Ken Hollings

Flash Gordon Conquers the Universe

The Superhero as Camp Enigma

Ein ewiges Rätsel will ich bleiben mir und anderen
Ludwig II of Bavaria

1.

Professor Zarkov: By destroying Ming you have saved the universe.
Flash Gordon: In his mad ambition he declared that he would rule the universe.
Professor Zarkov: Then since you have conquered Ming, I shall radio your father: «Flash Gordon Conquers the Universe».
Dale Arden: And saved the earth.
Closing dialogue, Episode Twelve, *Flash Gordon Conquers the Universe*[1]

What kind of hero is capable of conquering an entire universe? At such a triumphant moment as this it is worth recalling that the first – and only – thing we ever learn about Flash Gordon at the start of his film career is that he plays polo. Or at least he would do if the world weren't about to be destroyed. «He gave up his polo game just in time to catch the transcontinental plane, hoping to be with us before the end,» his father announces after receiving a telegram from Flash at the observatory where he works as chief astronomer, watching the planet Mongo on its collision course with the Earth. As it was in the beginning of Flash's first ever movie serial, so it is in the final episode of *Flash Gordon Conquers the Universe*, his third and last adventure in outer space. Flash never reaches his father or the observatory but finds himself instead with Professor Zarkov and Dale Arden on Mongo, in the clutches of its ruler Ming the Merciless. In fact, over the course of his three serials for Universal Pictures, Flash Gordon spends so little time on his home planet that it might just as well have been destroyed. All contact between father and son takes place through the medium of radio, via relayed messages and urgent telegrams, as if the two were in spirit communication with each other, their voices barely touching in the ether.

Flash Gordon only comes alive in outer space, far from the defining pull of family, career or social obligation: he belongs there, among the rocket ships and monsters, the alien races, their customs and rulers. Whether on Mongo or Mars, in the kingdom of the Shark Men or the land of the Rock Men, his response to every creature he encounters is pretty much the same: he either fights them or befriends them. At the end of every episode he finds himself in some terrible peril until the start of the next: his fate hanging in the balance, trapped between life and death. Flash's entire existence in space is played out from such mutually exclusive opposites. The hero who can conquer an entire universe is one capable of operating at its simplest, most basic level – without complexity or subtlety, change or development. Oscillating constantly between absolutes, Flash Gordon

is the superhero as enigma. Behind that handsome, blond and finely muscled exterior is an endless binary code constantly threatening to cancel itself out.

A transmission from space waiting to be picked up, transcribed and interpreted, Flash Gordon is best understood in terms of the communications media that created him in the first place. His real connection to this world is to be found exclusively in pulp science-fiction serials and comic strips published in the United States, where other versions of him exist under different names but similar circumstances. As a human being pitted against aliens, his earliest recognisable ancestor is John Carter, who first appeared in the 1912 short story *Under the Moons of Mars*[2]. The creation of Edgar Rice Burroughs, John Carter is a Civil War veteran and adventurer magically transported from a cave on Earth to the Red Planet, where he establishes a new life for himself among the Martian races he encounters there. His adventures became the subject of an eleven-volume fiction series whose titles alone give some indication of what to expect from its hero; some of the most important among them are *A Princess of Mars*, *The Warlord of Mars* and *The Swords of Mars*. After John Carter came Philip Francis Nowlan's Buck Rogers, making his debut in the August 1928 issue of *Amazing Stories* magazine.

Launched in 1926 by science publisher Hugo Gernsback, *Amazing Stories* was the first of his periodicals devoted exclusively to what he liked to call ‹scientifiction›. Behind distinctive, glossy covers, it offered its predominantly adolescent readers fast-paced space opera on low quality newsprint. Here were machines, maidens and monsters from other worlds. More importantly, *Amazing Stories* made a feature of prophets who spoke in the past tense: men from the present day who, by accident or design, had journeyed into the future and survived to tell the tale. The most famous and enduring of these was Anthony ‹Buck› Rogers. Like John Carter, he found himself trapped in an old, abandoned mine, where he falls under the influence of a mysterious radioactive gas which causes him to fall asleep for approximately four hundred years. When he awakes Rogers finds himself on Earth in the Twenty-Fifth Century, rescuing beautiful women, fighting invading «Mongols» and thwarting the plans of his arch rival, «Killer Kane», who is bent on world domination. Transformed in 1929 into a comic-strip character by Nolan and Dick Calkins for the National Newspaper Syndicate of America, subsequent stories involved Buck Rogers in trips to the Moon, Martian invasions and an expedition to the sunken continent of Atlantis. The influence of Buck Rogers on the public imagination cannot be underestimated. Not only was his syndicated strip the first to feature rocket ships, atomic blasters and journeys to other planets, but his original success indicated just how popular science fiction could be. A Buck Rogers film was even premiered at the 1933 Chicago World's Fair: a ten-minute epic entitled *An Interplanetary Battle with the Tiger Men of Mars*.

By then the Hearst Corporation's King Features Syndicate had approached cartoonist Alex Raymond to come up with a rival to Buck Rogers; and in January 1934 the Flash Gordon comic strip started to appear in the Funny Pages. Two years later Universal Pictures' released the first Flash Gordon movie serial starring US Olympic swimmer Larry «Buster» Crabbe in the lead role. With his sporting profile and athletic physique, Crabbe had to do little more than dye his hair blond in order to take on the role of a comic-book character who was, in media terms, a heroic blank: little more than an empty frame. John Carter and Buck Rogers might have arrived in space ahead of him, but Flash Gordon actually was

space – not because he was strange and new but because he was a composite of what had gone before and, as such, seemed already familiar to a mass audience.

2.

> «Following in the wake of the distressed condition of the world, with dictators, war and rumours of war, a ravaging plague has visited the Earth: the ‹Purple Death› that leaves only a purple spot on the forehead of its victims ...»
>
> Opening narration, Episode One, *Flash Gordon Conquers the Universe*

The enigma of Camp, first capitalized by Susan Sontag in her 1964 essay *Notes on Camp*, lies in its very familiarity. Every emotion, form and gesture it reproduces is already known. Needing no personal background beyond that supplied by other comic strips and pulp tales, Flash Gordon is the embodiment of the superhero as Camp enigma. His is a mystery that conforms to type. He is brave, handsome, noble and strong – and comes alive only when far from our own world. Sontag even lists «the old Flash Gordon comics» between «Bellini's operas» and «stag movies seen without lust» as prime examples of Camp.[3] To see Buster Crabbe as Flash Gordon – or, more precisely, to see Flash Gordon as Buster Crabbe – is to understand what connects all three. Before playing Flash, Crabbe had appeared in a 1933 movie serial as Tarzan, Edgar Rice Burroughs's most famous fictional character; similarly, many of the sets and props for the first Flash Gordon vehicle were taken from old Universal horror and fantasy movies, including *Just Imagine*, a science-fiction musical comedy partly inspired by Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* and set in the year 1980. How else to express the new and the unknown except in terms of novelty and change, which are merely restatements of the familiar? What connects the half-naked primitive Tarzan with the futuristic superhero Flash Gordon was affirmed yet again in 1939 when Buster Crabbe starred in the title role of a twelve-chapter Buck Rogers adventure set in the year 2440.

In relative terms, the production standards of *Flash Gordon*, *Flash Gordon's Trip to Mars* and *Flash Gordon Conquers the Universe* are fairly low: they reflect the meeting of low budgets with low expectations, catering ostensibly for the young, the undemanding or those desperately eager to be transported into space. After all, in his very first outing Flash has to stop an entire planet in its tracks to prevent it from colliding with the Earth. Furthermore the composite structuring of Flash Gordon as a media creation seems to have leaked into the aesthetic of the very films in which he appeared. The two complement each other very effectively, adding to the unreadable nature of Flash Gordon's status in the popular imagination as a space-age superhero. That which is already known is often barely noticed: it is the inclusion of the familiar rather than the strange that allows for what Coleridge once called «the willing suspension of disbelief». While watching the first Flash Gordon serial, it is easy to overlook, amongst the borrowed sets and costumes, the addition of a sequence from the 1935 Hollywood version of *Dante's Inferno,* in which a gigantic pagan idol presides over a mass of writhing human bodies, some snatches of Max Steiner's affecting score for Universal's *The Bride of Frankenstein*, plus several bars from Richard Wagner's «Parsifal Prelude», all of which are used more than once during the course of the serial to underscore the drama. They appear, alongside old footage of dinosaurs

fighting and clips lifted from newsreels and wildlife documentaries, as evocations of the otherworldly: something to which a mass audience can only become accustomed by virtue of having witnessed it before.

What enhances this effect – and extends the aesthetic of the otherworldly further still – is the deliberate confusion of technologies and cultures discovered by Flash Gordon on Mongo and its surrounding worlds. A bafflingly eclectic mix of historical periods and styles predominates: military uniforms of the Roman Empire appear alongside statuary from Ancient Egypt and palaces depicted in the pages of *A Thousand and One Nights*; ‹atom furnaces›, spaceships and submarines coexist with dragons, swords and breastplates. Such juxtapositions result not so much in the «tiger's leap into the past» signalled by Walter Benjamin in his *On the Concept of History*[4], a work composed after Flash Gordon had already begun his cinematic adventures, but the presentation of outer space as an anomaly to be understood purely in terms of the past. The otherworldly becomes enigmatic and harder to read precisely because it seems to occupy no specific time or place. Its composite details, however recognisable these may be, consequently fail to sustain a relationship other than as fantasy: an unstable ambiguity that cannot easily be resolved. It is the sublime seen purely in terms of the contradictions it arouses within us.

Not surprisingly, Flash's conquest of the universe begins with the Purple Death: a ‹ravishing plague› that only seems to affect the inhabitants of Earth. In fact, we see it claim a single anonymous victim, struck down in the street at the very start of the serial. However, a doctor is on hand to examine the body and point out the purple spot on the deceased's forehead to a small group of alarmed bystanders. To give this short sequence its pressing sense of urgency a montage of stock footage has been constructed around it, showing ambulances chasing down city streets and the restless jostling of mobs in public squares around the world. The Purple Death, it turns out, is nothing less than a technologically transmitted epidemic: an international panic made up from old newsreels, crowd shots, the broadcasting studios of radio stations and newspaper headlines. A mass contagion for an age of mass communications, it spreads itself by infecting everyone within hearing of its soundtrack: a barely coherent jumble of shouting voices, wailing sirens and official announcements.

As such, the Purple Death exists solely as an illusion, a dream made up of recorded words and sounds linked to images. Like Flash Gordon himself, it is a carefully edited assemblage of pre-existing details: a communication that cancels itself out by simply informing us of what we already know. And yet, how is it possible for anyone to die of the «Purple Death» in a black-and-white movie? That a deadly plague threatening the masses should even be purple, a colour associated with imperial power since the days of Roman rule, is in itself an expression of our superhero's status as Camp enigma. Already at the controls of a rocket ship and far above the Earth before this latest adventure in space has even begun, Flash Gordon – accompanied as always by Dr Zarkov and Dale Arden – quickly traces the source of the Purple Death back to the planet Mongo and its absolute ruler, Ming the Merciless.

3.

> Fashion has a flair for the topical, no matter where it stirs in the thickets of long ago; it is a tiger's leap into the past.
>
> Walter Benjamin, *On the Concept of History*[5]

Like the plague he has inflicted upon the people of Earth at the start of *Flash Gordon Conquers the Universe*, the Emperor Ming is a complete illusion; and like his vanquisher, Flash Gordon, he is also a composite of familiar details. Furthermore, Ming the Merciless represents a much older order of composition than either the media contagion of the Purple Death or the Camp enigma of the space superhero. A version of Sax Rohmer's fictional villain Fu Manchu transported to another planet, Ming is yet another insidious variation on the fake exotic; from the drooping moustache and shaved head to his high-collared robes with their flowing sleeves, he embodies what Hermann Glaser characterized in *Spiesser-Ideologie* as «the enigma of the Orient»[6]. Published in the same year as Sontag's «Notes on Camp», Glaser's *Spiesser-Ideologie* offers highly politicized kitsch in place of the ironic aesthetic detachment of Camp. As an evil dictator bent on conquering the entire universe, Ming speaks to both perspectives at the same time. A form of pathological longing that developed during the industrial transformation of Europe, the enigma of the Orient conceals itself behind an empire of impressions projected onto some dim and distant other: Asia, the Middle East, the South Pacific, even outer space. At the same time, the costumes and set designs featured in the Flash Gordon serials suggest that none of the characters involved has actually travelled that far from home. «The exotic Orient entailed sadism: whatever was romantic was brutalized whereas the cynical elements were romanticized,»[7] observes Glaser. At Ming's command, Flash and his colleagues are thrown to wild animals, pitted against beast-men, bombed and gassed, threatened with death rays and overrun by cohorts of exploding robots. Without Ming's impassive cruelty, however, Flash Gordon's eternal binary code would simply come apart: in his arch nemesis the superhero has also found his genesis.

Ming's cruel exoticism is a grab-bag of second-hand finery, cheap painted scenery and even cheaper sideshow attractions. His palatial court is constructed from old movie sets and props, his palace a collection of cardboard towers, and his sole entertainment the bumping and grinding of an exotic dancer straight off the boardwalk at Coney Island. In all his tawdry splendour Ming the Merciless is the perfect counterpart to Flash, in that both represent the uncertainty and shock of a mass culture still struggling to come to terms with its own progressive industrialization. There is no doubt that they will survive the technologically transmitted contagion of the Purple Death precisely because all three are media fantasies thrown up by the same historical confusion. The old order of experience will not survive the new order of machines – except in outer space where past and future coexist as an unstable collection of anomalies. In all seriousness, the contradictions inherent in the Industrial Revolution are momentarily resolved as Camp enigma. There is no room at all for ironic detachment in this arrangement. «The pure examples of Camp are unintentional: they are dead serious,» remarks Sontag. «The Art Nouveau craftsman who makes a lamp with a snake coiled around it is not kidding, nor is he trying to be charming. He is saying in all earnestness ‹Voilà! the orient!›»

Something analogous can be glimpsed in the role played by industrial techniques and processes in the realization of Ludwig II's dream castles and other pet projects. His exotic Winter Garden at the Munich Residenz would have been unthinkable without sheet glass and piped hot water, just as the Grotto of Venus depended on iron girders and poured cement for its creation. Even his evocation of Louis XIV's Versailles at Herrenchiemsee featured in its dining room the remarkable *Tischleindeckdich*, capable of being lowed mechanically into the kitchen below, while the palace itself was to have been made accessible by a flying cable car suspended from a gas balloon. Whatever distaste the young King of Bavaria might personally have shown towards European industrialization and its modernizing influence, it is difficult not to picture Ludwig in the company of both Flash Gordon and Emperor Ming when he fantasized in 1866 about the existence of some futuristic new weapon of mass destruction capable of wiping out entire regiments in a few minutes, thereby curtailing the agonies of warfare.

Writing nearly a hundred years after Ludwig II gave voice to this space-age fantasy, Susan Sontag is able to define the aesthetics of Camp «not in terms of beauty, but in terms of the degree of artifice, of stylization». Technique transforms style into the parody of style; and the ensuing extravagant displays set «everything in quotation marks», as Sontag puts it. During the early 1960s, the «tiger's leap» described by Benjamin is continued as a definite shift in sensibility, particularly in the avant-garde and intellectual circles of New York at this time. The July 1964 issue of Esquire reflected this shift in an article entitled «The New Sentimentality»; essentially a montage of film stills and captions assembled by David Newman and Robert Benton, the piece argued that the whole value system in America was changing. The Old Sentimentality of «Patriotism, Love, Religion, Mom, The Girl» was disappearing in favour of an ironic detachment, fostered in part by the emergent electronic media. It had become a matter of maintaining your cool in an increasingly overheated age: «one of the definitions of The New Sentimentality,» they suggested, «is that it has to do with you, really just you, not what you were told or taught, but what goes on in your head, really, and in your heart, really.» That third «really», emphasized in the original, suggests just how deeply that ironic detachment could run. «A typical Warhol dilemma, that word ‹really›,» Stephen Koch would later remark in Stargazer, his critical overview of Andy Warhol's early films. «One can just hear the word crawling from the mouths of the Factory denizens: she didn't really say that, we didn't really do that, they don't really believe that.»[8] Thanks to Warhol and the inhabitants of his silver Factory, its reflective surfaces suggestive both of the spacesuits worn by America's Mercury astronauts and the vanities of the old Hollywood, science fiction was transformed into modernist Camp. This realignment is best exemplified by Empire, his eight-hour silent movie of the Empire State Building, whose thrusting Art Deco lines still dominated the Manhattan skyline of 1964, the year in which it was made. «The Empire State Building is a star,» Warhol said of his film at the time. «It's an eight-hour hard on. It's so beautiful. The lights come on and stars come out and it sways. It's like Flash Gordon riding into space.»[9] However would Flash escape this latest peril? The universe he once had conquered seems to have abruptly changed.

4.

«ARABS IN FRENZY CHAOS = PROF MALLABAR»

Telegram received in Episode One, *Flash Gordon*

By 1964, Camp had emerged not so much as an identifiable set of objects, images, poses or narratives but rather a means of perception, which is to say a medium in and of itself. As such it is perhaps best understood as a form of negative critique. What would New York, the architectural inspiration for Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, be without its lights? Its skyscrapers no longer fit within the frame of conventional photography, can no longer be seen by the unaided eye; they exist purely within the media as the extreme interplay of light and darkness. The remorseless tracking of day into night captured in *Empire* conflates the original building's carefully coordinated and timetabled erection, triumphantly consummated in 1931, into an «eight-hour hard on». Linking the image to «Flash Gordon riding into space» only serves to connect it to an ironic past and an even more ironic future. The qualities of a superhero tend to be ill-defined and hard to name at the best of times; any individual superpowers they might possess quickly negate the «all-too-human» characteristics of the traditional hero. As Susan Sontag notes, Camp represents the triumph «of irony over tragedy»[10]. Consequently the heroism displayed by Flash Gordon – insofar as it can be appreciated as heroism – remains unexceptional. He is not original enough a media creation for anything more: the «eight-hour hard on» is both a heroic signifier and an absurd burlesque at one and the same time. Flash Gordon can never be fully understood as a superhero until he becomes sexualized as Camp.

Empire was also to have been Warhol's first sound film, shot on an Auricon camera; however, in an act of nostalgia for the cinema's early days in the age of mechanical reproduction, he decided to delete the entire soundtrack. It was shortly after this that Warhol brought in playwright Ronald Tavel to script his movies for him. «A person whose work is as much about escaping as mine,» Tavel would later recall of his time with Warhol, «and whose entire compulsion is exoticism and whose favourite actress is Maria Montez must have a very clear understanding of the here and now they want to get out of. It was this here and now that he was interested in...»[11] The Purple Death, it seemed, had continued to spread its contagion across the planet: its weird futuristic pathology and tawdry exoticism clearly detectable in the films of Maria Montez. Born Maria Vidal in the Dominican Republic, her unearthly beauty and imperious manner led to a screen career playing glamorous roles in fabulous back-lot locations. Filmed in oversaturated colours during the 1940s with fabulous costumes and sets, films like *Arabian Nights*, *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* and *Cobra Woman* transformed the enigma of the Orient into Camp excess. In this respect it is interesting to note that Maria Montez chose to appear under a surname already made notorious by Lola Montez, the mistress of the first King Ludwig of Bavaria, who was also Ludwig II's grandfather. A former singer and actress, Lola Montez would later display herself to the American public, who were charged a dollar just to touch her.

Backlit by the glare of the electronic media and the cool glow of the New Sentimentality, the old Hollywood values appeared as a delirious form of escapist fantasy. Maria Montez was, after all, hailed by her studio as «the Queen of Technicolor» – but what kind of queen rules over an industrial colour separation process?

The underground film and theatre communities that emerged from downtown New York during the 1960s often read ironic subtexts into the Hollywood melodramas of fake beauty and fake suffering, mocking the impossibility of glamour in a tawdry world. We find this gleefully tragic vision in the films of Warhol and Tavel where the representation of feelings is parodied in order to interrogate the validity of individual experience. Also exploring the Camp enigma at this time were Ron Rice, Mario Montez, Wyn Chamberlain, Ken Jacobs and Jack Smith. The title sequence for Smith's classic 1963 movie *Flaming Creatures* is even accompanied by over three minutes of gongs and dramatic drum rolls lifted from Maria Montez's 1944 fantasy, *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*. «Today!» hisses a voice from nearly twenty years before, «Ali Baba comes today!» As if to enhance this connection with a fabled cinematic past *Flaming Creatures* was filmed on the roof of the Windsor Theater, reputed to be the oldest picture house in New York, during the summer of 1962. Underground movie actress Joan Adler characterized working with Jack Smith and Ron Rice as: «A world of constantly shifting realities, illusions, hallucinations, mysteries, possibilities. Where madness waits for those who falter, beauty for those who are without self-consciousness. Plots appear, shimmer, threaten, evaporate or die. Roles change, shift, take on new meanings, mean them all at once, shift back to which one you decide to live with for now.»[12]

The towers of Manhattan become the skyline of Baghdad regained where the East River meets the Hudson, rather than the Tigris and the Euphrates. At the same time that *Flaming Creatures* was being made, Kenneth Anger relocated from the West Coast to Brooklyn where he started filming a Coney Island bike gang for his cinematic poem to men and machines, *Scorpio Rising*. With its artificial entertainments and distractions, Coney Island is Babylon by the Sea: Atlantis Risen. In a similar dark manner, Anger's latest film would be a reinvention of the old Flash Gordon movie serial as a masculine death trip in which rebel heroes ride motorbikes into black oblivion rather than outer space. Organized around sequences of violent and threatening imagery cut to pop songs from the period, its urgent narrative echoes the episodic nature of Flash's futuristic adventures as he escapes one mortal peril after another. An early indication of this project can be found in Anger's own description for one of his first ever films, *Prisoner of Mars*, completed in 1942, just four years after *Flash Gordon's Trip to Mars*, but later withdrawn: «Science-Fiction rendering of the Minotaur myth. A ‹chosen› adolescent of the future is rocketed to Mars where he awakens in a labyrinth littered with the bones of his predecessors. Formal use of ‹serial chapter' aesthetic: begins and ends in a predicament.»[13] Further intimations of Anger's sly transformation of the blond superhero into a dark, death-obsessed focus of sexual power are not difficult to discover. Anger's 1966 «Magic Mushroom Version» of his hallucinogenic *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome* with its ritual poisoning and sacrifice of a fair-haired Pan by his fellow celebrants, features overlaid footage from Hollywood's 1935 production of *Dante's Inferno*, including the pagan orgy scene used in the very first Flash Gordon serial. This same footage would later appear again in the closing moments of Anger's *Lucifer Rising*, the last film in the *Magick Lantern Cycle* of his existing films. It therefore comes as no surprise to discover that the ironic *Portrait of Kenneth Anger* by West Coast pop artist Marshall Berman does not show the underground filmmaker at all but Flash Gordon instead, his uniform emblazoned with a stylized sun motif.

5.

PURPLE DEATH TOLL MOUNTING HOURLY: Scientists Baffled As To Cause
Daily Chronicle headline, Episode One, Flash Gordon Conquers the Universe

The tiger's leap is often predatory and, in the end, always a demonstration of power – even at its most playful. «Pornography is said to be inherently reactionary,» opined one gay guide to Camp films, referring specifically to the 1941 movie serial, *The Adventures of Captain Marvel*. «The same holds true for boy-oh-boy adventure shows like this one. Yet both can undeniably be of interest to male homosexuals. Are all superheroes Fascists at heart? And do most homosexuals have a secret Fascist lurking deep inside, screaming to get out?»[14] These are questions, however lightly posed, that can overturn social assumptions. Camp transcends categories and distinctions by blurring them in parody or inverting them as a form of erotic fantasy. Not only did *Flash Gordon Conquers the Universe* costume its main characters in tight-fitting military uniforms that would not have looked out of place either in light operetta or at the court of Ludwig II, but its frequently-repeated main title theme was a stirring adaptation of Franz Liszt's symphonic poem *Les Préludes*, then being used by the Nazis on the radio to herald unscheduled ‹special announcements› following any new Wehrmacht victory. That its composer was also a former lover of Lola Montez before she became the mistress of Ludwig II's grandfather is most certainly a detail that should not at this time be lost to history.

Staged at the Bouwerie Lane Theater in downtown New York during the November of 1967, John Vaccaro's *The Conquest of the Universe* was a Play-House of the Ridiculous production featuring many of the superstars from Warhol's films, including Taylor Mead, Ondine, Ultra Violet and Mary Woronov – «otherwise,» as Stefan Brecht comments in his review of the play, «the cast consists of beautiful women and deviates, the intimation of whose cattily friendly concourse evokes the decadence of conquerable upper classes (pampered jades) if we want to look at it that way.» From Brecht's finely impressionistic eye-witness account, it is possible to detect in Vaccaro's play a rewriting of *Flash Gordon Conquers the Universe* as savage satire in which Flash has been replaced by Tamburlaine and Buster Crabbe by Mary Woronov: «Tamburlaine (fascism, militarism, violence and stupidity) conquers the solar system without much opposition other than private, his opponents a huddle of queens. The burden of the spectacle is thus on Woronow *[sic]*, the superb actress who plays the overreacher. With hysteria, paranoia, she plays a bare core of sadist energy. Her Tamburlaine ‹comes in bullets,› distraught only his lack of issue.»[15]

Free from the social context created by the kind of relationships traditionally used to mediate power, Flash is an enigma of absolutes whose contradictions can only be comprehended as Camp: liberator and oppressor all at once, he saves the earth by conquering the universe. A signifier without meaning – which is to say a hero without an individual tragedy – Flash's conquest of the universe is achieved by defeating Emperor Ming in his own plans to conquer it. The mass-produced copy of a mass-media superhero, without issue or a father who can be contacted in any way except by radio, Flash Gordon survives simply by replicating himself. From the science-fiction hero of a West German television series in the 1950s to the wide-eyed porn star of *Flesh Gordon* in the mid-1970s through to ‹saviour of

the universe› in the 1980 movie update, it becomes apparent that Flash's real tragedy is that he can never die. In fact, Hollywood already has a new Flash Gordon vehicle «in development» for 2012.

Whatever «bare core of sadist energy» that Vaccaro might have detected at work beneath Flash Gordon's blond handsome physique helps to refashion the superhero from political kitsch to ironic Camp and finally recyclable trash.

«I think there's a bit of a green impulse there, which is perfectly all right with me,» filmmaker Craig Baldwin remarked of his own practice of creating movies from existing footage. «I prefer ‹recombinant› or ‹repurposed›, but in any event it is a cinema based on the principle of using what is around you. You don't have to have a whole lot of money: just the willingness to dive into a dumpster to recover stuff that other people would consider trash and then redeem it and use it for another purpose.»[16] Set in 2019 and composed from an ingenious mesh of found footage and scripted scenes shot with actors, Baldwin's *Mock Up On Mu* tells the «not untrue» story of how science-fiction writer and founder of Scientology L Ron Hubbard sends Marjorie Cameron, formerly the Scarlet Woman in Kenneth Anger's *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome,* down to Earth from his base on the Moon to seduce and entrap Lockheed Martin, the fictitious head of a big aerospace corporation. Once there, however, she becomes intrigued by rumours that her former lover Jack Parsons, the Caltech rocket scientist and practicing initiate of occultist Aleister Crowley's Ordo Templi Orientis, had actually faked his own death back in 1952 and is now experimenting with solar energy out in the Nevada Desert. As Hubbard, Parsons and Cameron all spent time together in Pasadena during the 1940s trying to conjure up a Moon Child using OTO ‹sex magick› practices, the lines between myth, fact and fiction were already blurred long before Baldwin elected to incorporate them into his cosmological docudrama. However, what gives this project its audacious energy and trashy poetic appeal is the way in which he presents the entire tale as an old science-fiction movie adventure in thirteen separate chapters. «I love the idea of the pulp serial,» he explained in a recent interview with the author, «because it was cheap and it has a built-in humour. You could see the cracks. The truth would come spilling out from behind this cheap *papier maché* illusion. Pulp is one way you can make a film for no money and still make your point.»

No wonder then that Baldwin shows Aleister Crowley, who once listed Ludwig II of Bavaria in the «Collect of Saints» for his Gnostic Mass, trapped in a cave far below the desert in the company of the old Flash Gordon from the movie serials. The inclusion is partially intended as homage to the roots of genre cinema but also a very precise take on the underlying structure of modern pop-culture mythology. «They turned me on to cinema when I was in high school,» Baldwin recalls of the early Flash Gordon adventures. «Some friendly drama teacher used to screen *Flash Gordon* after class, and it blew my mind – that's the only word for it. But, see, that's the collective unconscious right there: the detritus of all that American science-fiction genre fantasy. That's why it's down there, under the ground. All these people are not going away; they're down there and they keep coming up every time you read a poem or watch a movie or have a dream. To me this is the underside that I wanted to reveal.»

Annotations

1 Delta DVD box set *Flash Gordon Conquers the Universe*: 12 Dynamic Chapters, 2002.
2 James P. Hogan, Introduction to Bison Books Edition of Edgar Rice Burroughs, *Under the Moons of Mars*, Lincoln 2003, p. xi.
3 Susan Sontag, *Notes on Camp: Against Interpretation*, second edition, New York 1966, p. 279.
4 Accessed online http://www.sfu.ca/~andrewf/CONCEPT2.html 12.12.10.
5 Ibid.
6 Hermann Glaser, *The Cultural Roots of National Socialism* (Spiesser-Ideologie), London 1978, p. 211.
7 Ibid., p. 213
8 Stephen Koch, *Stargazer: The Life, World and Films of Andy Warhol*, revised and updated edition, London 2002, p. 33.
9 Victor Bockris, *Warhol*, Westminster/London 1989, p. 244.
10 Sontag 1966 (footnote 3), p. 289.
11 Bockris 1989 (footnote 9), p. 251.
12 Joan Adler, «On Location», reproduced in Stephen Dwoskin, *Film Is: Free International Cinema*, London 1975, p. 21.
13 P Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde 1943–1978*, Second Edition, Oxford 1979, p. 96.
14 Paul Roen, *High Camp, A Gay Guide to Camp and Cult Films*, San Francisco 1994, p. 22.
15 Stefan Brecht, *Queer Theatre, The Original Theatre of the City of New York From the mid-60s to the mid-70s*, Book 2, Frankfurt a. M.1978, p. 57. Note: published in its original English.
16 Interview with the author, recorded at Resonance 104.4 FM studios, London, March 16, 2010.