



EXPERIMENTA

Cinema Is Evil: Welcome to the World of Legendary, Queer Occult Filmmaker Kenneth Anger

Programme

When the Devil Drives

Director: W.R. Booth
Production Company:
Charles Urban Trading Company
UK 1907
5 mins

The Dead

Film-maker: Stan Brakhage
Production Company:
The Film-Makers' Cooperative
With: Kenneth Anger
USA 1960
11 mins

Arena: Kenneth Anger's Hollywood Babylon

Director: Nigel Finch
Production Company: BBC TV
Executive Producer: Anthony Wall
With:
Kenneth Anger
Mike McShane
(Fatty Arbuckle/the God of Hollywood)
Aaron Stafford (the young Kenneth Anger)
Trasey Vivat (Lupe Velez)
Sjaak Van-der-bent (singer of 'New Star in Heaven')
Marianne Faithfull
UK 1991
60 mins

Rabbit's Moon

A film by: Anger
Production Company: Puck Film Productions
Cast:
Andre Soubeyran (Pierrot)
Claude Revenant (Harlequin)
Nadine Valence (Columbine)
USA 1950
16 mins

Fireworks

A film by Kenneth Anger
Assistant Cameraman: Chester Kessler
Music: Ottorino Respighi
Cast:
Kenneth Anger (the dreamer)
Bill Seltzer (body builder/lover)
Gordon Gray (body bearing sailor)
members of the US Navy (crowd of sailors)
USA 1947
14 mins

Total running time: 107 mins

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Kenneth Anger, who died on 11 May 2023 in Yucca Valley, California, produced a body of work unique in cinema. His films never brought him a mass audience, even though they are as beautiful and technically proficient as anything produced by the big motion picture studios. Anger loved popular cinema, but at the same time cultivated an adversarial relationship with a mainstream American culture grounded in cant and pieties, such as the belief that only morally upstanding people can produce great art, and that artists' perceived moral failings should be denounced loudly and in public. During a career spanning more than 70 years, Anger never once took the side of virtue; vice was much more to his taste. He summed up his attitude to life with the final line of Aleister Crowley's poem 'Hymn to Lucifer': 'The Key of Joy is disobedience.'

Anger was born Kenneth Anglemeyer in 1927 in Santa Monica, California, and grew up in the shadow of Hollywood. Encouraged by his grandmother, watercolourist Bertha Coler, and her lesbian companion Maria Dedler, a costume mistress in the film industry, Anger began making films while still an adolescent in the early 1940s. Works including *Escape Episode* (1944) and *Drastic Demise* (1945) have been lost, though suppressed might be a better word. The rediscovery of prints is not out of the question, as they were once in distribution.

Anger's official filmography begins with *Fireworks* (1947), made with acquaintances in sailor suits while his parents were out of town. The film has been hailed as a pioneering work of gay cinema, but it is more complex than such an anodyne designation would suggest. Its action unfolds in an oneiric space of masochistic fantasies about rough trade, the sort of men who can't bring themselves to have sex with other men unless they beat them up before or after the act. *Fireworks* ends with one of the film's toughs, face obscured by a painted starburst pattern, sharing a bed with Anger. Even after so many years, the film retains a certain mystery, which Anger encouraged with his own mythmaking. He repeatedly said he was 17 years old when he made *Fireworks*; in fact, he was 20.

Anger then spent several years in Europe, which at that time was more congenial to his homoerotic films than the United States, and returned home after his mother's death. Back in Los Angeles, he attended a Halloween party with the theme 'Come as Your Madness' at the home of actor Samson De Brier. The guests, their costumes and the extraordinary interiors of De Brier's house inspired *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome* (1954). The ambitious film was Anger's first attempt to deal with mythology and the occult. Highly stylised and somewhat claustrophobic, the vividly colourful *Inauguration...* also offers a glimpse of the revelries of an underground Hollywood social scene of gay, libertine Satanists.

Anger's next triumph was as the author of *Hollywood Babylon* (1959), a profane anti-hagiography that exposed the private vices of the great and good of the film industry. The book valorises nonconformists, especially filmmakers and actors who loved sex and drugs, as opposed to the studio bosses and their lackeys professing respectable morals. Its content was largely invented or exaggerated, likely woven from gossip overheard in LA's gay bars, but its prose is so stylish and its narrative so compelling that the book has never quite faded from the public imagination. A mood of manic amorality pervades both *Hollywood Babylon* and many of Anger's best films.

He returned to America after still more years spent abroad and made his most astonishing film, *Scorpio Rising* (1964), a blasphemous paean to the aforementioned rough trade, as well as to fascist iconography. The film shows

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Kimitachi wa do Ikiruka

Sun 12 May 12:00; Sun 26 May 12:30

Seniors: Shakespeare Wallah + intro

Wed 15 May 14:30

Families: Wonka

Sun 19 May 12:50 (Funday)

Silent Cinema: Vagabond Queen + intro by

BFI curator Bryony Dixon

Sun 19 May 15:40

Relaxed Screening: The Magic Flute Trollflöjten

+ intro & discussion

Mon 20 May 18:00

Restored: The Small Back Room + intro by the

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Tue 28 May 18:10

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working-class men repairing and riding their motorcycles, indulging in amphetamines and, most memorably, cutting loose at a Halloween party. *Scorpio Rising* is, among other things, a representation of men who were not entirely aware of how they appeared to those who lusted after them, and dramatic irony pervades the film. Its effect is heightened by Anger's use of music, possibly his most influential gesture as an artist: Martin Scorsese, David Lynch and Quentin Tarantino are all in his debt. Songs released between 1961 and 1963 – a moment of innocence occurring just before the British Invasion and the rise and predominance of the singer-songwriter – provide a running commentary on the action. After seeing *Scorpio Rising's* juxtapositions of bike boys carousing and appropriated footage of Jesus performing a miracle, accompanied by The Crystals' song 'He's a Rebel', it's impossible to look at a hackneyed Christian religious film with a straight face. The film's Nazi imagery, the unreconstructed masculinity of the bikers, a gleeful sense of sacrilege and the visceral emotionalism of pop music combine to make for an overwhelming viewing experience, and one not easily reconciled with received ideas about virtue. Unsurprisingly, the film attracted the attention of law enforcement; the owner of the LA theatre where it played was prosecuted on charges of exhibiting a lewd film. This conviction, later overturned on appeal, inspired Anger's best joke. He said that *Scorpio Rising* was busted in Los Angeles for desecrating the swastika.

Invocation of My Demon Brother (1969), shot in San Francisco and London, was salvaged from an aborted first version of what would become *Lucifer Rising*. Made during the Vietnam War, the film is filled with images of occult rituals, swastikas, hippies posturing and naked boys. While much of the cultural detritus inspired by the Summer of Love has come to seem jejune, *Invocation...* is as powerful today as the moment it premiered: in the aftermath of the Manson Family's murders. Only 11 minutes long but densely packed with subliminal images, the film is Anger's portrait of America as fascist death cult. Admittedly, this aspect of *Invocation...* is easier to see in the 2020s; fascist symbols, previously avoided as a topic in most of the writing about Anger's work, now leap out at spectators living in societies that are experiencing a recrudescence of right-wing terror.

Anger laboured for nine years on his longest work, *Lucifer Rising* (1972), which was shot in locations across Europe and Egypt. By the time of its eventual release in 1981, intellectual fashion had changed and a film about the interaction of deities, hierophants and mythological figures had a slightly out-of-date air – in the Reagan era, a reminder of a past that few wanted to relive. Nonetheless, shortly thereafter, Anger's crowning achievement, the 'Magick Lantern Cycle', a collection of all his extant films in a definitive form, was shown successfully around the US.

The four decades following the release of the 'Magick Lantern Cycle' were not kind to Anger. He discovered the brutal truth that the United States offers pitiful support to experimental filmmakers, even to a great one. With no academic job or trust fund, this ornery and imposing national treasure earned money however he could; a low point was publishing an inferior ghostwritten sequel to *Hollywood Babylon* in 1984. Better opportunities arose when museums and commercial art galleries began mounting exhibitions of his work and items from his collection of memorabilia. After more than 20 years of creative inactivity, he began making videos in the 2000s. While these works, particularly *Mouse Heaven* (2005), about the cult of Mickey Mouse, found supporters, none had the impact of the films made during his long period of productivity between World War II and the early 1980s. With the help of his manager Brian Butler, Anger offered his talents and likeness to the fashion industry, and this brought sporadic financial windfalls. He continued to accept requests for interviews, and if the right questions were asked, he could tell truly remarkable stories. Rumours of a pact with the devil conferring immortality proved untrue; he outlived all of his contemporaries, friends and rivals, but Kenneth Anger, after nearly a century of life, turned out to be mortal in the end.

William E. Jones, *Sight and Sound*, Summer 2023

Programme notes and credits compiled by Sight and Sound and the BFI Documentation Unit

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