

# A brief introduction to the beat (in) film

by Jack  
Sargeant



John Cassavetes directing *Shadows*

---

Jack Sargeant is the author of *Naked Lens: Beat Cinema* (1997), *Deathtripping: The Cinema of Transgression* (1995) and *sUTURE* (1998) (all published by [Creation Books](#) ). He is also a regular contributor to many journals and magazines; a collection of his writings *Cinema Contra Cinema* is available (Fringecore via Amazon).

---

The earlier version of this essay appeared in the 2000 Brisbane International Film Festival catalogue.

---

"Beat means Beatitude, not beat up"  
- Jack Kerouac

"The entire Beat literary movement was based, to some extent,  
on Keroac's estimate of be-bop as an improvised spontaneous form"  
- Allen Ginsberg

1.

Beat has a schizophrenic etymology. There are numerous manifestations of beat culture. The first - and most commonly recognized - is of the literary friendships which emerged in '40s New York between poet Allen Ginsberg and author Jack Kerouac, both of whom sought a way in which the written word, and art in general, could express the immediacy of lived experience. They believed that art should express the harshness of life as experienced and the transcendental potentialities of religious and narcotic explorations. Art and life were to become the same, the false distinctions that had thus far separated the two would be transgressed in multiple celebrations. A third figure in this unique friendship was William Burroughs, although he would always deny his position as a beat writer, frequently advocating insurrection and radical-literary deconstruction beyond the exegesis of the poetic vision, nevertheless his path and that of the beats would be entwined in friendship, love, and sex, throughout the rest of their lives.

Each of these three central writers could be said to have had their own decade, finding their own particular resonance with dissonant subcultures. Kerouac had the jazz'50s: improvisation, jamming, word games and speech rhythms emerge through his literature. Ginsberg had the hippie and yippie'60s: protests, finding a voice for those marginalised by dominant culture, and travelling East in search of mystico-religious visions. Burroughs had the'70s: terrorism, nihilism, punk, and short circuiting the control machine.

Yet these three writers were never alone. Through early travels in the dark alleyways, the basement bars, and the jazz clubs of New York and San Francisco, Ginsberg, Kerouac, and Burroughs met other kindred spirits also seeking to explore and experience the vestiges of life as art: car-thief and writer Neal Cassady; and criminal, hustler, junky and story teller Herbert Hunke. In the '50s further friendships emerged with the poets of the San Francisco Literary Renaissance - Philip Whalen, Lorraine Hansberry, Michael McClure and Gary Snyder - and New York writers Gregory Corso, Diane DiPrima, Amiri Baraka, and John Clellon Holmes. During the Parisian, Beat Hotel years others became affiliated with the beats, most notably the polymath Brion Gysin. Together these poets have retrospectively been imagined as forming the beat literary scene, although any socio-political collusion is coincidence. There was/is no single arche - no single truth - of beat literature. Perhaps the only unifying factor amongst these writers and poets would be Burroughs' adaptation of Hassan I Sabbah's credo that "Nothing Is True - Everything Is Permitted".

Part of the beat writers weltanschauung was the belief in exploring one's creativity across artistic mediums, thus, for example, Ginsberg took numerous photographs, whilst Kerouac and Burroughs both painted. This manifestation of beat culture fed into the wider period of artistic experimentation which explored similar areas to those of the beat writers. In this context the emergence of personal film in the '50s must be viewed as, at least in part, a constituent element of a wider beat culture. Furthermore the desire to explore self expression and experiment with aesthetics across disciplines led many writers, filmmakers, poets, photographers, painters and sculptors into liberating collaborations. Beat was not purely literature, but part of a wider American artistic and cultural renaissance.

A further, more populist and clichéd, manifestation of the beat is as a construction emerging from the paranoid media discourse of '50s Cold War America. The beatnik - a fusion of beat and nik, from the Russian launched Sputnik satellite, forever fusing beats and the Red Menace together in the popular imagination - wore sandals, shades, a beret, black roll-neck, dungarees, and a goatee, he spouted meaningless poetry, read Mao, smoked reefer, grooved to jazz, and spent his time dreaming of sex or playing bongos.

2.

Underground Improvisations: A Brief Genealogy of Beat Underground

## Film.

"The world-weariness of Antonioni is strictly European and however interesting and beautiful can not satisfy America. Besides, it's not beat. It's not mongrel, wild, uncouth, naive, heartless, pornographic, licentious, insane, bold, bald, fat, monstrous, square enough for America - strong enough to release the monolithic freeze which periodically grips this land and is settling in again this year along with the weather. America's great movements are too little - we must have the screen. The enormous 12,800 mile SCREEN! He says, falling all 500 stories to the cement. America, loosen up or strangle." Taylor Mead, *The Movies Are A Revolution*.

Beat cinema - in common with beat literature - has no common singular style, rather it shares an attitude that demands self expression, exploration, poetic visions, mysticism, radical ideas, liberation and the belief that art and life can not be separated. Beat filmmakers vary from animators such as Harry Smith - whose bebop influenced alchemical images, collectively titled *Early Abstractions* (circa 1939 - 1956), explored the potentialities of abstract colour and light, creating images of transfiguration that are characterized by a haunting beauty - to the personal, naturalistic films of directors such as Jonas Mekas (*Guns of the Trees*, 1961) and Shirley Clarke (*The Connection*, 1961) - both of whom presented believable quasi-biographical narratives as unmediated literary-cinematic flow.

In late '50s and early '60s America the beat experiment in film was primarily linked to the emergence of underground film (a.k.a. New American Cinema). Perhaps the most famous beat film was created by two young artists, the painter Alfred Lesley and the photographer Robert Frank, who began to collaborate with Jack Kerouac on an idea for a film adaptation of a short play by Kerouac entitled *The Beat Generation* or *The New Amaraen Church*. The film - eventually entitled *Pull My Daisy* (1959) - was cast with leading members of the beat literary scene: Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, and Peter Orlovsky, alongside Delphine Seyrig, jazz musician David Amram, and artist Larry Rivers. Kerouac narrated the film, producing undoubtedly the best audio recording of his career. The film was hailed by Jonas Mekas - the leading exponent of the emerging New York underground film scene - as "the first truly Beat film" and a "free improvisation", whilst J. Hoberman described the inaugural screening - on a bill with Cassavetes' *Shadows* (1959) - as the moment at which "the underground announced itself".

John Cassavetes' debut movie *Shadows* was produced almost simultaneously to *Pull My Daisy*. A feature length film exploring the friendships of a group of writers, musicians, and performers based in and around the jazz scene, the film appeared as an authentic voice both from and about the New York bohemian community. Like *Pull My Daisy* - with which it was first screened - *Shadows* was hailed by Jonas Mekas as a triumph of "improvisation, spontaneity, and free inspiration" elements that, Mekas argued, "are almost entirely lost in most films".

Over the subsequent years, numerous, frequently contradictory tales, would emerge

concerning the production of these two films, and both films would be 'revealed' as rehearsed films which only appeared as spontaneous. Nevertheless, even if these films lacked the marks of an 'authentic' and 'genuine' 'spontaneity', they inspired numerous other filmmakers to explore the potentialities of improvised, free cinema in their own works.

In San Francisco, Ron Rice produced the excellent 45 minute poem to the free spirit: *The Flower Thief* (1960). Starring the poet, underground film and theatre actor Taylor Mead, the film largely eschewed even the loose naturalistic narratives that characterized *Shadows* and *Pull My Daisy*. Instead, *The Flower Thief* follows the central protagonist's geographic ramblings throughout San Francisco's North Beach, letting Mead's flower-stealing protagonist lead the wandering 'narrative'. Mead's character in the film is, according to Ron Rice, an homage to the long lost Wild Man, and is presented with a combination of childlike innocence and anarchistic sexuality; he sees and experiences the world with wonder yet also is sophisticated enough to pick-up a young man and take him to the beach. In the film, Mead embodies a crazed, spontaneous, playful, sexual figure, an outsider in the classic beat tradition. Like *Pull My Daisy* and *Shadows* the film was praised by Mekas for its spontaneity, as well as for being "the craziest film ever made".

Haunted by the beat travelling spirit Ron Rice would journey across the USA to New York, and to Mexico, following the philosophy of exploration and wonderment. His journeys produced several poetic films: *Senseless* (1962) which followed a road trip to Mexico; the anarchic *The Queen of Sheeba Meets The Atom Man* (1963/completed in 1982); and the Jack Smith influenced *Chumlum* (1964).

In New York, filmmakers Ken Jacobs and Jack Smith began to explore new forms of personal cinema, in particular, films which focussed on the outsiders with whom they spent their days - Jacobs' used Smith in his film *Blonde Cobra* (1959-63). Jack Smith - already using the photograph as a way in which to document the glorious creatures that were his friends - picked up a camera and several reels of old film stock to produce *Flaming Creatures* (1963). In *Flaming Creatures* life manifested as performance as cinema as life... all the distinctions vanished. Banned by over zealous legal authorities the film became a free speech issue, and it would go on to become a landmark not just for improvised cinema and underground film but also for queer theatre, pop art, glitter and even punk.

In Europe, a different manifestation of beat film emerged from the dusty rooms of the legendary Beat Hotel in Paris. It was whilst living at Madame Rachou's cheep hotel that William Burroughs became friends with painter Brion Gysin, mathematician Ian Sommerville, and film director Antony Balch. Combining ideas and research, these four radicals developed a body of work - from the Dream Machine to the cut-up novel - that attacked all representations produced by what Burroughs' would describe in his novels as "control". Whilst their initial cinematic collaboration *Towers Open Fire* (1963) was based loosely on recurring memes in Burroughs' novels *The Soft Machine* (1966 edition) and *Nova Express*, their second was a radical gesture that has still to be equalled in filmmaking. Whilst the American underground filmmakers explored personal filmmaking and aesthetic

existence, the Balch / Burroughs film *The Cut-Ups* (a.k.a *Cut-Ups*, 1967) saw the creation of a cinema that attempted nothing less than the savage deconstruction of the relationship between image and reality. Balch's film negated even the loose narratives of underground film in favour of a jarring mathematical cut-up that attempted to create an estrangement between sensory and psychological (pre)conceptions. Balch literally attempted to re-wire the audience's collective psyche.

Balch's films are a clear influence on later works which continue exploring Burroughs' anarchistic / liberating ideas. This can most clearly be seen in Klaus Maeck and Muscha's *Decoder* (1982), which explores such Burroughs' staples as the electronic revolution and the potentialities of sonic weaponry. The film explores the author's statement that "Young people in the West have been lied to, sold out, and betrayed. Best thing they can do is take the place apart before they are destroyed in a nuclear war". *Decoder* sees the war-universe of Burroughs' Wild Boys literalised within the post-punk / industrial music scene of early '80s Berlin, bringing Burroughs' philosophical and political work to a new audience.

The literary outpourings of the beats also offer filmmakers a source of material ripe for adaptation. The first cinematic adaptation of a beat novel was Ranald McDougall's 1960 version of Jack Kerouac's novel *The Subterraneans* starring George Peppard and Roddie McDowall. Whilst the film managed to spectacularly fail to represent any of Kerouac's concerns it nevertheless succeeded in being one of the most entertaining exploitation films based on the hipster lifestyle. Other beat exploitation movies included such classics as Charles Haas' *The Beat Generation* (1959), master of the exploitation movie Roger Corman's *Bucket of Blood* (1959) and E. T. Greville's *Beat Girl* (1959). Honourable mention must also go to comic beatnik appearances in *The Addams Family* and *The Munsters*.

The beats were the major turning point in twentieth century artistic, literary, and cinematic practice. Further, from the mid '40s onwards, they explored new ideas and new ways of living - embracing a politics that was queer, anti-nuclear, ecological, and libertarian. Beat cinema ranges from the classics of the underground to bio-pics and documentaries, from adaptations of beat literature to the most gleefully absurd exploitation b-movies. Some of these films seek to find an authentic voice, others attempt to jump on a cult bandwagon, most of these films are rarely - if ever - screened, and all demand to be viewed if only to give an insight into the massive influence of the beats on global culture over the last sixty years.

---

© Jack Sargeant 2000

---

[contents](#)   [great directors](#)   [cteq annotations](#)   [top tens](#)   [about us](#)   [links](#)  
[archive](#)   [search](#)