

*The Beat Hotel*

Directed by Alan Govenar

Documentary Arts (2011) 88 Minutes

Reviewed by Kurt Hemmer, Harper College

*The Beat Hotel* is Alan Govenar's winsome, even frolicsome documentary about what Beat scholar Barry Miles calls "the last of the great bohemian hotels." The documentary is a love letter to long-gone hotel that once emitted the smell of a pungent combination of cannabis, hashish, exotic food, and Turkish toilets. There is a *jouissance* to the film that might entice some to dream of fifty-cents-per-day rooms full of poets, prostitutes, and thieves. At one time or another, many of the major Beat writers, with the conspicuous exception of Jack Kerouac, lived at the hotel. Though the film does not tell us, "the Beat Hotel" was the name Gregory Corso, who came to stay with Allen Ginsberg and Peter Orlovsky, gave to the unnamed hotel at 9, Rue Git-le-Couer, before it turned into the Relais-Hôtel du Vieux Paris, which stands there today. While living at what poet Jean-Jacques Lebel considered the cheapest and dirtiest of hotels in Paris, Corso wrote many of the poems that would find their way into his most acclaimed collection, *The Happy Birthday of Death* (1960); Allen Ginsberg began "Kaddish" (specifically at the café La Select in Montparnasse) and completed several of his important poems, such as "To Aunt Rose" and "At Apollinaire's Grave"; and William S. Burroughs put together and published *Naked Lunch* (1959). Govenar centers his film around the enchanting photographs and reminiscences of Harold Chapman, who enjoyed the happiest time of his life living in the Beat Hotel. The film leaves you wanting to hear more about the minor characters who populate Chapman's portraits. In one of the most revealing and interesting scenes, Chapman describes his "dustbin" photography. He would get the cassettes for his 1935 Contax camera from dustbins outside camera shops and convince newsreel cameramen to give him their film ends, which had been cut off when they had reloaded new reels of film into their cameras. The results of his efforts, as this film duly documents, are extraordinary.

His photographs, combined with the drawings of Elliot Rudie, another former resident at the Beat Hotel, enhance the film and set the tone, though the animation of the drawings is sometimes equally unnecessary. (It is particularly gratuitous to see an animated Corso vomit three times during the course of the film.) Another aspect of the film that does not seem to warrant the length spent on it are the visits to Chapman's English residence in Deal, by Rudie and writer "Cyclops" Lester. Though the anecdotes are not always equally fascinating, there is enough background detail provided by Beat scholars Miles and Regina Weinreich, and Burroughs scholar Oliver Harris, to provide an intriguing context for the casual viewer.

Burroughs tends to dominate the film's look at the Beats. Several scenes in the film were shot during the fiftieth anniversary celebration of the publication of *Naked Lunch* in July 2009, which included the revealing of a plaque commemorating the hotel's prestigious clientele. According to Miles, Burroughs came to Paris to find a psychoanalyst who could help him work out his obsession with Ginsberg, rather than choosing Paris as an ideal place to write. Ironically, as Harris tells us, it was at the Beat Hotel that he began to move away from the Beats (the Romantic instincts of Ginsberg and Corso made them become wary of Burroughs's anti-Romantic Cut-up experiments, though the process inspired poet Harold Norse) and Burroughs began to develop his

own literary innovations and unique identity. Perhaps the film would have been better served if it had spent a little more time on a few more substantial anecdotes relating to Corso, Ginsberg, Orlovsky, and Norse. Another aspect of the story that could have been addressed is the influence of the controversy and censorship of Burroughs's work published in magazines and journals in the United States had on Maurice Girodias's decision to publish what was then called *The Naked Lunch* at Olympia Press. Weinreich tells us that Ginsberg and Corso campaigned to get Girodias to publish the book, but a more in-depth discussion might have added additional nuance to the story. The only egregious mistake in the film seems to be the misidentification of Neal Cassady as Kerouac, twice, in the famous photograph of Bob Donlin, Cassady, Ginsberg, Robert LaVigne, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti outside City Lights Bookstore taken by Peter Orlovsky in 1956 [Editor's note: the filmmakers have caught this mistake and have corrected it for the DVD's upcoming release in August 2012].

Yet this film also rewards the careful viewer. We hear Peter Golding, now a fashion designer, play one of the folk tunes he once used to serenade *les bohémiens* at the Beat Hotel. It is often overlooked, but not here, that the Beat residency (1957-1963) coincided with the Algerian War (1954-1962), which certainly had an important impact worthy of further inquiry. Supposedly, Gysin had a chance to market his Dreamachine through Philips, but the company's representative broke his leg after a fall on the hotel's steps. Surprisingly, Miles argues that the Beat Hotel could have been anywhere—Vienna, Berlin, Amsterdam—though Lebel, who introduced Ginsberg and Corso to Benjamin Péret, André Breton, and Marcel Duchamp, counters that the French literary and artistic legacy of Paris was particularly important to the Beats. (When Corso met Duchamp, he cut off part of his tie with scissors, to which Duchamp responded, “*Trés Dada.*”) We also have the pleasure of seeing what may have been George Whitman's last filmed interview, and we see his daughter, Sylvia, who now runs Shakespeare & Co, which is connected to a building that has a staircase reminiscent of the one that once could have been found in the Beat Hotel before a lift was put in the very expensive Relais-Hôtel du Vieux Paris.

It is heartbreaking when we hear Chapman relate how he was the last to leave the Beat Hotel as we see his final Beat Hotel photograph of Madame Rachou, the owner of the hotel, and Norse before the renovation that would relegate it all to memories. Those who want a more detailed discussion of the material covered in the film are encouraged to read Miles's excellent monograph *The Beat Hotel: Ginsberg, Burroughs, and Corso in Paris, 1957-1963* (2000). Miles's book covers a lot more terrain, but Govenar's film lovingly recalls a time when the Beats and their friends were very poor and very prolific, if not downright happy.