

Fireworks

by Chris Meir

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Fireworks (1947 USA 14 mins)

Source: ACMI/NLA **Filmmaker:** Kenneth Anger



Completed at the tender age of 17, *Fireworks* – an audacious pre-Stonewall exploration of homosexuality, violence, and American youth – was the breakthrough film for avant-garde film legend Kenneth Anger.

Fireworks takes the form of the trance-film, in which its protagonist (played by Anger himself) partakes in a hypnotic journey through his own unconscious. (1) Anger described the film with the following synopsis: “A dissatisfied dreamer awakes, goes out in the night seeking 'a light' and is drawn through the needle's eye. A dream of a dream, he returns to bed less empty than before.”(2) The protagonist's grotesque erection – which turns out to be a visual gag when the sheet is pulled back to reveal a wooden statue – becomes the impetus which drives this “dissatisfied dreamer” into the door marked 'Gents' to seek his “light.” This journey through the protagonist's dream world (with its trance-film structure), places *Fireworks* resolutely within the context of the American post-war avant-garde, a broad movement which is replete with examples of the form; *Fireworks* along with Maya Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943) being the most notable, but other examples abound including Brakhage's *Daybreak* (1957) and Deren's *Ritual in Transfigured Time* (1945). In employing and indeed mastering this form with *Fireworks*, Anger forever established himself as one of the leading figures in the post-war American avant-garde, and his later works would only serve to buttress that position.

In addition to demonstrating an affinity with avant-garde filmmakers in America, Anger's *Fireworks* also shows a great deal of international 'cine-savvy' through its homages to French filmmaker Jean Cocteau, particularly his classic experimental work *Le Sang d'un poète* (1930). This can be seen in both films' use of baroque set design, while the strange artifact hanging from the protagonist's ceiling in *Fireworks* is a direct quotation of the multiple wire sculptures which are so important to Cocteau's film. Apart from similar set design and decoration, the films share a concern with youthful angst and the usually concomitant social repression of sexuality. In both films, this angst finds an outlet in the form of extreme acts of gory violence. The films likewise share a dream-like structure in

which their respective protagonists search for some kind of spiritual and sexual fulfillment. It is no wonder that Cocteau would become such a fervent admirer of Anger's work, as *Fireworks* shows that Anger was also a big fan of Cocteau, and was obsessed with many of the same formal and thematic concerns as the French cinéaste.

Fireworks is not only Anger's first major film, but it also introduces many of the themes and motifs which would come to populate his later works. Foremost among these is the concern with light. From the film's title and opening image of a torch being thrown into water, through the lightning flashes and subsequent journey into darkness that the protagonist takes (and concluding with pyrotechnic orgasms and a lover surrounded by a corona scratched onto the film's surface), *Fireworks* is a film obsessed with the technical and metaphoric use of light. The dreamer of Anger's synopsis ultimately finds his 'light' in the sailor with a phallic roman candle who becomes a god-like figure, laying in bed with the dreamer at the film's end. Throughout the rest of his career Anger has remained fascinated with this idea of light and the character of Lucifer, who is literally the god of light. (3)

On the subject of the god-like lover with the roman candle penis, it is worth pointing out Anger's penchant for camp in *Fireworks*. The not-so-subtle imagery and symbolism in the film – the aforementioned pyrotechnic phallus, the rivers of milk standing in for semen, the dreamer's sexual quest beginning with a journey through a gigantic door with the word 'Gents' spelled out in equally gigantic letters, the dreamer having a gas gauge heart (an idea seemingly stolen from *The Wizard of Oz* [Victor Fleming, 1939]), and all those muscle-bound sailors – is so baroque it is somewhat laughable. Anger would employ this tongue-in-cheek strategy throughout his later work, bringing camp to its zenith with *Scorpio Rising* in 1964. This deployment of camp aesthetics in *Fireworks* is anything but arbitrary, and it instead brings a vital satirical dimension to the film. At different points in the film we see images of post-war American culture and authority, all of which are subverted and/or appropriated as part of the dreamer's journey. The sailor, an embodiment of the military might of the newfound superpower nation, is simultaneously also the quintessence of the homoerotic lust object. America's (supposedly) healthiest beverage, milk, is rendered as a stand-in for seminal fluid. And two iconic American holiday objects, Christmas trees and fireworks – used to celebrate the nation's most patriotic occasion, Independence Day – become charged symbols in the dreamer's quest for a sexual fulfillment which, like the torch which opens the film, is otherwise doused by conventional social mores and standards. As Anger also commented about the film, “This flick is all I have to say about being 17, the United States Navy, American Christmas, and the Fourth of July.” (4)

In closing, I would like to point out the remarkable synthesis Anger achieves in bringing together the nocturnal longings of a gay teenage boy (and a sense of the cultural climate of the 1940s America he inhabits) and the work of Cocteau, a companion soul the film openly acknowledges. In *Fireworks*, Anger melds together a lampoon of American culture and authority and his life-long obsessions with Lucifer – and his play with light – into a work which explores the inextinguishable flames of youth and eros. He also made a film which is aware of its own context in the history of avant-garde cinema.

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Endnotes:

1. The term “trance-film” is taken from P. Adams Sitney, whose *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) has become the bible of American avant-garde film history. ▲
2. Quoted in Sitney, 86 ▲
3. Anger has correctly pointed out in interviews that Lucifer is indeed the light-bearer of the gods and not Satan, which he calls a “Christian slander.” On this point I am especially indebted to William C. Wees analysis of Anger's work in *Light Moving in Time* (Oxford: University of California Press, 1992) 107-123. ▲
4. Quoted in Sitney, 91 ▲

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