

Magick Weapon

TOM GUNNING ON KENNETH ANGER

THE FILMS OF KENNETH ANGER occupy the dark heart of American cinema. Along with Maya Deren (who slightly preceded him) and Stan Brakhage (who began making films roughly a decade after Anger), the director of *Lucifer Rising* (1972) remains the best known and most influential of the founding figures of American avant-garde film. But whereas Deren and Brakhage envisioned a homegrown avant-garde cinema that would scorn the Hollywood behemoth, Anger emerged from the dragon's lair itself. While his films—especially the five early works collected on Fantoma's glorious new DVD release *The Films of Kenneth Anger, Volume One*—defied Hollywood practice and themes, they also drove right into the shimmering, illuminated moving images that undergird the Dream Factory. Anger's films exploit Hollywood's elaborate costumes, fantasies (both violent and erotic), otherworldly sets, and the peculiar mixture of magic and vulgarity that Anger himself dubbed "Hollywood Babylon." His *détournement* of Hollywood tropes helped Pop art emerge from the biting irony entwined with affection that defined American homosexual camp culture.

Always a step ahead of cultural currents, Anger has long possessed an aesthetic clairvoyance, or perhaps simply a pervasive subterranean influence. With more justice than understanding, he has been proclaimed the inventor of the rock video. In the 1960s, *Scorpio Rising* (1963) and *Kustom Kar Kommandos* (1965)—works destined for the second and final volume of *The Films of Kenneth Anger*, whose summer release will also bring to hand *Invocation of My Demon Brother* (1969), *Rabbit's Moon* (1979 version), and *Lucifer Rising*—blended rock sound tracks with razor-sharp editing and explosive visual images in a manner that still influences the most ambitious music videos. But the dialectical complexity of Anger's use of pop culture also deconstructed the MTV genre before it even emerged. In his alembic of cinema, Anger transmuted the lyrics and rhythms of pop tunes into visions as exhilarating as they are disturbing, taking seriously the claim that rock 'n' roll might literally be black magic. Anger does it all, bending the essential stuff of cinema—color, rhythm, movement, sound, and oneiric images—into works that transport a viewer even while the filmmaker strips enthrallment and enchantment of any alibi of innocence.

Although Fantoma's first disc lacks Anger's masterpiece, *Scorpio Rising*, this collection of his earliest work

is nonetheless invaluable for its illumination of the unique qualities of his oeuvre. His first surviving film, *Fireworks* (1947), shot with the primitive intimacy of a teenage wet dream, delivers a raw dose of sexuality and desire that has rarely been equaled by other filmmakers. His exploration of the aesthetics of liquid flows and nighttime labyrinths, *Eaux d'artifice* (1953), offers one of Anger's most perfect, elegant, and wickedly deceptive films. *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome* (1954) captures an orgy of intoxication and narcissism at a Hollywood Halloween party on the verge of the Beat era, with hallucinatory imagery so witty that it almost justifies the vulgarity of the psychedelic culture that came in its wake. This disc—

which also includes *Puce Moment* (1949) and *Rabbit's Moon* (shot in 1950 but edited and released in 1971)—delivers great works of American cinema and avant-garde art that are simultaneously deeply challenging and completely sensually satisfying: eye-popping and mind-expanding in the most complex sense. Unlike earlier VHS offerings of Anger's work, this DVD is based on meticulous restorations of often delicate material, and the versions of the films presented here have been carefully selected from the variety of editions Anger has released with different sound tracks and editing patterns. I am of two minds about digitally removing splices and marks of wear from prints, since it can create a falsely smooth surface, but I don't claim this to be a major problem. Anger's voice-over commentary provides many wonderful insights but resists, for the most part, a full-scale reading of the films' imagery, while his occasional forays into gossip back-ground information add spice.

Anger and his films come wrapped in legends. He not only picked through classical and romantic mythology for material, but created a modern mythology from the detritus of popular culture. Separating truth from fable in the filmmaker's biography seems difficult, but,



Kenneth Anger, *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome*, 1954, still from a color film in 16 mm, 38 minutes. From left: Lord Shiva (Samson De Brier), Lilith (Renata Loomer), and Aphrodite (Joan Whitney).

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more important, pointless. Anger grew up in a realm of illusions, on the fringe of Hollywood in the studio era, and frequently refers to his grandmother, who designed costumes and sets for the stars. He claims he played the Changeling Prince in the 1935 film of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* shot by renowned German theater director Max Reinhardt and William Dieterle on a shimmering soundstage that recalls the forest in Anger's own *Rabbit's Moon*. I have no reason to doubt the claim, but I would find it equally fascinating if Anger was projecting his childhood identity onto a figure he saw on the screen. After all, Anger moves among a forest of symbols within a constructed fairyland. Like the gossip culture that his well-known underground classic book *Hollywood Babylon* (1959) chronicled, he continually peered beneath the surface of the illusion, discovering hidden desires that redefined the glimmer on the surface. Born in 1927, he came of age within a gay culture that refashioned the dreams Hollywood supplied en masse into subversive rituals of identity and cultural appropriation, reworking Hollywood's use of costuming, makeup, role playing, and created environments. For Anger, an artist's first creation must be his persona; "Anger" is, in fact, an adopted name. But this simulated



Clockwise from top: Kenneth Anger, *Rabbit's Moon*, 1950/1971, still from a tinted black-and-white film in 35 mm, 16 minutes. Columbine (Nadine Valence). Kenneth Anger, *Fireworks*, 1947, still from a black-and-white film in 16 mm, 15 minutes. Kenneth Anger, *Puce Moment*, 1949, still from a color film in 16 mm, 6 minutes. Star (Yvonne Marquis).

paradise confronted a violent world where the forces of law and order were willing to unleash a cruel sadism to enforce conformity and to oppress sexual and ethnic difference (in Anger's voice-over to *Fireworks*, he reveals that the film's images of homophobic violence were partly inspired by the anti-Mexican zoot-suit riots in World War II-era LA, and as a teenager he personally experienced police brutality directed at gays).

Anger once described the "cinematograph" as his "Magick weapon" (using the preferred spelling of his mentor in the black arts, twentieth-century magus Aleister Crowley), and his furious art undertakes a Luciferian mission, a purifying destruction anticipating apocalypse, both personal and social. The violence in Anger's cinema carries an impact that the "realistic" special-effects carnage of contemporary Hollywood films cannot match. But even his most brutal images appear within a ritualistic rather than a narrative context, drawing on imagery and methods from occult systems of correspondences—and perhaps prompting recognition of the often-ignored debt much modernist art owes to secret traditions. Besides providing Anger with a lexicon of images (most obviously in *Inauguration*

and broaching of taboos (the film was even studied by Dr. Alfred Kinsey as a document of human sexuality). Fantoma has chosen what is, in my opinion, the preferable extant version of this film, which includes Anger's spoken prologue and beautifully conceived final moment (a shot of a hand underwater bearing the word END), both shorn from the version circulated on VHS. *Fireworks* combines the primitive grubbiness of a closet film with a clarity of symbolic structure, and these antithetical energies sharpen each other. Moments that might descend into adolescent pretension quickly pivot on a needle point of irony (as when the protagonist emerges wearing a Christmas tree on his head, or when the raw meat that seems to be his internal organs reveals an electrometer rather than a beating heart). A brief shot of Anger lying naked among the urinals of a public men's room suffuses the film with the pungency of a bathroom tryst even as it enacts a ceremony of personal metamorphosis.

Delving into the detritus of society, both material and social, Anger follows the magical principle that power resides in the rejected and the taboo. Metaphors in Anger provide connections between surface reality

of the *Pleasure Dome*), the occult also supplied a structure that differed from both the narrative forms of Hollywood and the lyricism of much avant-garde cinema. Anger's films stage a series of rituals, usually rising from a bed of dreams to encounter more powerful and violent realms of fantasy. Rather than tell a story, Anger's films ritually dress in rich costume a central figure who then moves through an environment of contradictory but stable spaces to a drama of transformation (not infrequently including a process of violent destruction).

Anger first picked up a camera at puberty. Although his pre-*Fireworks* adolescent films were apparently destroyed by their maker, he remains one of cinema's few Rimbaud-like teenage poets. *Fireworks* is his *Season in Hell*. A landmark in gay cinema, *Fireworks* continues to astonish with its direct portrayal of desire

and hidden, often repressed, forces. Metaphors can provide sanitized euphemisms for uncomfortable meanings, but Anger uses them to contaminate a world of purity with fundamental, amoral forces. Milk poured over his face in *Fireworks* invokes semen, while a precisely placed Roman candle becomes an ejaculating penis. The extravagant, baroque fountains of *Eaux d'artifice* (*Fireworks*'s elemental companion piece) evoke urine, ejaculation, and vaginal flow as well as the fluid energies of the supernal mother in occult systems. Thus Anger not only transforms cinema into the medium of occult influences, but creates a modern ritual in which irony aspires to the sublime, and the divine influx masquerades in abandoned Hollywood costumes.

Working with minuscule financial and technical support, Anger managed to negotiate the entire history of film and to form a new tradition, but only at the cost of a fragmented career. His oeuvre is littered with legendary destroyed or lost films, unfinished projects (*Puce Moment* and *Rabbit's Moon* are the magnificent remains of two of these), and, more recently, privately commissioned or yet-unshown films. *Rabbit's Moon*, for example, blends the films of Georges Méliès from the beginning of the century (especially his 1903 film *La Lanterne magique*), the work of Jean Cocteau, and the heterocosm of Josef von Sternberg's Hollywood films with Marlene Dietrich. Although I have always felt this film greater in its parts than as a finished piece, it shows, as does *Eaux d'artifice*, the elegant side of Anger, his mastery of nocturnal reveries. But his grand, mythopoeic *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome* allows the edges of irony to shine through the breathtaking surfaces of a constructed illusion. Encouraging Hollywood beatniks (including Anaïs Nin, fellow filmmaker Curtis Harrington, and notorious occultist Marjorie Cameron) to costume themselves as gods, Anger reveals them as only temporary divinities, magicians in search of shortcuts to ecstasy and sexual conquest within an Olympus that exposes its two-dimensional nature like a Freudian slip. Anger himself plays Hecate in drag, shaking his hips like Carmen Miranda. As the film reaches its climax of sexual cannibalism, multiple layers of superimposition and unmotivated color express more passion than the would-be gods. Whereas lesser artists use irony to display their superiority to the vulgar crowd, Anger's wit endows the pretense of a mythical world with the canny sense of the magician who admits it's all an illusion. But, then, what isn't? □

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