

“Creative Viewing”: the Beat Generation on Screens in the 21st Century

G. O. Stembkovska

Comparative Literature Section, National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine
Corresponding author. E-mail: atkolanna@gmail.com

Paper received 20.11.21; Accepted for publication 29.11.21.

<https://doi.org/10.31174/SEND-Ph2021-260IX76-12>

Abstract: Writers of the Beat Generation, as well as the American counterculture more generally, were to a great extent inspired by ideas of the Frankfurt School and the American New Left. Thus, they rejected mass culture and technology as repressive. However, the most prominent figures of the group have long ago become cultural idols and clichéd popular culture symbols and remain such in the 21st century. In the recent decades, as well as in the 20th century, Beat Generation figures have appeared on screens multiple times portrayed in a variety of genres, in particular adaptations of their key novels (*Big Sur* (2012), *On the Road* (2012)), as well as biographic documentaries (*William S. Burroughs: A Man Within* (2010), *Corso: The Last Beat* (2012), *Ferlinghetti: A Rebirth of Wonder* (2013)) and road trip accounts (*Words of Advice: William S. Burroughs on the Road* (2007), *Magic Trip* (2011)). This paper, however, is an attempt at analysis of a sample of three recent films about the Beat Generation created in the hybrid modality of fictional interpretation of pivotal events in the individuals’ and the group’s lives: *The Last Time I Committed Suicide* (1997), *Howl* (2010), and *Kill Your Darlings* (2013). The analysis is aimed to highlight both the films’ ideological implications, and the authors’ style of creative expression.

Keywords: the Beat Generation, counterculture, cinematic art, ideological implication, creative experimentation, representation.

Nothing exists until or unless it is observed. An artist is making something exist by observing it. And his hope for other people is that they will also make it exist by observing it. I call it “creative observation”. Creative viewing. [12]

Introduction. The Beat Generation authors – as well as all the counterculture movements following them in the 1960s and inspired by ideas of Frankfurt School theorists, in particular Herbert Marcuse, and the American New Left – had a complicated relationship with mass culture genres and technologies (“Smash the control images. Smash the control machine.” - William S. Burroughs, *Dead City Radio*). However, throughout the 20th century, and in the 21st one they’ve been persistently finding they ways to large and small screens as iconic images of protest, decadence, the romantic “live fast die young” and what not. The cinematic art is transmedial to a large extent, which poses great risks of what Marcuse would refer to as social control and domination by means of “repressive desublimation” [8]¹, but it also offers extended opportunities of creative representation.

Literature review. Even though theoretical studies of presentation of literary phenomena on screen have been actively developing (see, e.g. Deborah Cartmell, Imelda Whelehan, *Cambridge Companion to Literature on Screen* [2]), analysis of historical, socio-political, and creative representation of the Beat Generation in the 3 recent films covered in this paper has so far been limited to individual critical reviews.

The objective of this paper is to present a brief checkup of the current status of perception and representation of the Beat phenomenon in film trying to trim between these two positions so central to the authors themselves: that of ideology and control, and that of going out of the box in creative expression.

Research methodology. In the recent decades, as well as in the 20th century, Beat Generation figures have appeared on screens multiple times portrayed in a variety of genres, the most obvious of them being adaptations of their

key novels (*Big Sur* (2012), *On the Road* (2012)), as well as biographic documentaries (*William S. Burroughs: A Man Within* (2010), *Corso: The Last Beat* (2012), *Ferlinghetti: A Rebirth of Wonder* (2013)) and road trip accounts (*Words of Advice: William S. Burroughs on the Road* (2007), *Magic Trip* (2011)).

However, for the purposes of this study – exploring both the ideological implications and the creative experimentations in the 21st century – our focus is going to be on hybrid pieces, i.e. fictional interpretations of pivotal events in the individual and group lives of the Beats. *The Last Time I Committed Suicide* (1997) is a story of Neal Cassady’s riotous years where the events are organized around his girlfriend’s attempt at suicide. The script is based on a 1950 letter written by Neal Cassady to Jack Kerouac. *Howl* (2010) is a fictional interpretation of events central to Allen Ginsberg’s political and creative life: the Six Gallery poetry reading, where the poet first presented his groundbreaking *Howl*, and the 1957 obscenity trial in the case of those who eventually published it (Shig Murao and Lawrence Ferlinghetti). Finally, *Kill Your Darlings* (2013) offers an account of university days of Lucien Carr, Allen Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs, and Jack Kerouac – a story of love, friendship, and non-conformist protest against establishment leading to, eventually, the tragic episode of Carr’s killing his pursuer David Kammerer.

Results and Discussion. *The Last Time I Committed Suicide* (1997), directed by Stephen T. Kay

The film is a creative piece covering a period of Neal Cassady’s life based on another creative piece, a 1950 letter written by Neal Cassady to Jack Kerouac. In 1950, Cassady described for his addressee a storming part of his stormy life dating back to 1945, when his girlfriend Joan Anderson attempted suicide. Until quite recently, the letter was considered lost (and was allegedly found in 2012), with only a fragment of it having been retyped (probably by Kerouac himself, impressed with Cassady’s narrative style) and subsequently included into a number of collected work publications.

Joan’s suicidal attempt is an important structural

¹ Where “the progress of technological rationality is liquidating the oppositional and transcending elements in the “higher culture.” [8, 75]

element of the film, but definitely not the focus of it. With a set of creative methods – fragments in black and white, the framing images of Neal's starting writing the letter and completing it at the end of the film, jumps back and forth, stop-motion, as well as the jazz backdrop– the authors try to recreate the “semi-coherent stream-of-consciousness running on a jazzy, hopped-up rhythm that became a hallmark of Beat literature... [as the] visual pulse” of the story [7].

The context of the film is recognizably “beat” - substances, car rides in stolen cars, as well as inspired, frantic exchange of creative ideas. Keanu Reeves, who appears as one of key and highly ambiguous characters, looks through the culturally familiar ambiance into the widely recognized roots of it – Nietzsche's theory of the Dionysian that heavily contributed into the generation's perception of the objective world as an illusory reality: "To me, these writers represented the epic language they used invoking the Greek and Roman gods. That Bacchus and Dionysian aspect resonated with me, and I used that to try and read my life and break out of myself, search for new sensations-- living the moment, staying up late, traveling, experiencing" [9].

So, the central part of the film, sure, is exploration of psychic and creative processes of the gifted Neal Cassady. Even though Ferlinghetti, still alive when the film was released, criticized the way the authors had depicted the protagonist as "clean cut" [1], the character appears ambiguous enough with his wild acting out and the fantasy of a perfect family home, fluctuations between creative passion, as well as moral attitude and the easygoing don't-look-back life course, dramatically conveyed with his scattering pages of his long elaborated novel leaving the film frame. The title itself explains the perspective of the film – even though it was Joan who actually attempted killing herself, the motif of suicide here applies to the protagonist and the generation he represents. The authors seem to have implied some element of regret here, but the narrative remains true to the let go and ride on attitude of the time – no less existentially tragic, though.

Romanticism of the film's representation of the time period is obvious. The repressive state machine coming up with fake charges against the protagonist is clearly opposed to the generation's appealing ease and emotionality on the verge of self-destructiveness. Romanticism was to a degree characteristic of the cultural period, and lots of critics agree that the film "works well as an evocation of the youthful unrest that would soon find cogent subcultural expression." [6]. However, the part that could be reinforced is the conflicting nature of the individual, who – due to non-conformist trends – was at that time coming to the forefront of the American social scene, “when the country, still dewy-eyed with postwar optimism, was jumping out of its collective skin” [7]. This may also be the aspect that Ferlinghetti lacked in the familiar image as depicted on the screen.

Howl (2010), directed by Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman

The film *Howl* is a careful recreation of the period preceding Ginsberg's writing of his pivotal poem, of his historic reading of it in 1955, and of the infamous 1957 obscenity trial in the case against Lawrence Ferlinghetti as its publisher (surprisingly omitting any mention of

Ferlinghetti's partner Shigeyosi Murao, who was on trial too) – all of that lined with Ginsberg's commentary based on his 1957 interview. The film is heavily documentary to the point of recreating by acting more and less recognizable scenes and photos from the Beat archive.

The objective seems to be reanimating the spirit of the time to introduce the context of the poem's perception back when it was written: “reproducing a sense of what Ginsberg's poem might have sounded and felt like at the moment of its creation, which is presented both as a specific point in recent history and an episode of transcendence” [10]. This is achieved with nonlinear presentation of the black-and-white plot line of Ginsberg's past life and the reading, color feature film-like drama of the trial (making it, actually, the only action line in the film), and the documentary style of the restaged interview. A particular feature of the film is an attempt at visualizing parts of the poem as animated sequences, which generated mostly negative feedback, as visualizing Ginsberg's rich poetic imagery as animation does seem somewhat primitive, however this part – with its cliched imagery of social domination and the overtly sexual visualization of liberation – seems to play a role as a lens concentrating the socio-political discourse of the film.

Which otherwise tends to – though digging into the poet's individual psychology and struggle for affirming his identity too - focus more on literary criticism of the poem as literary phenomenon presented on screen: “The film... is an exhilarating tribute from one form (cinema) to another (poetry)... It's a celebration, an analysis, a critical essay, an ode.” [4] In the court room, voices of various literary experts are heard in the context of polemics with the counterposed figures of Ferlinghetti's liberal defense attorney and the somewhat farcical prosecutor. The tension is between those who see Ginsberg's piece as unnecessarily obscene and secondary (Whitmanian references obviously present), and proponents of an individual's freedom to convey his/her experience and mindset in any form that makes genuine, authentic expression possible. The judge acquits Ferlinghetti (or rather the book, which is this whole creative construct's protagonist) with a verdict appealing to the foundational American values and freedoms. The ending of the story is elevated and humanistic, as is Ginsberg's *Footnote to Howl* that the poet ends his reading and the film with – a celebration of humanity transcending the pictures of devastation that the poem starts with:

Holy forgiveness! mercy! charity! faith! Holy! Ours!
bodies! suffering! magnanimity!

Holy the supernatural extra brilliant intelligent kindness of the soul! [5, 22]

Kill Your Darlings (2013), directed by John Krokidas

This is semi-biographical fiction film depicting the earliest evolution of the Beat movement - with the meeting of Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs, Jack Kerouac, and Lucien Carr - and having all the elements to make it popular among a large audience, including drama, romance, a murder as a climax, and a set of renowned actors starring, including Daniel Radcliffe acting as the protagonist, Allen Ginsberg. Actually, the story recovers long hidden archives: Burroughs and Kerouac co-authored a novel based on the shocking events of 1944, *And the Hippos Were Boiled In Their Tanks*, but it remained unpublished for

over sixty years after and was revealed just recently.

In contrast to the two other films, the style of this one is predominantly conventional. It is framed with repeating scenes of Ginsberg visiting Carr in prison, with the initial one creating suspense, while the second reiteration appears as the ending. However, the linear narrative is sporadically interrupted with flashbacks, there are the familiar sounds of jazz and typewriting, attempts at visualizing alternative states of mind, and poetry reading.

With World War II in the background, the film, however, is focused on the other, different kind of war of the time – young writers' and poets' war against the establishment at Columbia University and the social norms in general for freedom of self-expression. Meter and rhyme – the ironclad rules taught by their English professor – are the youngsters' "fascists", as put forward by the *enfant terrible*, as well as *fatal*, of the story, Lucien Carr. The title phrase of "kill your darling" resonates here in a variety of senses: apart from the literary link with the murder, in the jargon of creative professions it means stepping away from the habitual and cherished approached in one's creative work and pursuing the natural way of expression. This is explained to the group by the professor, who obviously implies there something very different from how it must have been heard by the prospective Beatniks. Creators of the film do their best to intensely convey how bloody and serious their literary – and ideology – war was: "to give a modern audience a taste of that terror, and also of the thrill and intoxication that went along with it." [11]

The group pursues the concept of "the new vision" – rejection of conventions for the benefit of unlimited self-expression. The revolutionary mindset, later resulting in some of pivotal creative representations of the time, not only gets them in trouble, but also, obviously, sets a number of moral dilemmas for the protagonist and the audience: "*Kill Your Darlings* is inquisitive about the movement's worth, and the genius of its characters is never assumed". [3]. The murder shattered the revolutionary pro-Beat community to the extent that even though Ginsberg initially dedicated the first edition of his *Howl and Other Poems* to Carr, the latter requested to have his name removed from all the subsequent editions. As expected with

a mass product though, the film ends on a positive note. Previously rigid characters become fluid. Having refused to conform, Ginsberg gets expelled from the university, but then he sees a latently supportive inscription made by his opponent, the English professor, on his rejected scandalous manuscript: "Keep this. Keep going." His father, who he had to dramatically confront before, smiles at him warmly with the accompaniment of sounds of a victory celebration on the TV in the background.

Conclusion. All the films analyzed appear to be creative and thoughtful prequels of the success story of the Beats. The authors opt for different genres and narrative techniques experimenting with the biography, interview, psychological drama, documentary enactment, crime fiction, and what not. The stream of consciousness and collaged style of writing of the Beats themselves seem to inspire film creators to look for ways of its adequate visual representation, and they come up with interesting solutions as described above made possible to a great extent due to the progressing technology of our century.

Which obviously implies a conflict. Commodification and a certain degree of one-dimensionality could probably not be avoided by authors of the films produced for mass consumption. The authorized world commodified the Beat movement, as well as a variety of other subcultures, long time ago. However hard may the authors try to present different facets of the phenomena and fluidity of the individual psyche, they operate within that framework and it would have required a truly titanic effort – commensurate with that undertaken by their characters themselves – to break free and dare Marcuse's "Great Refusal" [8].

However, in the whirl of these complex ideological and ethical elaborations, don't we always get back to rely on one thing – narrating and sharing stories. Stories are the basic element of any human communication and co-participation. It is stories that make us a community – as well as the individuals we are. The three visual narratives of the films analyzed are Plato's shadows on the wall of a cave, glimpses of the infiniteness of individual experiences. That, however, inspire empathy and reflection helping us get closer to the entry into the cave and the light.

REFERENCES

1. Asher, L. The Last Time I Committed Suicide. DOI: <https://litkicks.com/BeatNews19981029>.
2. Cartmell, D., Whelehan, I. (2007) Cambridge Companion to Literature on Screen. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press.
3. Collin, R. Kill Your Darlings, Venice Film Festival, review // The Daily Telegraph, September 5, 2013. DOI: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/filmreviews/10288843/Kill-Your-Darlings-review.html>.
4. Edelstein, D. Movie Review: Howl Is an Exhilarating Trip Back in Time. September 27, 2010. DOI: https://www.vulture.com/2010/09/movie_review_howl.html
5. Ginsberg, A. (2001). Howl and Other Poems. Monroe: City Lights Books.
6. Harvey, D. The Last Time I Committed Suicide. January 26, 1997. DOI: <https://variety.com/1997/film/reviews/the-last-time-i-committed-suicide-1200448290/>
7. Holden, S. The Last Time I Committed Suicide // The New York Times, June 20, 1997. DOI: <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/library/film/suicide-film-review.html>.
8. Marcuse, H. (2002). One-Dimensional Man. London: Routledge Classics.
9. Neville, K. Q&A with Keanu Reeves: WINM: Keanu Reeves Articles & Interviews Archive. June 20, 1997. DOI: http://www.whoaisnotme.net/articles/1997_0620_qna.htm.
10. Scott, A. Leaping Off the Page, a Beatnik's Poetic Rant // The New York Times, September 23, 2010. DOI: <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/24/movies/24howl.html>
11. Scott, A. The Watchful Years, Before the Howling Began // The New York Times, October 15, 2013. DOI: <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/16/movies/kill-your-darlings-stars-daniel-radcliffe.html>
12. Sobieszek, R., Burroughs, W. (1996). Points of Entry: William S. Burroughs and the Arts. CA: Small Press Distribution.