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David Parkinson. "Jack Smith's Technicolor muse: Maria Montez." *The Guardian*. September 23, 2011.

Jack Smith's Technicolor muse: Maria Montez

A recent retrospective on the cult film-maker revealed his inspiration – a dazzling 1940s diva who could not even act



Snakeskin throne ... Maria Montez in *Cobra Woman* (1944). Photograph: Alamy

Jack Smith and Maria Montez were made for each other. They never met. Sadly, she had died before he started making films – drowning in her bathtub in Paris at the age of 39 on 7 September 1951. Yet her spirit imbued his first movie, *Buzzards over Bagdad*, which reimagined her teaming with Jon Hall and Sabu in [Arabian Nights \(1942\)](#), one of the garishly fantasies that earned Montez the nickname "the Queen of Technicolor".

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Indeed, she inspired many of the works contained in the ICA's recent landmark season, [Jack Smith: A Feast for Open Eyes](#), and even acted as a posthumous beard for his avant-garde manifesto, [The Perfect Filmic Appositiveness of Maria Montez](#), which appeared in the Winter 1962 edition of [Film Culture](#) and laid out Smith's vision for a new Queer cinema. In so doing, he created the Underground conduit that led from classical Hollywood camp to the transgressive trash of the 1970s and 80s that, in turn, kickstarted the indie rebellion against corporate studio blockbusterism. It's ironic, therefore, that the vehicles Universal fashioned for Montez, including [White Captive \(1943\)](#), [Cobra Woman \(1944\)](#) and [Siren of Atlantis \(1949\)](#), sustained the studio that would eventually become home to Steven Spielberg.

Born to a Spanish diplomat in the Dominican Republic, Montez wasn't much of an actress. Robert Siodmak, her director on [Cobra Woman](#) conceded she "couldn't act from here to there, but she was a great personality and she believed completely in her roles". This commitment to her often hokey projects was reinforced by a dedication to her stellar image and Smith paid knowing homage to her diva-like antics in [I Was a Male Yvonne De Carlo \(1968\)](#), in which he lounged on a sofa while being feted by fans, factotums and a photographer.

In fact, everywhere you look in Smith's canon, there's a reference to Maria Montez. The infamous [Flaming Creatures \(1963\)](#), whose scenes of mock depravity provoked questions in Congress, opens with a soundbite from [Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves \(1944\)](#), while [No President \(1967\)](#) includes a slave market modelled on the one in [Arabian Nights and Jungle Island \(aka Reefers of Technicolor Island, 1967\)](#) used marijuana plants to recreate the exotic settings for so many of her kitsch confections. He even renamed his Puerto Rican transvestite muse Rene Rivera "Mario Montez" in her honour and had him worship at a candlelit shrine to his icon while dressed as a mermaid in the unfinished feature, [Normal Love \(1963\)](#).

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Smith's work was the complete antithesis of the classical narrative cinema perpetuated by the studio system that made Montez a star. Yet in concentrating more on the gracefulness of her gestures and movement rather than the delivery of the hackneyed dialogue, Montez set the tone for Smith's own prioritising of the visual over the spoken content of his films. The genuine nature of her glamour counted far more for him than the phoney plot, and his ability to glean truth from artificiality is one of the hallmarks of a style that influenced film-makers as different as [Andy Warhol](#), Federico Fellini and John Waters.

As for Montez, her star waned as the wartime appetite for escapism was replaced by a new demand for noirish realism and she decamped to Europe with actor husband Jean-Pierre Aumont. Only three of her 26 pictures are available on DVD in this country and it's high time that the "Caribbean Cyclone" was accorded her place alongside Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich, Ingrid Bergman, Dolores Del Rio, Lupe Velez, Carmen Miranda and Hedy Lamarr in the pantheon of what Smith might have called "accented cuties".