

17TH STORY of Level 1 printed in FULL format.

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The Independent

January 18, 1990, Thursday

SECTION: ARTS PAGE; Page 13

LENGTH: 776 words

HEADLINE: INTERVIEW / Magick lantern; Kevin Jackson talks to the experimental film-maker Kenneth Anger

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BODY:

EDGAR was right: the Prince of Darkness is a gentleman. Were all the lurid legends true, a meeting with Kenneth Anger - maverick film director, gossip-monger supreme and devotee of Aleister Crowley - would be like one of the more melodramatic passages of a novel by Huysmans. Hollywood's own Magus ought to come striding in swathed in dark robes, you feel, hands still reeking with the blood of a she-goat and with a crazed incubus or two dancing attendance. Instead, Anger proves to be an affable, erudite, conservatively dressed fellow who sips herbal tea as he chats about civic pride.

"In the neighbourhood where I live in Los Angeles there's a gang called The Rebels who go around spray-painting everything. It really offends me, so I get up very early in the morning and paint it all out, even though it's led to one or two incidents. I like cities to look as if the people who live in them respect them; I don't like litter and I go along with Prince Charles about modern architecture. I believe in civility."

Unremarkable as they might be at a rector's sherry party, these words seem positively bizarre in the mouth of Anger, whose name has been associated with blood, fire and outrage since the age of 17, when he made his first film, *Fireworks* (1947). This was a violently masochistic gay fantasy which still has the power to shock even the camp followers of the avant-garde; Jean Cocteau loved it. Anger's subsequent films have been no less provocative, especially to the LA Vice Squad, who once seized a print of *Scorpio Rising* (1963).

But if cinephiles know him as a visionary director, rock fans will remember him as the man who consorted with Mick Jagger, Marianne Faithfull and Jimmy Page in their Satanist periods. "Mick did a track for me for Invocation of my Demon Brother on a Moog synthesiser. I think it's the only thing he's ever done for free." And aficionados of salacious gossip and sick humour, moreover, will know Anger as the author of the two best-selling Hollywood Babylon books, which exhume some unsavoury tales from the American film industry in its early years - everything from the bottle which ended the career of Fatty Arbuckle to the lonesome death of Marie Prevost.

Anger's latest visit to London is prompted by *Inside the Pleasure Dome*, an NFT season of his films and those of his kindred spirits. In one respect, Anger has already been represented on the South Bank for more than a year now: MOMI houses a neon violin from Gold Diggers of 1933, a souvenir which Anger picked up at the age of four during a break in Max Reinhardt's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, in which young Kenneth played the changeling.

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Though the total running time of his surviving work is less than three hours, Anger has been by far the most influential of all experimental directors. Scorpio Rising's combination of sardonic pop music soundtrack, bravura editing and bikes-and-leather images has spawned homages in, for example, Martin Scorsese's Mean Streets, and shameless imitations in hundreds of rock videos: "It seems to be much easier for these people to rent my films, look at them and make notes than to give me a ring and offer me a job. If I liked the music, I'd do it. I could certainly use the money."

Official retrospectives can sometimes serve the function of bringing rebels and heretics back into the fold of respectability; but even if Anger's charms these days seem social rather than Magickal, there is still plenty of trouble-making in him. His film-in-progress is Mouse Heaven, a hallucinatory work about Mickey Mouse which is unlikely to tickle the Disney corporation: "I've had a lifetime love affair with Mickey Mouse, but like all connoisseurs I'm only interested in it sic up to about 1940, before they emasculated it from a mischievous little rodent into a goody-two-shoes."

In the near future, too, are a third volume of Hollywood Babylon and his debut feature film of the same name, based on stories from the first volumes and to be produced by Ed Pressman - "but we can't agree about the budget". Above all, Anger continues to be devoted to - well, not the Prince of Darkness, but to someone who has had a Devil of a bad press: "Lucifer Rising is a tone poem to the old idea of Lucifer, being not a Devil but, as the name means, the bringer of light. In the Gnostic sense, Lucifer is the patron saint of the visual arts. Colour, form - all these are the work of Lucifer." And you won't hear many people talking like that at the rectory.

- Continues at the NFT until 28 January (01 928 3232); Kenneth Anger's films will also be shown at the ICA from 5 to 7 February (01 930 3647).