

BEAT FILMS AND THE PERSISTENCE OF VISION

M I C H A E L L . S H U M A N

Seeing the Beat Generation: Entering the Literature through Film

By Raj Chandarlapaty

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ROBERT FRANK, THE SWISS-BORN PHOTOGRAPHER AND FILMMAKER whose obituary appeared as this issue of *The Mailer Review* was being prepared for publication, documented two pivotal decades in American history with the skewed perception of an emigrant and outsider unwilling to perpetuate the myth of post-war prosperity. His collection of astonishingly bleak photos, *The Americans*, was published in 1959 after Frank's nearly year-long road trip through cities in the United States, where his lens captured scenes of loneliness and despair. His short documentary film, *Pull My Daisy*, appeared that same year and, written and narrated by Jack Kerouac and directed by Frank, the antics of Allen Ginsberg, David Amram, Delphine Seyrig, and Kerouac himself joyfully reveal the disruptive ideals of this little band of anarchic artists. Frank closed down the 1960s with a scandalously titled and little seen motion picture chronicling the drug-and-sex-drenched 1972 North American tour of The Rolling Stones, an appropriate post-Altamont reaction to the previous decade's professed flower-power wonder. Both the Beat Generation and the early-1970s model of the Stones, with their boundless celebration of personal freedom, hallucinogenic experience, and sexual abandon,

may seem quaintly irrelevant to a new generation that accepts gap years, legalized marijuana, and internet porn as a part of everyday life. How, then, can Generation Z ever appreciate the historical significance of cultural rebels who ruptured rigid social boundaries over a half-century ago? How may the members of this new generation understand that, without these early zany misfits, the relative permissiveness of today's social order would never exist at all?

Raj Chandarlapaty, a scholar whose previous work on *The Beats* exhibits unique insight into the intellectual and cultural environment provoking this renegade movement, suggests that teaching the Beats to a new generation may be more complicated than simply promoting a cultural understanding of freedoms that were aspirational to the artists of the 1950s and 1960s but casually assumed as normal in a new millennium. Chandarlapaty has extensive teaching experience at universities in the United States, including Southern University in New Orleans and St. Thomas University in Miami Gardens, but his experience at American University in Kabul, Afghanistan gives him a singular perspective on education and international issues. In his new book, *Seeing the Beat Generation: Entering the Literature through Film*, Chandarlapaty points to the failure of the educational system to acquaint today's students with fundamental knowledge of historical and civic issues. "American history," he maintains, "isn't ably taught in the classroom because its impact conflicts with more popular archetypes that confirm core values." Consequently, American students "do not know the details of their country's history, times, culture, arts, or simply the geographies and social conflicts that inform democracy beneath the guarded American social *ethos*." (13).

Given this already-diminished knowledge of social and political issues in today's student population—arguably the product of timid teachers giving way to political pressure—Chandarlapaty rejects classroom examination of primary texts as ineffective, an exhausted tradition leaving the audience even more convinced of the Beats' irrelevance to modern social trends. Film, he argues, may be the most effective approach to acquaint twenty-first century students with artists such as Kerouac, Burroughs, and Ginsburg. "Thinking in terms of the rhetoric and descriptive angles of the film accentuates and builds attachment," Chandarlapaty writes, "whereas literature, frozen in its specific moment—or rather the specificity of its notoriety and thus its peculiar artistic location—forces us to miss the mark if we are ever to afford

pluralistic education in the United States" (197). Chandarlapaty moreover sees contemporary film, a popular medium that accentuates visual rather than textual rhetoric, may have a more immediate impact on today's students, not only allowing them to appreciate history and cultural advancement but inspiring personal development and career decisions as well. "Films," he maintains, "when they adapt writing and thought, comprise a stepping-stone to vocational, personal, philosophical, and political inquiries that may then change the adult citizen's range of ideas and principles to help them conceive a greater moral universe." (p. 13).

Film, while a collaborative art form involving writers, directors, and production technicians, ultimately is a performance medium that allows audiences to identify with the actors' projected identities and motivations. In that respect, film may indeed impact a viewer's career choices as well as individual notions and values, perhaps even communicating decades-old counterculture values with renewed clarity and relevance. The Beats, after all, relied upon their own performances—both public and private, in small gatherings of like-minded artists—to both inform and to flabbergast anyone watching their disruptive acts. Chandarlapaty cites the importance of performance to support his concept of film as an educational vehicle for Beat ideals, noting that when we appraise "films and documentaries, poetry readings and rare moments of philosophizing, we project a much greater power to the scene's meditations" (32). Bruce Cook, an early chronicler of Beat culture, effectively supports Chandarlapaty's perceived significance of the Beats' performances in his analysis of the negative critical opinions of the time. "[Critics'] lack of respect was probably due less to the work produced by Kerouac and his friends than to their public performances," Cook writes in *The Beat Generation: The Tumultuous '50s Movement and Its Impact on Today*. "Whether at readings, on panels, or in front of television cameras, they could always be depended upon to shock some and dismay many more. There was a sort of programmatic ruthlessness to their impudence. It was as though they had put aside any notion of revolting against the establishment and had decided merely to thumb their noses at it" (7). The Beats were always acting up, Chandarlapaty seems to say as Cook authorially nods in the background, so why not allow film to perpetuate their astute nonsense into the far-away future?

The majority of Chandarlapaty's book is devoted to detailed analysis of individual films by or about the Beats, with four chapters dividing the artists

into cohorts based upon their associations as well as the similarity of their work. Ginsburg and Burroughs are distinctive enough to claim chapters of their own, while Neal Cassady and Jack Kerouac serve with Baraka, Ferlinghetti, Cassady, and Snyder as virtual bookends, opening and closing Chandarlapaty's commentary on the films.

Heart Beat, a 1980 production written and directed by John Byrum, is a key film in Chandarlapaty's examination of the sexual and moral disposition of the Beat movement. Literary history is a subtext in the narrative, Chandarlapaty suggests, nevertheless "constituting part of the foil speaking to much greater, wilder expositions of the Beat movement's joys and intricacies, sexual gambling and tomfoolery, and jocular, anti-Victorian thrusting of street personas" (31).

Kill Your Darlings, a 2013 film starring Harry Potter heartthrob Daniel Radcliffe as Allen Ginsberg and Jack Huston, an actor with credits including TV's *Boardwalk Empire* (2010-2013) and the movie *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2016), as Jack Kerouac, certainly fits Chandarlapaty's profile of a film appealing to younger audiences. John Bunn's screenplay, the author notes, "spell[s] out the contrast between middle-class dream and renegade daredevil, and maybe the specific moment of crisis that slowly and sporadically would hit the pages of poems in the Beat Generation's early years" (93).

Director David Cronenberg's remediation of the 1959 Burroughs novel *Naked Lunch*, released in 1991, is less successful at communicating the transgressive messages of the Beats than other films that Chandarlapaty examines. "Cronenberg stripped *Naked Lunch* of its narcotic detail and crushed the impact of [the protagonist's] studies and excursions into the Third World slums and dens," he maintains. Instead of representing the obscure landscape of Oriental drug cafes and exotic rituals unfamiliar to a Western audience, essential elements of Burroughs's work, Cronenberg instead concentrates on the protagonist's "drugged dream that treats the central social operation of themes and experiences as nil." This misplacement of emphasis, Chandarlapaty maintains, eliminates the film's ability to show "true narcotics transcendences, Tangier's criminal savvy and [the novel's] graphic presentations of the Self" (159).

Ferlinghetti: A Rebirth of Wonder, a 2009 documentary that includes revealing scenes of Ferlinghetti reading his own work, is perhaps naturally more successful at meeting Chandarlapaty's pedagogical expectations than the scripted dramas and adaptations that predominate this monograph. In

addition to Ferlinghetti's inspired poetry, testimony from artists as diverse as Billy Collins, Michael McClure, and Dennis Hopper illuminate the intellectual and cultural impact of the Beats, a force that still resonates through the decades. According to Chandarlapaty, the film's content suggests "that today's liberal scene develops in part from Ferlinghetti's broad, pluralistic values and from the veer of his easygoing, mobile wit that pokes fun at the intellectual man's dour sincerity" (177-178). Ferlinghetti, still active at age 100, may be an unlikely messenger to deliver Beat values to Generation Z, but the extraordinary career of this gentle man invariably maps much of the development of modern expression and social activism. "Ferlinghetti's weaving of stories and thoughts," Chandarlapaty writes, "attractive to young people and heralding a timeless struggle with injustice, documents poetry's practical necessity, and serious Beat inquiries" (184).

For all its professed effectiveness in conveying Beat sensibilities to a new audience, film nevertheless has pedagogical limitations and Chandarlapaty's argument may be a tough sell to some readers who maintain a preference for the original texts. Certainly the viewer is confined to the director's own interpretation of the Beats' lives and works, and by necessity the limited running time of a commercial film further restricts a comprehensive revelation of their concerns. Films such as Cronenberg's, as Chandarlapaty points out, may entirely sidestep essential qualities of the primary text, leaving the resulting statement more aligned with the filmmakers' own vision rather than that of the Beat artist. Although he does not discuss methods or pedagogical implications of a side-by-side classroom examination of film and text, Chandarlapaty nevertheless acknowledges the value of such an approach. Experienced along with the Beats' own works, he suggests, films "add the guiding sense that history will become familiar, easy, enjoyable, just as the sitcoms and serials from the same time period elicit a dull and wordless nostalgia from post-Reagan citizenry" (199).

Appealing to popular sensibilities may be an admirable way of acquainting students with the historical context of the Beats, and Chandarlapaty's classroom experience seems to justify the effort. Recent surveys of film preferences among younger viewers, however, suggests a resistance to movies that seem, for whatever reason, to be an artefact of another time. One such study, conducted by online retailer FYE presumably for marketing purposes, indicates that thirty percent of young people have never watched a black and white film, while less than a third of millennials have seen, from start to

finish, a movie from the 1960s. Films from the past fifteen years, in fact, emerge as the most popular target for youthful binge-watching, a statistic that unfortunately leaves *Heart Beat* stranded in the streaming queue (SWNS). Literature faculty members incorporating older films into their curriculums, in fact, may find the captive-audience context of the classroom as essential for the forced-march watching of Beat-oriented films as for the spoon-fed reading of the novels *On the Road* and *Howl*.

Aside from any concerns of faculty or student acceptance of Beat films in the classroom, Chandarlapaty's book presents regrettable textual and proof-reading issues that may affect some readers' acceptance of his ideas. The title of Byrum's film appears throughout as a single word, *Heartbeat*, even though other references list it as two words, *Heart Beat*, and the archival movie poster even accentuates the proper title and the film's Beat-content by striking through a lower-case "b" before printing "Beat" as a capitalized second word. Chandarlapaty also refers to *Ferlinghetti: A Rebirth of Wonder* by its subtitle only, a line from the poem "I Am Waiting," and the film appears nowhere in the Index of Table of Contents. Particularly intrusive is the persistent use of past tense when referring to a work of art, especially as Chandarlapaty's book attempts to emphasize the continued influence of the Beats in today's social and political order. Lapses in diction also occasionally obscure the author's meaning: In the Introduction, for example, Chandarlapaty applauds the Beats for maintaining elements of postmodernism into the 1960s and 1970s, "gluing agency's stereotypical deaths onto the main character's legendary oeuvre," and notes that renewed attention to this process might "squeeze out the Beat Generation's real, sociopolitical dissent that critics assault from the 1950s onward." Characterizing the historical advancement of a literary tradition as a metaphorical tube of Gorilla Glue, on the critical workbench and ready for action, ultimately may not be the most effective way of promoting an important challenge to scholarly readers.

Chandarlapaty's text may present some obstacles limiting wide acceptance, but emphasizing these issues improperly diminishes the intellectual effort and wide range of concerns presented in this challenging monograph. Overall, when minor details fade after reading, the book presents a warmly argued and impassioned rationale for advancing knowledge of the Beat Generation by introducing film in the literature classroom. The author admirably attempts to expand awareness of American literary and historical movements among a student population apparently desensitized against any

experience aside from the present, and maintains a commendable commitment to diversity and pluralism in United States educational practice. Much as Robert Frank's black and white photographs embody the somber existence of Americans across geography and generations, continuing to do so through new editions of *The Americans*, the Beat Generation's outlaw sensibility resonates into the present day, but largely without visual witness. Chandarlapaty's notion of appropriating film, a visual medium, as a way of acquainting Generation Z with Kerouac, Ginsburg, and other artists of the Beat Generation makes sense in a social landscape where the most accessible entertainment consists of actors in superhero guise performing outrageous acts of F/X-aided heroism, both on the big screen and its ubiquitous portable counterpart, the smartphone.

Performance, so essential for communicating the Beats' message in their own time, may be the most salient method of perpetuating their riotous ideals today. In the spring of 1974, as a new graduate student on the campus of Indiana University, I watched as Allen Ginsburg and a companion—perhaps Ram Dass, who was also visiting Bloomington at the time—slowly walked across Dunn Meadow, the open field popular with frisbeeing students. The two men were absorbed in conversation, apparently oblivious to their own gestures and actions, as they approached a conclave of earnest Hippies and the impromptu kettle of stew prepared in the counterculture icons' honor. Their movement seemed itself a performance, the slow and graceful dance of one generation moving toward the next, still absorbed with unresolved concerns from a decade ago, yet intent on accepting a gentle offering from young people charged with reimagining the hedonism and subversion of the Beat Generation and, in turn, passing it along in renewed form. Raj Chandarlapaty provides a method for Generation Z to benefit from this long metamorphosis, a way of ensuring that their incendiary vision persists, and that alone justifies appreciation for this remarkable book.

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