

KENNETH ANGER, THE MAGUS OF FILM

Kenneth Anger ranks among the best known, most important, and influential avant-garde film makers of the twentieth century. His use of photomontage, multiple-exposures, rapid abrupt (and even grating) editing, flash images (so brief they are missed if you blinked), hand-scratching and painting the celluloid, powerful highly artificial and symbolic color (used in an abstract way) and contemporary popular music (especially rock and roll) is innovative, and so influential that many of these techniques are staples of much filmmaking today, including both art or commercial film, as well as MTV and commercials.

For all of his influence and fame, which is extraordinary considering he only made a handful of films prior to 1980, Anger himself is something of a mystery, his life embodying an elusiveness that reflects the ephemeral spirituality and transubstantiation of his cult-like ritualistic films. We know he was born Kenneth Wilbur Anglemyer in Santa Monica, California, in 1927, but otherwise little detail is published about his life, and much of this is from his own claims. Anger was steeped in Hollywood. His grandmother was in charge of wardrobe for KT, and he studied at the Maurice Kossloff Dancing School with Shirley Temple and Judy Garland. He claims to have played the Changeling Prince in Max Reinhardt's 1935 film, *A Midsummer's Night Dream*, although his name does not appear in the credits and it is difficult to identify him as the Changeling Prince.

He began making and showing films at the age of ten, a child prodigy. His first extant work, and the first to be distributed, is *Fireworks* of 1947, made at age 20. The movie launched his reputation as an avant-garde filmmaker. The surrealist filmmaker, writer, and artist, Jean Cocteau, awarded the film a prize at the Biarritz Film Festival, and attracted Anger to Paris in 1951 to work at the film magazine, *Cahiers d'Art*. Anger's notoriety spread well beyond avant-garde film circles when in 1959 he published in Paris *Hollywood Babylone* (translated in English in 1965), a tell-all book of Hollywood film stars from the silent era through the 1950s, an exposé so outrageous, and dripping in sexual aspersions, that much of its content is highly contested.

Beginning with his teenage masterpiece, *Fireworks*, Anger defied cinematic convention. The black-and-white film opens (and closes) with a daring abstract shot, which gradually can be read as light mysteriously shimmering on surface of a dark body of water. Equally abstract are sequences showing street lights and the headlights of moving cars pitted against the pitch-dark of night. Also radical are dramatic camera shots literally taken from ground level and zoomed straight up, or taken from above and precipitously plunging down. In a few instances, Anger uses quick and abrupt editing, a technique that will become more intense in future films. In *Puce Moment*, shot in Los Angeles in 1949 and never completed but existing as a fragment, Anger worked for the first time in color, which commercially was relatively new. His use of color was radical, for it appears not just to support naturalism but as an abstract element that projects powerful emotional and even symbolic content. In the opening sequence, dress after colorful dress, each filling

the entire screen, is peeled away, ending in a close-up of a beaded black dress, the focus so close that the beaded design is blurred into a hazy abstraction. A hedonistic freedom, even a fin-de-siècle decadence, is quickly and efficiently evoked.

Perhaps Anger's most sensuous film is *Eaux d'Artifice*, made in the Gardens of the Villa d'Este in Tivoli while Anger was living in Paris. The movie was shot during the day with infra-red film and printed in Ektachrome through a Cyan filter, with the result that entire film seems to take place at night and steeped in a spiritual blue cast. The viewer is immersed in a rich, sensuous, and mysterious world that is constantly morphing through the use of double exposures, montages, and intense close-ups of abstract jets of water, to dense dew-laden foliage, to weathered stone reliefs of voyeuristic ancient gods, and to the fleeting images of a woman, dressed in 18th-century Venetian elegance as if for a masked ball, furiously traveling through the garden, either futilely in search of something elusive or trapped in this wondrous environment. *Eaux d'Artifice* was followed by *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome*, begun in 1954 and finished in 1966, and it perhaps represents Anger's most ambitious use of color. Deeply-saturated reds, blues, yellows, and greens, for example, dominate every scene in the film, giving a decadent opulence, lurid sensuality, and mysticism to surrealistic, costumed figures attending what appears to be an occult rite, a rite of passage and transformation enhanced by Anger's use of multiple exposures, montages, flash images, and rapid editing, all of which become faster and more furious as the film progresses.

To varying degrees ritual drives Anger's films, which can be readily seen in *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome*, not only in the use of ceremonial cups, costumes, altars, and jewelry but also in the use of occult signs that flash superimposed over the rites taking place behind them. These magical symbols were taken from the writings of Aleister Crowley, a famous English occultist and writer largely forgotten today, whom Anger greatly admired. Anger includes all of his films made prior to 1980 as part of the Magick Latern Cycle, the "k" in Magick reflecting Crowley's spelling and lending the word a hallowed Gothic edge. Much of the plot of Anger's 1968-80 *Lucifer Rising* is based on Crowley's teachings, and Anger's Lucifer is Crowley's—not Satan but rather the god of light, a Venus, the Rising Morning Star, a figure symbolizing awakening, creativity, and independence. While films like the *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome* and *Lucifer Rising* are filled with Crowley's symbolism, virtually every one of his works is about transubstantiation or the rite of passage. In *Fireworks*, it is gay awakening and initiation. In *Puce Moment*, it is the release of the young woman to become a free spirit. In his 1963 *Scorpio Rising*, it is the New York cult of motorcycles, and in *Kustom Kar Kommando* it is the California worship of hotrods.

Homoeroticism also runs through many of Anger's films. Sexual innuendo fills *Scorpio Rising* and *Kustom Kar Kommando*, and gay identity is the thrust of *Fireworks*, an especially daring theme for 1947, a theme that in effect anticipated by some 40 years the postmodern preoccupation with sexual orientation. But wherever we look in Anger's oeuvre, it is filled with innovation. His use of rock and roll music as the sound track (Anger never uses dialogue), as seen in *Scorpio Rising*, is considered a first for film and is especially admired not only for how the music and lyrics support the plot but also how

the editing is sometimes synchronized with the rhythm. And while interweaving the occult, myth, magic, and the timeless into his films, works such as *Scorpio Rising*, *Kustom Kar Kommandos*, and *Invocation of My Demon Brother* deftly capture the essence of their times: The first, for example, Pop culture and cult of Eastern urban gangs; the second, the clean, hard-edge, high-tech ambience of California's car culture; and the third the psychedelic drug culture of San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury.