Still from *The Good Blonde*

Jack Foley

Nic Saunders’ Film, *The Good Blonde* (2017)

“I did it. I made the film. My *Dune*. I changed the ending of the book.”
—Alejandro Jodorowsky in
Jodororowsky’s Dune (2013)

I want to begin with some quotations from articles I have written about other films by Nic Saunders:

At Apollinaire’s Grave (2011):

Et ma vie pour tes yeux lentement s’empoisonne.
And for your eyes my life takes poison slowly.
—Guillaume Apollinaire,
“Les colchiques” (“The Saffrons”)

Poetry may inspire films in various ways. Nic Saunders has found a way to weave poetry, for the most part an auditory art, into the very fabric of his film, for the most part a visual art. It is a beautiful and highly ritualistic combination. Art may be, as Apollinaire’s line perhaps suggests, a slow poison, but it is a poison that engages us, as this film clearly does, more fully in life. Nic Saunders’ films weep for the angels—but they also, as Elizabeth Smart says, teach them how to rumba. *Je connais tout, fors que moi-même*, wrote François Villon, I know everything except for myself. *At Apollinaire’s Grave* is an opening into that deep mystery.

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One Night at the Aristo (2013):

Nic Saunders' *One Night at the Aristo* is not so much a "version" of William Burroughs' story as it is an imaginative interchange in which elements of Burroughs' piece mingle with elements of Saunders' filmmaking. It is an open field in which a kind of poetic creativity can happen. It is neither wholly Burroughs nor wholly Saunders but a fascinating picture book of one man's psyche as it encounters another's. It is an extraordinary *in between* which holds our attention as it whirls between fantasy and reality, film and writing, "truth" and "fiction." It is noir—except when it isn't.

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One Night at the Aristo (2013):

Kasia Halpin is the film's heroine—suitably blond and simultaneously absent and present. Unlike most noir heroines, however, Halpin is not a *femme fatale*. One might rather call her a *femme pour vivre*—someone more maternal than sexual, someone closer to life than to death: "I know, baby, I know," she tells him. If noir tends to identify women's sexuality with destructive energy (Let's murder my brute of a husband, You killed Miles and you're going over for it), Saunders—more "romantic" than "noir"—sees women rather as agents of renewal.

…

Let's say you're in love with the Beat writers—and beyond that, with the Beat world they wrote about. How is it possible to connect with that world? Further: how is it possible to make that world present, alive, *now*? Do you put on black clothing? Take dope? Listen to 50s jazz, talk bop?

Nic Saunders has made films dealing with Michael McClure (*Curses and Sermons*, 2009), Allen Ginsberg (*At Apollinaire's Grave,* 2011), and William Burroughs (*One Night at the Aristo,* 2013). And now, *The Good Blonde* (2017), his latest, deals with "the King of the Beats," Jack Kerouac. Saunders' stars are again, as they are in all these films, Philip Bulcock (here wearing Kerouac's trademark red lumberjack shirt) and Kasia Halpin (wearing a white, two-piece bathingsuit).

Kerouac’s story, “Good Blonde”—first published in *Playboy*, January, 1965, though dealing with events set ten years earlier—begins:

“This old Greek reminded me of my Uncle Nick in Brooklyn who’d spent 50 years of his life there after being born in Crete, and wandered down the gray streets of Wolfe Brooklyn, short, in a gray suit, with a gray hat, gray face, going to his various jobs as elevator operator and apartment janitor summer winter and fall, and was a plain old ordinary man talking about politics but with a Greek accent, and when he died it seemed to me Brooklyn hadn’t changed and would never change, there would always be a strange sad Greek going down the gray streets. I could picture this man on the beach wandering around the white streets of San Francisco, looking at girls….”

“Wolfe Brooklyn” is a reference to Kerouac’s mentor, Thomas Wolfe, and his great story, “Only the Dead Know Brooklyn.” The old Greek is a version of the father figures who haunt Kerouac’s fiction—“old Dean Moriarty, the father we never found” in *On the Road*; he is also something Kerouac might become as he ages: “this man on the beach wandering around the white streets of San Francisco, looking at girls….” “White streets”? Purity. The opposite of the lust the old man feels for the “girls” he ogles. Even the young protagonist feels sadness: “It made me sad I didn’t have a girl to meet me in the bushes, in the exciting sand among leaves, to lie there swapping breathless kisses, groping at clothes, squeezing shoulders.”

Kerouac’s protagonist asks the old man,

“What do you think? You think all this is a dream?”
“What?”
“Life?”
“Here? Now? What you mean a dream, we’re awake, we talk, we see, we got eyes for the see the sea and the sand and the sky, if you dream you no see it.”
“How do we know we’re not dreaming?”

The notion that Life is a Dream (*La Vida es Sueño*—Calderón) is another of Kerouac’s deep themes, and it colors everything that happens in the story. (Film, of course, is also a kind of “dream.”)

As Kerouac’s protagonist begins to hitch-hike, suddenly, in an extremely dream-like way, “a brand new cinnamon colored Lincoln driven by a beautiful young blonde in a bathingsuit flashed by and suddenly swerved to the right and put to a stop in the side of the road for me. I couldn't believe it…She said 'Get in. Can you drive?'" Kerouac continues, "She was a gorgeous young blonde girl of about 22 in a pure white bathingsuit, barefooted with a little ankle bracelet around her right ankle. Her bathingsuit was shoulderless and low cut. She sat there in the luxurious cinnamon sea in that white suit like a model."

Little wonder that the story was published in *Playboy*!

The story then tells of their adventures as the good blonde attempts to drive the protagonist to San Francisco. Finally she lets him off "right smack in front of the little station where I'd worked as a yardclerk." Though he "hadn't anticipated parting from her ever," "I could see she was anxious to get on home to her man so I said 'OK, here I go,' and got my bag and went out and stuck my hand in to shake and off she went, up Main Street, probably to her pad to take a shower and dress up and go down to her man's bar. And I put my bag on my back and walked down the same old homey familiar rail and felt glad."

The woman is a fantasy, just like the women in *Playboy*, and as she disappears from the story, Kerouac's prose turns into a lyrical description of San Francisco and of his recollections of places he had been: "as though some ruling God in the sky had said 'Jack I want you to cry when you remember your past life, and to accomplish this, I'm going to shoot you to that spot' and there I was…."

The woman is gone, but "I was at last back in my beloved San Francisco and surely must have a lot of crazy adventures ahead of me." She was an incident in his life—an interesting incident that aroused, among other things, sexual longing—but she was only an incident, only one thing that happened, and sweet recollections of a beloved city and of its future possibilities seem to heal any regrets he might have at not having had a deeper connection with her. She was simply something that happens when you are "on the road"—something like a vision, a dream. Here, even Oakland—notorious for Gertrude Stein's "no there there" remark—is presented as a "distant marvel and visible miracle."

Only *some* of these elements are present in Nic Saunders' film version of Kerouac's story. One important element missing from Saunders' film is the fact that in the film the woman and the Kerouac figure don't drive anywhere. He proposes that they drive to San Francisco, but they don't do it. The two interact, but not in a car—not "on the road." Another missing element is the fact that in the story the two take drugs: not here. Further: in the story, the good blonde has a man waiting for her in San Francisco; not in the film.

Saunders' film begins with the hitchhiker walking in Big Sur and then shifts to San Francisco's City Lights bookstore. The scene is set in what is now the upstairs "Poetry Room" though it would not have been the Poetry Room in 1955, when poetry was located in the basement of the building. The hero speaks to an old man: Kerouac's friend Al Hinkle or "Big Ed Dunkel," the only male character in *On the Road* who remains alive today. The old man asks whether a photo stashed in the hero's book is a photo of his girl. "Not really." "She's beautiful." "Yeah. I met her on the way here." Then, amid extremely rich, painterly splashes of color, the film again shifts to the hero as hitchhiker walking in Big Sur. A flashback. A beautiful woman in a white bathing suit appears on the beach and walks towards him. (In Kerouac's story the bathing suit is somewhat incongruous; here it makes perfect sense: she is on a beach. But she remains a kind of fantasy figure.)

The woman lies down near the hero. She asks what he is reading. He answers, "Proust." She asks whether it's any good. He answers, "I don't know. It's kinda difficult. It was recommended." (Here and elsewhere, British Bulcock's New-York-American-via-Kerouac accent is pitch perfect.) He tells her he is hitchhiking to San Francisco, adding that if he could get a lift he could get there by this evening, which would be "kinda perfect." She says nothing. It's a moment in which the film could have her tell him that she has a car and could drive him—as the good blonde does in Kerouac's story. Her silence is an indication of Saunders' decision to abandon that aspect of the story.

The woman puts on some music—and they talk a little about music, then about the giant redwoods that surround them. "They just follow the road, like you." They chat in a mildly flirtatious way. She tells him about her father. He tells her that everything comes from stardust. She asks whether he likes children. He tells her he can't see the point, people are just born to die. The conversation remains light but hovers around larger issues. She tells him she's from Texas. She seems seductive, interested in a romantic connection: she asks whether he is married, whether he has ever been in love. Quoting Garbo in *Ninotchka* (or Cyd Charisse in *Silk Stockings*), she says that she can't believe that love is just a chemical reaction. The conversation becomes more heated: he tells her, "Life's just a suffering dream you get to endure for eighty odd years and then that's that. You die and it's over. I wish it wasn't true, but that's just the way it is." She asks him what he really wants and adds that everybody wants something. He tells her he may write the Great American Novel. She says, triumphantly, "So you *do* want something. Everybody wants something." He admits that he has a meeting with a publisher in San Francisco. "I write poems actually." She tells him that poets should definitely wear black and "have little goatee beards." He tells her he has a lot of black in his suitcase—"and bongo drums of course." The hero of the *story* "Good Blonde" is definitely a thinly disguised Jack Kerouac. The hero of this film both is and is *not* Jack Kerouac—he has written only a few poems. "Not anything, really." The poet as "beatnik"—black clothing, little goatee beards—occurred only *after* the real Kerouac's success. Further: the woman accuses the man of "hitting" on her—not a term current in Kerouac's time. (There will also be a reference to websites on the internet.) Just as the hero both is and is not Jack Kerouac, the film both is and is not a version of Kerouac's story. It exists in a world which is both *then* and *now*. It is like a dream of Kerouac's story.

The good blonde tells the Kerouac figure that she is uncertain of what she wishes to be. An airline hostess? An actress? He tells her he will write a poem about her: "Queen of the Redwood Mountains." He goes on, "My point is, you gotta go for what you want. You can't let people stop you from achieving your dreams." He suddenly becomes intense and speaks of a play by Chekhov about a man who wishes to be a writer and a woman who wishes to be an actress. "We can learn from them. You see, her mistake was not realizing how great the guy was. If she'd have realized that she never would have rejected him." It's a moment in which he is pleading with her to join him, to come with him to San Francisco. She answers coldly, "She hardly knows him." This of course is true, but who exactly is "he" at this point? Is he a hitchhiker of perhaps limited talent, someone who will perhaps never realize his dreams, or is he—as in many ways he seems to be—Jack Kerouac, genius, brilliant writer? She holds out the possibility that, once he has achieved fame, she will see the poem he wrote for her, will see his website, will perhaps contact him. Bulcock is brilliant in these moments. The intensity of his feeling comes through in an extraordinary way, and he never overplays it. Beginning to despair, he asks, “What if she never sees the poem he wrote for her? What if the only time they ever meet is when she walks up to him on a beach and sits down next to him?” She answers, a little distantly, “He’d have to make sure she did.”

Then off she goes. A seagull appears. “This bird has flown.” This is the central moment of the film—the moment when the film is at its most real—and it is a sort of “No.” (*The Seagull* is the Chekov play referred to.) Everything in the film exists to name this sad moment of disappointment, despair, and we see it all registered in Bulcock’s face and in the image of the now desolate beach. Antonioni.

The hero hitchhikes, makes his way to San Francisco. Back to City Lights and the Kerouac figure climbing the steps to the Poetry Room. We now see again that the woman has left her photo in the hero’s book, and on the back of the photo is a phone number. Al Hinkle asks, “Are you gonna call her?” The hero answers, “I don’t know. Maybe.” “When I was your age,” says Hinkle, “the stuff we got into! Somebody could write a book about it, believe me.” (Of course, somebody—Jack Kerouac—did!) Hinkle then advises the hero to “call her.” The scene darkens, and the film ends with a quote from Kerouac: “Happiness consists in realizing it is all a great strange dream” (*Lonesome Traveler*).

In the seventeenth century, Nicholas Saunders wrote of Henry VIII, “*Quod paeucas vidit pulchriores quas non concupierit, & paucissimas non concupierit, quas non violârit.* “He saw few faire maides that he did not desire, and desired few whom he did not inioy” (“*violârit*”!). In the film Nic Saunders made, it is not clear whether the hero will ever “inioy” the heroine. Yet the concluding quotation is not an affirmation of romantic love: it is an assertion that everything—all of life—is “a great strange dream.” Like the hero, we in the audience desire the heroine (delicately played by Kasia Halpin, with just a hint of Texas accent)—and we desire further that she and the hero will be romantically linked, as so often happens in films. Yet the heroine is after all nothing more than a photograph, a figure in a film, and a photograph is all the hero now has left of her. The woman in the white bathing suit has been half woman, half fantasy. Would it make sense to “realize” her, to phone the number, to make her be more than a fantasy?

I remember a dialogue I once heard. Two men were talking about women and love. “And you know,” said one, “the fantasy woman is *better*.” “Oh yeah?” said the other. “You can’t make love to a fantasy.” “Yes,” said the first. “That’s *why* she’s better.”

The Good Blonde *will be shown at the Berkeley Video and Film Festival in October.*

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