

# Kenneth Anger

Kenneth Wilbur Anglemyer

b. February 3, 1927, Santa Monica, California

by Maximilian Le Cain

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Offering a description of himself for the program of a 1966 screening, Kenneth Anger stated his 'lifework' as being Magick and his 'magical weapon' the cinematograph. A follower of Aleister Crowley's teachings, Anger is a high level practitioner of occult magic who regards the projection of his films as ceremonies capable of invoking spiritual forces. Cinema, he claims, is an evil force. Its point is to exert control over people and events and his filmmaking is carried out with precisely that intention.

Whatever one's view of this belief may be, what is undeniable is that in creating the nine films that he either managed to complete (*Fireworks* [1947], *Eaux d'artifice* [1953], *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome* [1954-66], *Scorpio Rising* [1963], *Invocation of My Demon Brother* [1969], *Lucifer Rising* [1970-81]) or else released as self contained fragments (*Puce Moment* [1949], *Rabbit's Moon* [1950-79], *Kustom Kar Kommandos* [1965]), Anger forged a body of work as dazzlingly poetic in its unique visual intensity as it is narratively innovative. In many ways, these wordless films represent the resurgence and development of the uniquely cinematic qualities widely considered retarded or destroyed by the passing of the silent era, especially in the area of editing. According to Tony Rayns, "Anger has an amazing instinctive grasp of all the elements of filmmaking; his films actively work out much of Eisenstein's theoretical writing about the cinema.... [Anger] comes nearer [to Eisenstein's theories] than anything in commercial cinema and produces film-making as rich in resonance as anything of Eisenstein's own." (1)

Anger's films are cinematic manifestations of his occult practices. As such, they are highly symbolical, either featuring characters directly portraying gods, forces and demons (*Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome*, *Lucifer Rising*) or else finding an appropriate embodiment for them in the iconography of contemporary pop culture (*Puce Moment*, *Scorpio Rising*, *Kustom Kar Kommandos*, also *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome*). This view of pop culture as vehicle for ancient archetypes is also the basis of *Hollywood*

*Babylon*, his famous book about the seedier aspects of Hollywood history. In attempting to induce an altered state of consciousness in his viewers, Anger dispenses with traditional narrative devices, although his films definitely tell stories. Using powerful esoteric images and, especially in his later works, extremely complex editing strategies that frequently feature superimposition and the inclusion of subliminal images running just a few frames, Anger bypasses our rationality and appeals directly to our subconscious mind. The structure common to his major works is that of a ritual invoking or evoking spiritual forces, normally moving from a slow build up, resplendent with fetishistic detail, to a frenzied finale with the forces called forth running wild.



*Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome*

The films directly pertinent to this description that fully develop it both within their own contexts and in regard to each other are *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome*, *Scorpio Rising*, *Invocation of My Demon Brother* and *Lucifer Rising*. The first of these details the shifts in consciousness undergone by guests at an occult Eucharist at the house of Lord Shiva, the Magician. The first scenes detail his preparations for the event. The decadent magnificence of the spectacle is established in the opening image: a

big close-up of a gold chain at the centre of the frame that, snakelike, slithers away from the camera, out of focus and ultimately upwards. The camera follows to reveal the hand of Shiva, luxuriating in his bed, languidly observing the chain, dangling it over his face. He then reaches out to his bedside table which is laden with rings. His hands opulently bejewelled, he swallows the chain, the first example of oral consumption, the means whereby each alteration of consciousness will come about. Shiva proceeds to a small, completely red room where he perceives a deity in the mirror, and then to the space where the bulk of the action transpires, a completely dark area of indeterminate dimensions. The guests begin to arrive, each dressed as a mythological deity—Pan, Astarte, The Scarlet Woman, Isis, Lilith, Aphrodite, Hecate and, prefiguring the pop-culture references of future works, Cesare the Somnambulist from Wiene's *Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919), each bearing narcotic gifts.

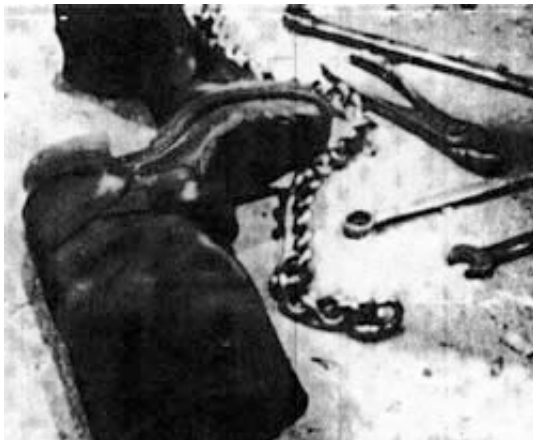
This section of the film is constructed around Shiva greeting each guest, often in a different form, and partaking of what they offer. The movement of the film is essentially the passing of the gifts from one guest to another as they advance into a state of transpersonal ecstasy. Anger's compositions are highly formal and painterly, seducing the viewer with the spectacle of the sumptuous costumes and adopting a colour palette of an aggressively theatrical beauty, reminiscent of Powell's *Tales of Hoffmann* (1951). The final part of the film is an orgiastic vision of the ritual's consummation, with fast cutting, multiple superimpositions including images of magical symbols and the presence of fire hinting at an apocalyptic destiny for those involved. Even if Anger's films are mute, it would be inaccurate to think of them as silent—his use of music is never less than vitally important and frequently deeply impressive. In this case Janacek's *Glagolitic Mass* adds to the rapturous imagistic grandeur of Anger's ritual.

*Scorpio Rising* is practically an amplified remake or, more precisely, a translation of *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome*. The implied destruction that concluded the earlier film referred to Anger's recurring preoccupation with the end of the Christian Age of Pisces, the violent death of which was necessary to allow for the birth of the Age of Aquarius. The arcanelly theatrical, neo-decadent imagery and abstract space gives way to a realistic milieu, that of a contemporary biker gang. The fetish objects are now the paraphernalia of youth subculture and the violence more savage and overt. But the patterns are the same—a loving preparation for the ritual, the build up of energy at the ritual and finally the act of destruction. Anger has simply taken his show to the street.



*Scorpio Rising*

The preparations involve the bikers fixing and polishing their motorbikes, donning the 'ceremonial garb' of leather, bedecking themselves with rings and chains like Shiva in *Pleasure Dome*—the physical aspects of preparation. Psychically, there is the reading of comic books, the adoration of James Dean visible on posters in the protagonist's bedroom, the imitation of Brando who appears on his television in Laslo Benedek's *The Wild One* (1954) and the snorting of cocaine. The 'ritual' is a homoerotic Halloween party, featuring fancy dress like the gathering in *Pleasure Dome*, where we witness sodomy, fellatio and all manner of pranks. That this machine-fixated biker gang is a death cult is made obvious by the omnipresence of the skull and cross bones, the adoption of Nazi imagery and the noose that hangs in the hero's bedroom. At the party, a man dances around with a skull on a wand, touching people's heads with it in twisted benediction. The film moves into its third stage when the hero leaves the party to desecrate a church, smashing the altar, installing swastikas and skulls, urinating into his helmet and casting a hex on a diurnal motorbike race that results in an accident. That same night there is also another accident that leaves one of the bikers, presumably the hero, dead.



*Scorpio Rising*

*Scorpio Rising* represents the densest, most complex montage of Anger's career. As previously stated, the hero's 'preparation' features images of Brando and comic books. This comparative editing is developed in the second part by the blasphemous, contrasting incorporation of images from the life of Jesus appropriated from a Z-grade Sunday school movie, a copy of which Anger is supposed to have discovered left on his doorstep by accident while editing *Scorpio Rising*. It is the perfect vehicle for conveying Anger's perception of an effete Christianity perishing in the face of the

new phallic virility that the bikers embody. As the ranting biker casts his hex from the church, images of Nazism and Hitler grow in frequency. Some shots are barely perceptible, such as the few frames of an erect penis intercut with Jesus healing a blind man. As the film progresses the intensity of the editing increases, culminating in the death hex in which

the spell seems to summon, by way of editing, a seemingly unconnected race that ends in accident as the form the malediction takes. These are only the major strands of this semiotic layering; other images are also called in to comment on the action and its meaning.

The use of music in *Scorpio Rising* is possibly the most influential aspect of Anger's oeuvre. The soundtrack is comprised entirely of a series of pop songs and a few sound effects. The songs not only add to the energy of the visuals but their lyrics form an ironic commentary on them. This prefigured such films as *Mean Streets* (Martin Scorsese, 1973) and *American Graffiti* (George Lucas, 1973) that paved the way for wide use of 'found' soundtracks.

If the 'translation' of the antique, closed universe of *Pleasure Dome* into the real milieu of *Scorpio Rising* implied that Anger believed Magick was active in the modern world and by the early '60s no longer needed an academically mythological context to be made cinema, the berserk *Invocation of My Demon Brother* shows it as immanent by the end of that decade. Aptly described by its director as “an attack on the sensorium”, it is a disturbing montage of jarringly edited images and symbols accompanied by a repetitive synthesised soundtrack by Mick Jagger that sounds like a malfunctioning computer printer. An albino man raises a wand; another man passes a knife across his chest; a cat is thrown on a fire; people smoke from a skull shaped pipe; Anger performs fevered rituals involving burning documents and swastikas; the Rolling Stones and a group of Hell's Angels appear; a procession of musicians descends a staircase followed by a fireball that stops at the bottom, resembling a burnt corpse and holding a sign that reads: 'Zap— You're pregnant— That's witchcraft'. For all its violence and ugly chaos, *Scorpio Rising* was careful to gradually draw the audience in to its well-defined milieu through a build up of details that in some ways parallels Scorsese and the Rossellini of *La Prise de pouvoir par Louis XIV* (1966) and kept its drama safely confined to this well defined space. *Demon Brother*, on the other hand, is terrifying in its randomness and lack of a defined space. There is a brief build up at the outset, with the wand and the knife, but soon the audience is experiencing the full impact of Anger's fragmented nightmare. Symbols, superimpositions and distorting lenses abound. If there is one dominant recurring image, it is eyes in close up, fixed on the audience. A found footage image of soldiers leaving a helicopter in Vietnam is fully visible twice. However, it appears throughout the film on a C roll visible only with infra-red glasses, subliminally adding to the sense of anxiety—one of the most extreme examples of Anger attempting to bypass our rational minds.



*Invocation of My Demon Brother*

His subsequent and latest film to date, *Lucifer Rising* is a departure from his previous major works. If *Pleasure Dome*, *Scorpio Rising* and *Demon Brother* remained fixated on death, *Lucifer Rising* is about rebirth, a celebration of the power of nature and of the ancient gods. It is a film of breathtaking beauty and power that supplants the closed worlds of *Pleasure Dome* and *Scorpio Rising* as well as *Demon Brother's* zone of all-pervading disorientation with an awesome sense of timelessness and spatial immensity, engendered at



least in part by having been shot at often sacred sites all over the world. The 'ritual structure' of the previous films is present, but opened up. It now operates on two levels, encompassing the world of the gods as well as the efforts of the adept at summoning them. Linking Egyptian mythology, embodied by Isis (Miriam Gibril) and Osiris (Donald Cammell), with Crowleyan practices, it celebrates Lucifer not as the devil but as lord of light. 'Lucifer' Anger observes 'is the patron saint of the visual arts. Colour, form, all these are the works of Lucifer.'

These 'ritual' structures are also present in some of the less developed works in either a minor or abbreviated form. *Puce Moment*, a film linked to *Pleasure Dome* in terms of its visual opulence (and, indeed, shots from it are used in *Pleasure Dome*'s superimpositions), shares the later film's fetishistic act of preparation, in this case a movie star getting dressed to walk her dogs and magically floating out of her house on her bed. *Rabbit's Moon* retells the story of Harlequin and Pierrot, which fits into Anger's common narrative pattern of a hero who summons up forces that finally harm him. Likewise *Eaux d'artifice*'s ending, in which the heroine seems to turn into water in one of the numerous fountains among which she has been walking, appears to suggest punishment for meddling with natural powers. *Kustom Kar Kommandos* seems more like a camp send-up of the machine fetish elements of *Scorpio Rising* than anything else, with a muscular young man polishing a car with a fluffy duster against a pink background in exaggeratedly eroticised compositions to the accompaniment of the Parris Sisters' *Dream Lover*.

Anger began life in Hollywood and popular legend maintains that an appearance as a child actor in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Max Reinhardt/William Dieterle, 1935) revealed his vocation to him. As a boy he claims to have made a series of unscreened and possibly lost films with such titles as 'Who Has Been Rocking my Dreamboat' (1941), 'Prisoner of Mars' (1942) and 'Drastic Demise' (1945). His first film in distribution is *Fireworks* (1947) and it already marks



*Fireworks*

him as a major talent. Essentially the story of a dream, this sado-masochistic, homoerotic vision of a young man who cannot sleep and goes in search of a light, only to be beaten and torn open by a group of sailors already displays the influence of Crowley; it is a veiled study of an initiate's symbolic death and rebirth. It also displays the influence of Jean Cocteau who was so impressed by it that he invited Anger to come to France. He spent much of the '50s there, involved in many abortive projects. Indeed, Anger's career is littered with films abandoned due to lack of funding or to theft, fire or vandalism. *Puce Moment* is all that was shot of a proposed feature, 'Puce Women', about fading Hollywood stars in their decaying mansions. In 1949 *The Love that Whirls* was destroyed by Eastman-Kodak developing laboratories who objected to images of nudity. Adaptations of Cocteau's *La Jeune homme et la mort* and Isidore Ducasse's *Les Chants de Maldoror* in the early '50s got no further than test shots. A documentary about Crowley's erotic frescoes at *Thelema Abbey* was 'lost' by the magazine *Picture Post* which commissioned it. Only 20 minutes of an adaptation of Pauline Reage's *L'histoire d'O* were shot in 1960.

Anger returned to the United States in 1962. After the success of *Scorpio Rising* he

planned the ambitious *Kustom Kar Kommandos*, abandoned due to lack of funds—the only scene shot comprises the film of that title that we have today. The original and very different version of *Lucifer Rising* was stolen in 1966, never to be recovered. In 1968 Anger went to London, where he began an association with Mick Jagger. *Demon Brother* was constructed from remaining footage from the first *Lucifer Rising* and material shot in London.

Since *Lucifer Rising*, Anger has spent his time pruning, maintaining and preserving his films, adding new soundtracks to several of them. He also travels widely to attend screenings of his work. In rigorously pursuing a vision of the cinema that is as original as it is personal, Anger not only created one of the most consistently thrilling bodies of work in cinema but in so doing highlighted the poverty of imagination that governs so much 'normal' filmmaking and the unconscionable limitations still placed on the medium. Like other geniuses of the American Underground such as Brakhage, Warhol and Markopoulos he has had a certain amount of influence over succeeding generations of filmmakers. But, like them, whatever he has taught others, he will always remain unique, one of the few filmmakers whose work is capable of returning meaning to that much overused word — 'visionary'.

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*Endnotes:*

1. Tony Rayns, "A Kenneth Anger Kompendium", *Cinema*, No. 4, Oct. 1969 ▲
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## Filmography

*Fireworks* (1947)

*Puce Moment* (1949)

*Rabbit's Moon* (1950-79)

*Eaux d'artifice* (1953)

*Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome* (1954-66)

*Scorpio Rising* (1963)

*Kustom Kar Kommandos* (1965)

*Invocation of My Demon Brother* (1969)

*Lucifer Rising* (1970-81)



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Jayne Pilling and Michael O'Pray (eds.), *Into the Pleasure Dome: the Films of Kenneth Anger*, BFI, London, 1989




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## Articles in *Senses of Cinema*

[Fireworks](#) by Chris Meir

[Magick in Theory and Practice: Ritual Use of Colour in Kenneth Anger's Invocation of \*My Demon Brother\*](#) by Deborah Allison




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## Web Resources

Compiled by Albert Fung

### [Art and Culture](#)

Brief bio and links

### [bfi Video](#)

Anger's films can be purchased here.

### [Jimmy Page and Kenneth Anger](#)

A piece about the not-so-perfect working relationship between Page and Anger.

### [Kenneth Anger](#)

A page with several Anger related links.

### [Kenneth Anger](#)

Capsules on each of his films.

### [Kenneth Anger: Between the Scandal Sheets](#)

Interview about the *Hollywood Babylon* publications.



*Kustom Kar Kommandos*

[Kenneth Anger.com](#)[Kenneth Anger's Icons](#)

An excerpt from a conversation with Jean Stein.

[Kenneth Anger interview](#)

A conversation with Kenneth Anger.

[Log Illustrated Ten](#)

About Anger's Australasian tour.

[Mystic Fire](#)

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