

the early works of Kenneth Anger

Walking through the red ribbon curtains that conceal the entrance to the 2nd floor Kunsthalle at PS1, one feels the charm and guilt of being admitted to an improper place. The walls of the main hall are lined in red vinyl and its intense smell contributes to the mood. The overall impression is of being in one of those refuges where young people hide to indulge in all sorts of fruitless activities.

This set that has been designed to host a survey of the early films by Kenneth Anger, one of the founding figures of American avant-garde cinema, who has always found his inspiration in all things improper. The exhibition, which will run until September 14, presents Anger's first eight movies en masse, completed between 1947 and 1981. "By grouping these movies together, it is easier to visualize the image cosmos that he created," said Susanne Pfeffer, Berlin based curator of KW Institute for Contemporary Art, who sees this exhibit as a way to celebrate filmmaking as an inherently visual art. Pfeffer, who has gained broadly positive responses presenting Anger's work in Bremen, Germany, was invited to organize the PS1 exhibit with Klaus Biesenbach, the chief curator in the department of media at the MoMA.

On the opening day Anger, whose official age fluctuates between 81 and 84, seemed happy to circulate around the Kunsthalle, accompanied at all moments by his young manager. Born in Santa Monica, California, he started making movies in his teens, in a style that owed to Murnau and the early Buñuel in their respective allegiance to image composition and freedom from traditional narrative. Noticed by Cocteau, he moved to Europe, where he lived and worked until the early sixties. A master of anti-narrative pictures, he created impressionistic portraits through the visual representation of rituals, individual and collective, and by charging certain symbolic actions or gestures with meaning. For instance, asking for a light or working on a motorbike. He described the emancipation from story-driven cinema as "breaking the chains of narrative."

None of his movies include speech. "There are beautiful films made with dialogue, yet to me it becomes a hindrance," he said. "I don't name my characters, so you can put your own names on them. Or they don't need names; they are types," said Anger, quoting Eisenstein as one of the early masters to adopt this approach. His characters are the product of a synthesis, rather than framed as individuals, they are paradigmatic types. There is not "a biker" for example, but "The Biker." Rather than flattening them, this conceit makes them powerful and timeless.

A fiercely independent filmmaker, Anger made most of his movies with very low budgets, often working alone. This granted him unique access to his subjects, mostly unpaid volunteers or acquaintances, which he photographed with seductive indiscretion and with an almost tactile use of the camera. "Dealing with real life characters," he said. "It's a kind of enchantment, or seduction. I learned you have to do things quickly. You can't expect them to

come back over and over.” The task of polishing the final product would be left to him: through endless editing he would create version after version of the film he was making. “He worked several months, several years in some cases, on half an hour of film,” said Pfeffer.

He seized the opportunity he created by giving up dialogue to cut out a new role for music in films, letting it be the guiding comment on the images and imposing on them a drastic shift of sense. The finest example of this is arguably *Scorpio Rising* (1964). Martin Scorsese wrote that after watching it for the first time he was “entranced” by the possibilities it had introduced to him. The sequence of pop songs in *Scorpio Rising* influences the meaning of the images, and at the same time also the reverse happens: “It’s something of a cliché to say that Anger invented the rock video, because he did something much more profound than that,” said Tom Gunning, professor of cinema and media studies at the University of Chicago. “He understood the way that pop music could be transformed by images long before it became a major industry.”

A follower of the occultist Alistair Crowley, Anger has always claimed that by making movies he is actually making magic. He realized how he could, as a wizard would, manipulate symbols and images of popular culture. These symbols, liberated of the prevailing narrative associated with them, unveiled a whole new universe of sense that was always there, but hadn’t been spoken. He did this very artfully with the homosexual undertone. “To him that really indicates that there is a logic to the way that colors and sounds and forms and images combine, that has a deep effect on the human psyche,” said Gunning, “which I think is kind of the definition of what magic is.”

As the exhibition got more crowded, Anger kept on walking around, as clusters of young people, unaware of his presence, sat on the floor in front of the screens, their legs crossed, to watch the films. As the photographers approached him about shooting his portrait, the young man in his eighties took on a new expression on his face. An icon of the underground establishment, Anger sported the endearing vanity permitted to whom reached recognition while staying true to his origins. His eyes widened; his cheekbones rose, followed by his jaw, as he looked down into the camera from the side in a mastered three quarters pose. Few can end with such coolness a lesson in history of cinema about themselves.

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