

Journal of Recurring Themes and Symbols in the Films of Kenneth Anger
θουρναλ οφ Ρεχυρρινγ Τημεσ ανδ Σψμβολσ ιν τηε Φιλμσ οφ Κεννετη Ανγερ

In the last week I have watched a number of Kenneth Anger films from the 'Magical Lantern Cycle'- *Scorpio Rising*, *Puce Moment*, *Lucifer Rising* and *Kustom Kar Kommandos*. The document below is a journal of my notes which details a number of persistent themes and issues within the films. Over the course of one week, I wrote about one theme per day that was common to the films.

Monday 27th June : Pop Art
Μονδαυ 27^η Ιουνε : Ποπ Αρτ



At the beginning of the 1960s Pop artists were blending familiar imagery from popular culture into their paintings. This contributed to a consciousness whereby the division between high and low culture became blurred. Pop artists used montage in their paintings to comment on society. There are parallels with the style of Pop artists and Kenneth Anger. Anger's work is a candid representation of the 1960s "Counter-Culture". What typifies *Puce Moment*, *Scorpio Rising* and *Kustom Kar Kommandos* is Anger's cross-cutting editing style combined with Pop music which replaces any need for dialogue. This appropriation of Pop music in art films could also be said to be bridging the gap between high and low art. Much of Anger's visual imagery reflects the content which dominated the Pop artists aesthetic.

The bedroom of the lead character in *Scorpio Rising* is a shrine to Hollywood rebellious movie-stars- James Dean in *A Rebel Without a Cause* and Marlon Brando in *The Wild One*. This worshipping of icons is very apparent in the oeuvre of Andy Warhol with his screen-paintings of Elvis, Marilyn Monroe and Elizabeth Taylor. *Puce Moment* is a three minute portrayal of a Hollywood screen actress circa 1920s. It was originally intended to be titled 'Puce Women' and was to be a longer film telling the story of several actresses. Anger once declared "Puce Women was my love affair with mythological Hollywood. A straight heterosexual love affair....with all the great goddesses of the silent screen". This further illustrates Anger's preoccupation with manufactured idolisations of Hollywood.

Kustom Kar Kommandos was also planned to be longer than the 3 minute film that exists today. The opening scene depicts two teenagers admiring a customised hot-rod. The soft and playful pastel colours in this film typify the Pop aesthetic. These colours also appear at the end of *Lucifer Rising*. The interior of the hot-rod is composed of red leather seating which resembles enlarged lips, the chrome and shiny metal sparkles seductively. A hand holding a pink feather buffer slowly polishes the hot-rod in a rhythmic caressing manner. The accompanying Pop soundtrack is the 'Parris Sisters' sultry version of *Dream Lover*. The almost breathless style of the vocals further enhances the subverted eroticism on screen. This fetishisation of the motor car is also explored by the Pop artist James Rosenquist's in his 1961 montage *I Love You with my Ford*. This painting is composed of three separate images- a Ford Car, a women's face and spaghetti. The ecstatic expression on the lady's face implies she is being sexually pleased which is substantiated by the phallic Ford symbol and the image of the wriggly spaghetti which, in appearance reflects the internal body.

Tuesday 28th of June: Magic /Alchemy/ Transformation and the Occult
Τuesday 28th of June: Μαγικα ανδ Αλχημυ/ Τρανσφορματιον



Lucifer Rising contains the most explicit references to the occult and mysticism. During one scene, the character's are furiously shuffling cards as if they are magicians in the midst of performing a spell. The themes of Alchemy and magic are accentuated by repeated images of Alestair Crowley -the writer, magician and founder of the religion 'Thelema' of which Kenneth Anger subscribes. Perhaps the character dressed in a red wizard gown is another reference to Crowley.

The triangle symbol is a motif Anger uses continually in *Lucifer Rising*- the red triangle is planted on a mirror and one of the characters garments is embroidered in multi-coloured triangles. Towards the end of the film, a triangle appears with sparkles and diamonds shooting out from it which predicates that a supernatural occurrence has taken place. The triangle is heavily rooted in alchemist and occult symbolology. The footage in *Scorpio Rising* of Jesus curing blindness is further expansion of this alchemical/transformation theme. Though a far fetched interpretation, one aside from the obvious one is that the repeated use of the swastika in *Scorpio Rising* could be a reference to the occult. Towards the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries esoteric German occultists appropriated the swastika as their secret signifier.

The theme of transformation can be seen in *Kustom Kar Kommandos* with the customisation of the vehicle. Though we do not see this customisation on screen, we know that this film is an homage to this phenomenon in male youth culture.

Wednesday 29th of June: Music Video, Fashion and Costume
Ωεδνεσδαψ 29^η οφ θυνε: Μυσιχ ζιδεο, Φασηιον ανδ Χοστυμε



It is widely accepted that Kenneth Anger's trademark use of Pop music as dialogue contributed to the development of the music video. Moreover, the influence of Anger's use of homosexual innuendo was to prove influential in music video content. For example the homosexual undertones in David Bowie's *John I'm only Dancing* were regarded so explicit by the BBC that they heavily censored it. Anger's influence can also be seen through the high-level of motor-bike related music videos for example 'Bruce Springsteen's' *Gypsy Biker*, 'Steppenwolf's' *Born to be Wild* and 'Meatloaf's' *Bat out of Hell*. Bonnie Tyler's 1982 video for *Total Eclipse of the Heart* is not dissimilar to scenes in *Lucifer Rising*. Tyler traverses through misty doorways wearing a mystic like gown akin to Marianne Faithfull's character. The actors in Tyler's video appear demonic with their glowing eyes as if possessed.

The costume and fashion in *Scorpio-Rising* were appropriated by Malcolm McLaren and Vivienne Westwood who adapted this style to create the leather clad aesthetic of the 'Sex Pistols'. Anger's use and knowledge of costume throughout is incredible. In *Puce Moment*, puce refers to a much coveted colour throughout the 1920s. Those who were dressed in the colour puce were considered very fashionable and en-trend.



“You walk like an angel talk like an angel, but I got wise....your the devil in disguise”

Religion is treated explicitly in both *Lucifer Rising* and *Scorpio-Rising*. The most obvious connection to religion to point out first is that both the *Lucifer Rising* and *Scorpio Rising* titles imply some sort of resurrection. However, parallels also exist in *Kustom Kar Kommandos* and *Puce Moment* which both deal loosely with the idea of worship. In the former it is with the hot-rod and the latter the lead character is an iconic Hollywood screen-siren.

Kenneth Anger is a follower of the religion Thelema founded by the controversial figure Alestair Crowley whose influence is apparent in an abundance of literature, music and films for example David Bowie's *Quick Sand* contains the following lyric “I'm closer to the Golden Dawn, immersed in Crowley's uniform of imagery”. During one shot in *Lucifer Rising* Jesus Christ appears to be holding a religious relic in front of an Alestair Crowley icon. Many symbols and much of the imagery in *Lucifer Rising* could be interpreted as reference to the fundamental ethos of Thelema. Crowley initiated the Thelema faith in the wake of a religious experience he had in Egypt. The religion bases itself on a scripture known as *The Book of Law* and hold to a Trinity of deities which have been adapted from ancient Egyptian religion. Magic and ritual make up a large part of the practice. The landscape and ancient monuments of Egypt are a recurring motif in *Lucifer Rising*. The Thelema hexagram symbol also flashes onto the screen numerous times.

Initiation is a key activity of Thelema and perhaps the initiation scene in *Scorpio-Rising* when mustard is spread on a biker's genitals is another indicator of this religion. This scene is accompanied by Kris Jensen's song *Torture*. This, along with the juxtaposition of Jesus Christ imagery could allude to the impending torture that Jesus was to suffer with the crucifixion .

The concept of ritual is explored through 'Scorpio' getting dressed up into his biker gear. A mundane everyday activity of putting on clothes is given a ritualistic importance in *Scorpio-Rising* and 'Scorpio' puts on his biker gear in the same proud manner as that of a soldier dressing in uniform in advance of a battle.

The frequent presence of animals in Anger films could be taken as a biblical reference. Animals have symbolic importance in the parables contained within the bible. In *Puce Moment*, the protagonist walks a number of wolfhounds. The previously discussed initiation scene is accompanied by ferocious lion roars and in *Lucifer Rising* there is the juxtaposition of such imagery including lambs, a tiger swimming and an elephant stamping on a python. Finally there is a recurring theme of evil in Anger's films. This theme is especially evident in *Lucifer Rising* with the practice of Devil-worship and in *Scorpio-Rising* with the scenes of Hitler

and the Third Reich. A side issue but one worth mentioning is that the psychedelic experimental soundtrack to *Lucifer Rising* by Bobby Beausoleil was created while Beausoleil was carrying out his life sentence in prison for the horrific killing of Gary Hinman in 1969. He was part of the Charles Manson Family and allegedly carried out this murder on Manson's order.

Friday 1st of July: Adoration, Leaders, Followers and Rebellion

Φριδαψ 1^ο οφ θυλψ: Αδορατιον, Λεαδερεσ, Φολλωερεσ ανδ Ρεβελλιον



In *Kustom Kar Komandos*, Anger demonstrates the lust and adoration associated with the vehicle by giving the car the same treatment that a Porn director might afford their actors. As mentioned above 'Scorpio' worships fellow motor-bike rebels James Dean and Marlon Brando. In *Puce Moment*, the sole character is supposed to be a Hollywood screen Goddess who is the object of adoration. Her success and fame is apparent by her opulent surroundings in the Hollywood Hills.

In *Scorpio Rising* there are repeated suggestions of these themes-the shots of the chosen leader Jesus Christ with his apostles, Scorpio's adoration for biker hero's Brando and Dean and finally the shots of Hitler and scenes from the Third Reich coupled with numerous images of the swastika. The accompanying Pop soundtrack to the film include ' Little Peggy March' *I will Follow Him* which when the lyrics are broken suggest almost blind following. "I will follow him, follow him wherever he may go, There isn't an ocean too deep, a mountain so high it can keep, keep me away.....,"

Though the actual *Lucifer Rising* plot is ambiguous, what is obvious to the viewer is that the characters are all taking part in some form of worship and as the title suggests we are led to believe that they are followers of the devil. Alestair Crowley is portrayed as a God-like character in *Lucifer Rising*. Another prevalent issue in both *Lucifer Rising* and *Scorpio-Rising* is the notion of "The Rebel". James Dean and Marlon Brando are the ultimate iconic biker rebels which 'Scorpio' emulates. 'Scorpio' also urinates into his gold helmet on the alter of a church, rebelling against conventions of religion. The image of Jesus Christ is that of a rebellious man who risked his life to preach the holy word. On a side note the footage of Jesus walking with the apostles accompanied by pop music is in tune with the image appropriated by rappers who consistently appear in their video as the leader of their "crew" or entourage.

The Pop music in *Scorpio Rising* celebrates the rebel such as *The Leader of the Pack* by 'The Shangri-Las and 'The Crystals' lyrics to *He's a Rebel* "When he holds my hand I'm so proud , cause he's not just one of the crowd.... he's the one to try the things they've never done, just because of that they say he's a rebel".

Saturday 2nd of July: Subversion
Σαββατομαρ 2^η οφ Ιουλίου: Συβερσιον



Subverted imagery and symbols are a fundamental component of Anger's films. In all his films that I have listen above, subversion runs throughout. Even the subjects he deals with have subversive connotations. For example Jesus Christ was a subversive character and the Bible is comprised of allegorical symbols. The interpretation of the subversion is not forced onto the audience and he leaves the meaning to the viewer to interpret. For example with the fascist imagery in *Scorpio-Rising* one could reach a number of conclusions. It could connote the extraordinary extent that people will blindly follow a person or a cause be it either Christianity, Hollywood stars or Fascist leaders. Alternatively perhaps Anger is trying to suggest a connection between the Catholic institution and Fascism.

Symbols and subversions also contribute to a homoerotic underscore of Anger's work. This is characterised by close up shots of the protagonists crotch, the hyper-masculinity and dress of the biker gang, male groping and substantial amount of phallic imagery . Indeed, it is widely accepted that James Dean had homosexual relationships and for this reason he is regarded as a Gay Icon.

Sunday 3rd of July : Untimely Death/ Death at one's most Beautiful
Συνδαση 3^{ος} οφ θυλψ : Υντιμελψ Δεατη/ Δεατη ατ ονεεσ μοστ Βεαυτιφυλ



Beauty is celebrated and cherished in Anger films, whether it is the chrome of the hot-rod, the Hollywood beauty or 'Scorpio' who in looks is not dissimilar to Elvis or Marlon Brando. The camera pauses on all these characters to highlight their beauty. In *Lucifer Rising*, though they appear to be in the midst of devil-worship are very beautiful and in the prime of their youth. One could make the assumption that Anger is fixated on the notion of the immortal idol-those who die when their beauty is still intact. All the character's in *Lucifer Rising* are young and beautiful and appear to be walking towards the devil with their arms stretched as if they are going to be taken from their present world. At the end of the film, a pink spaceship like container materialises from the sky which could be about to acquire the worshippers.

The suggestion is that 'Scorpio' pictured above crashed to his death at the end. He appears to fall from his bike, his eyes close and there is a flashing ambulance light accompanied by the sound of a siren which signals his tragic demise. James Dean has become synonymous with the phrase "Live Fast, Die Young". Indeed even Jesus Christ is said to have died at the age of 33. In fact the aforementioned 'the Shangrila's' *Leader of the Pack* tells the story of a young girl's rebellious love who is tragically killed. "As he drove away on that rainy night, I begged him to go slow, whether he heard I'll never know"

