocent, guilty etc. Your eye if you could use it told you more interesting things (facts?) than those. Dietrich was his visual projection—a brilliant transvestite in a world of delirious unreal adventures. (Smith, "Belated Appreciation of V.S.," 4)

33. Tyler, *Underground Film*, 69.

34. Jonas Mekas, "The Underground and the Flaherty Seminar," *Movie Journal, Village Voice*, 12 September 1963, 94–95, quotation on 95. One also could describe this process, paraphrasing Parker Tyler, as a documentary of the mental function of film for some, and, in *Underground Film*, Tyler calls *Blonde Cobra* "a documentary of a way of life" (80). Marc Siegel addresses this expanded sense of documentary and its "queer challenges to the normalization of erotic life" at length in his seminal essay on Jack Smith ("Documentary That Dare," 91–106). Here, I am interested in describing how this queer challenge is shaped by shared historical experience.

35. Smith, "Perfect Filmic Appositeness," 31.

36. Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 74.

