



Filmmaker and author Kenneth Anger

Brilliant, controversial, irascible, scandalous, a visionary. These are just a few of the words, that during the course of his long life and career, were used to describe author and avant-garde filmmaker Kenneth Anger, who died May 11, 2023 at the age of 96. To date, Anger has two works in the Library of Congress National Film Registry. "Scorpio Rising," from 1963, was added in 2022, and "Eaux d'Artifice," (1953) was added to the NFR in 1993. In an essay reflecting Anger's career, film scholar Daniel Eagan goes in-depth about "Eaux d'Artifice," and this unrepentant filmmaker.

"Eaux d'Artifice" (1947) Essay by Daniel Eagan

Born in Santa Monica, California, Kenneth Anger grew up in the heart of an illusory Hollywood, one that shaped his life and career. By his account, he attended dance school with Shirley Temple and was an extra in "A Midsummer Night's Dream" (1935), although he is not listed in Warner Brothers records. He also told interviewers that he made his first film, "Who Has Been Rocking My Dreamboat," in 1941, at the age of nine. Anger's early films have long been unavailable, although he described them in "Film Culture 31." For example, "Prisoner of Mars" (1942) was a "science-fiction rendering of the Minotaur myth." In "The Nest" (1943), "a brother and sister relate to mirrors and each other until a third party breaks the balance."

Anger starred as "The Dreamer" in "Fireworks" (1947), a fifteen-minute exploration of gay rape fantasies that quickly became a favorite of underground film societies. He moved to France after graduating from high school; "Fireworks" got him introductions to Jean Cocteau and Anais Nin, and the opportunity to re-edit Sergei Eisenstein's "Que Viva Mexico" (1932). He started his only 35mm film, "Rabbit Moon" (1950), in the Parisian studio Cocteau has used, but didn't edit the footage until 1971. He also began several projects that he was forced to cancel in the face of censorship and financial problems.



In "Eaux d'Artifice" (1953), Kenneth Anger features the Garden of the Villa D'Este, famed for its ornate fountains, as the film's backdrop.

Anger's next "official" film was "Eaux d'Artifice" or "Water Works." (The title is also a pun on "Feux d'Artifice", or "Fireworks.") Anger received permission to shoot at the Garden of the Villa D'Este, commissioned in 1560 by Cardinal Ippolito II d'Este, and restored in the nineteenth century and again after World War II. He used the garden, famed for its ornate fountains, as the backdrop for what critic P. Adams Sitney called "a single-image film" that culminated in a "union between protagonist and landscape." The protagonist in this case is a Water Witch played by Carmillo Salvatorelli, a circus performer recommended by Italian director Federico Fellini.

For a background score, Anger chose passages from Antonio Vivaldi's "The Four Seasons," music that was not only appropriate to his classical settings and style, but that provided a rhythmic framework for editing. As Oskar Fischinger did with Bach in "Motion Painting No. 1" (1947), Anger used Vivaldi as both a metronome and as a narrative guide. When Vivaldi's passages increased in speed and urgency, for example, Anger could build tension by cutting his imagery in a rapid pattern. He could also edit in a sort of counterpoint, at times anticipating the music, at times behind the score. At the

Furthermore, Anger could time his pans and tilts to match the beat of the score. His cinematography ranges from strictly representational to abstract, from easily deciphered wide shots of the garden to close-ups of water, backlit and shot in slow motion until they resemble gleaming jewels arcing across the screen. He employs double-exposures, montages, and dissolves to add narrative connections to his shots. Close-ups of the faces of statues seem to stare menacingly at the Water Witch as she strides through the garden. (Much of the eerie beauty of the film comes from the fact that it was shot on infrared stock and printed with a cyan filter, mimicking the voluptuous look of nitrate.)

In editing the films, Anger used a range of approaches, from a shot-countershot scheme that could be found in any conventional Hollywood feature to a more ambiguous montage that was based on emotion and atmosphere. How much of an artistic leap it was to connect the stormy passages of "The Four Seasons" to water flowing down garden troughs may depend on how ripe for cliché you find Vivaldi. Anger's title, with its multiple puns, could be a sort of pre-

emptive strike against such strictly literal interpretations. Perhaps Anger's film is about desire and pursuit, a story about men staring at a begowned figure who is unable to avoid their liquid eruptions. When he originally released the film through Cinema 16, a New York film society, he alluded to "a Firbank heroine lost in a baroque labyrinth." (The largely forgotten Ronald Firbank wrote novels and plays in the early twentieth century that writer Susan Sontag assigned to "the canon of camp.")

Anger returned to the United States to settle an inheritance, which he used to finance "Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome" (1954). His most famous film may be "Scorpio Rising" (1964), which used rock' n'roll music and amateur performers to comment on leather-clad motorcyclists and their culture. Later film projects, like "Kustom Kar Kommandos" and "Lucifer Rising," fell prey to bizarre twists. Anger is perhaps best known to the public for the books "Hollywood Babylon" and "Hollywood Babylon II," compendia of scandals, rumors, half-truths, and gossip about Hollywood celebrities.

Daniel Eagan is the author of "America's Film Legacy: The Authoritative Guide to the Landmark Movies in the National Film Registry," from which this essay is reprinted with permission. His work has also appeared in "The Hollywood Reporter," "The Nation," and "Film Journal International," among other publications.

The views expressed in the essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.

To learn more about these films and all of the films on the National Film Registry, visit www.loc.gov/film.