

Document Citation

Title	Experimental cinema -- excerpt
Author(s)	David Curtis
Source	<i>Universe Books</i>
Date	1971
Type	book excerpt
Language	English
Pagination	62-64; 129-130
No. of Pages	5
Subjects	Anger, Kenneth (1927), Santa Monica, California, United States Markopoulos, Gregory J. (1928-1992), Toledo, Ohio, United States
Film Subjects	Eaux d'artifice, Anger, Kenneth, 1953 Fireworks, Anger, Kenneth, 1947 Twice a man, Markopoulos, Gregory J., 1963 Scorpio rising, Anger, Kenneth, 1964 Du sang de la volupté et de la mort (Of blood, pleasure and death), Markopoulos, Gregory J., 1948

best-known work, centres around a game of hopscotch, drawn out and played in reverse, and a woman's awkward attempt to revive a man in a diving suit. The fragmented presentation of the sequences and soundtrack combined with the alternate expansion and squeezing of the images (by use of an anamorphic lens) gives the piece an almost psychotic atmosphere. This formal use of distortion gave the 'subjective shot' a completely new role. Instead of using effects to imitate reality, film-makers distorted reality to equate with a subjective vision.

After working with Peterson in California, Hy Hirsh left for Europe where he worked alternately in Paris and Amsterdam. There he developed in complete isolation a graphic cinema that extended the lyrical photography of Ralph Steiner's films, and which at the same time relates closely to the recent work of O'Neill, Strand, etc., in Los Angeles. *Autumn Spectrum* and *Défense d'Afficher* make rhythmic abstractions of their subjects—the reflections in the canals of Amsterdam and the tattered posters on the billboards of Paris. *Come Closer* converts oscilloscope-created images into neon-like circles that rotate, overlap and fade into each other in front of highly coloured backgrounds. (The effect was increased initially by use of a three-dimensional process.) With his last film, *La Couleur de la Forme*, Hirsh demonstrated his mastery of the optical printer by creating an optical rhyme (as in Richter's *Two Pence Magic*), in which the images reverse colour and motion in a series of almost subliminal overlaps.

Due to his self-imposed exile, Hy Hirsh has never received the recognition due to him; his films are hardly ever shown in New York and almost no articles have been written about him. He suffered (he is dead now) the consequences of being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

THE NEW FILM-POETS

The early films of Kenneth Anger, Curtis Harrington, Gregory Markopoulos and Stan Brakhage provided the first manifestation of a new sensibility that arose during the late forties and early fifties and probably constitutes America's first completely original contribution to the avant-garde film. No film-makers in the past had been prepared to probe as deeply or as specifically into the workings of their own subconscious; 'personal' subjects had been dealt with in the acceptable terms of 'universal experience', or were clothed in the redeeming guise of allegory and symbolic action (*Le Sang d'un Poète*, *Lot in Sodom*, etc.). These film-makers, while not discarding either form, invested their work with an intensely personal vision that demanded a sympathetic emotional response from the audience. Their technique, although no less inventive, appears raw beside earlier avant-garde expressions, the beauty of the films lying in emotional integrity rather than photographic elegance. Jonas Mekas wrote:

In American experimental-poetic films, Stan Brakhage or Kenneth Anger could serve as an example of the kind of modern film-poet who creates, not according to the technical rules of film-making (à la Spottiswoode) but rather according

to the rules of his own subconscious—that is where the real creation begins. And only with the cinema-sense established at that depth can we hope for the art of cinema to emerge.¹

In the case of Anger, Harrington, Markopoulos and Brakhage, the psychodrama served as a vehicle for only a brief initial period, before the emergence of a mature style. This pattern has been followed by many other young film-makers—as though it were necessary to make an emotional commitment to the medium before being allowed to master it.

Kenneth Anger and Curtis Harrington both began making films in earnest during the early forties, Harrington on 8mm, Anger on 16mm. When the Art in Cinema series gave them an opportunity to exhibit their work, Harrington chose to show *Fragment of Seeking* (1946) and Anger his *Fireworks* (1947). Both films deal explicitly with homosexual experience, and in each case the filmmaker himself played the central character. Harrington's film (plate 40) concerns a young man who, tortured by his own narcissism, attempts to respond to a girl who offers herself to him but finds she is no more to him than a mockingly blonde-wigged skeleton. Anger, aged seventeen at the time, plays the 'dreamer' in his film, who 'goes out in the night seeking "a light"', directly confronting the frustrated fantasies of his waking life. The 'light' is a triple symbol, representing the classic pick-up phrase, his initiation, and the match that sets light to the phallic Roman candle of the title. It still rates as one of the most powerful films ever made.

Harrington continued to produce his quieter, though none the less 'authentic' films with *Picnic* (1948), a satire on middle-class emotions, and *On the Edge* (1949; plate 39), in which a man attempts to go out into the world but cannot cut the thread that attaches him to his mother. During the fifties he turned to mythological subjects (as did both Anger and Markopoulos) to make *Dangerous Houses* (1952), an interpretation of Odysseus' encounter with Circe and his descent into Hades, and *Wormwood Star* (1953), 'in which the painter Cameron and her work are presented; achieving an alchemical transmutation'. (He started to direct 'commercial' features in 1961 with *Night Tide*.)

Kenneth Anger's contribution to the American experimental film has been enormous, but his position is a curious one. While the subjects of his films have become almost synonymous with the 'underground' (not necessarily with his approval), his technical approach to film-making is often closer to Hollywood (at Hollywood's most ambitious). This apparent conservatism has certainly contributed to the popularity of his work, at the same time emphasizing the originality of the subjects.

Anger's childhood was spent in Hollywood; he appeared, aged five, in Max Reinhardt's *Midsummer Night's Dream* (1935) and the visual richness of that production deeply affected him. His pre-1947 (teenage) films emphasize the enjoyment of dressing-up and the ritual it involves. *The Nest* (1943)—a story of incest disturbed leading to violence—contains a scene of 'absolutions, the acts of dressing- and making-up, observed as a magic rite'. *Tinsel Tree* (1941-2) is an even more elemental statement. A Christmas tree is (ritually) dressed up in sparkling decorations

¹ 'Experiment in the Fifties', *Film Book 1* 1959.

(perhaps influenced by Reinhardt's wood), then stripped bare and burnt in a burst of hand-tinting.

Fireworks (1947; plate 41), his first work as a 'public' filmmaker, is unique in Anger's *œuvre* in its complete rejection of Hollywood. If any nostalgia exists, it is in the imagery—the broken plaster hand, the burning photographs of the dream—which recalls the poetic artifice of Cocteau in *Le Sang d'un Poète*. Anger corresponded with Cocteau (as did Markopoulos) and worked with him briefly on several abortive projects during the early fifties, but he did not share Cocteau's literary style. Anger required a more potent form. In *Puce Moment* (1949), a fragment of a larger work, and in *La Lune des Lapins* (1950), he returned to Hollywood material, the first being 'the ritual of dressing and going out' of a twenties' movie star; the second, another resurrection of Reinhardt's tinselled wood—this time as a setting for a Pierrot (who causes chaos with his magic lantern!).

With *Eaux d'Artifice* (1953), Anger quietly made a masterpiece—a complete fusion of idea and technique. A woman (a circus dwarf in baroque wig and costume) hurries between the moonlit fountains of the Tivoli Gardens in Rome, seeking who knows what? The film is printed on a cold, uniformly blue stock; the images, often in slow motion—freezing the water yet letting it move (more explicitly)—dissolve one through to another, defying any attempts to determine the point of transition. Grotesque faces (carved water-spirits), shadows, piles of water and the fluttering image of the woman move into the screen in succession, the climax being a purely visual one, so underplayed as to be scarcely visible—the woman spreads her fan and it flickers, hand-tinted, green. Then she 'melts'—becomes a fountain—the water momentarily takes her shape as she disappears. In *The Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome* (1954, re-edited 1966; plate 42), and in his subsequent films, Anger introduces a conscious element of alchemy, which gives the eclectic range of his subjects a new significance. His nostalgia for Hollywood, his almost academic montage (*Scorpio Rising*) and his combination of 'pop' and mythology are given a new potency as the tools of his magic. In *Pleasure Dome* ('an invocation of Horus, the crowned and conquering child, the godhead of the aquarian age'), one is aware of the magic ritual only on a secondary level, subservient to both the multi-layered images and Janacek's amazing music (*The Glagolitic Mass*); some strange purpose seems to order the movements of the participants, but that is all.

In *Scorpio Rising* (1963), Anger's 'high' view of the myth of the American motorcyclist, the ritual is more explicit—the worship of the bike, the dressing of the Angels, the orgy and the ultimate self-destruction. Parallels are drawn with the magic of Christianity (clips from *King of Kings*), Dean, Brando, comic strips, and above all pop-music (the revelation of the homo-erotic substructure of '*Fools Rush in . . .*', '*Blue Velvet . . .*', '*Wind me up . . .*', etc., must surely make them immortal). Curiously, the film taken overall is almost puritanically moral—the crudest message being the double one 'speed' kills' (as in *Heatwave* leading to *Wipeout*). The magic exists only on an incidental level—each act is celebrated (filmed with the utmost sympathy)—so why the moral tone of the final destruction?

In *KKK (Kustom Kar Kommandos)* (1964; plate 43), Anger

gives his purest observation of ritual taken to the point of fetishism—the creative act (the building of the dream buggy) is over—the builder polishes it with a vast, useless powder-puff. *Invocation of My Demon Brother* (1969), a rescued and reworked section of the stolen *Lucifer Rising* (1966–7), is Anger's most recent and most consistently inventive work. Its style is a departure from the classic 'Russian' editing of *Scorpio* and would seem to indicate the beginning of a more informal, but no less energetic and well structured approach to his subject. The power of this movie is conveyed by movement within the image: by the rapid flickering of the eyeballs of the albino male and by the figure of Anger himself, seen always in speeded-up long-shots and jagged zooms—spinning and casting all his energy into the void that surrounds him. The re-made *Lucifer Rising* which he announced in 1970 threatens to be a powerful movie.

— The camera assistant on Harrington's *Fragment of Seeking* was Gregory J. Markopoulos, a student of Von Sternberg's at the University of Southern California, now one of the most respected film-makers of the New American Cinema.

Markopoulos' highly personal style is the product of a consistent evolution that began with the trilogy *Du Sang de la Volupté et de la Mort* (1948). Then, as now, he was concerned with the re-activation of the narrative film form, but nothing could be more foreign to his work than the accepted language of close-, mid-, long-shots, 'follow-the-action' camera movements and nondescript editing that typify the commercial film story. In the three parts of the trilogy (*Psyche*, *Lysis* and *Charmides*) he establishes at once his rejection of 'normal' continuity, replacing it with a fragmented approach in which the sum of the images is almost more important than their sequence. In *Lysis* (the description is Sitney's):

An ugly woman pops from one tree to another by means of stop motion photography; a young man, lying in bed, rubs his feet along decoration streams; Markopoulos wanders through a graveyard; a nude man, hanging by his wrists, is stabbed in the back; a negress plays with a swan. The spectator soon becomes lost in a maze of strange images. Like the protagonist, we are hypnotized by what we see . . .

The theme of the trilogy is homosexual love (male and female); he tempers it, as often in his work, with free but appropriate interpretations of classical literature and mythology.

As an extension of the subject fragmentation, Markopoulos has developed an editing technique entirely his own, using short bursts (groups) of images—single frames taken from different scenes or parts of a scene, both repeating and anticipating events. These 'thought images', which arrived in their mature form in *Twice a Man* (1963), serve both as a mental-emotional counterpoint to the longer 'base' shots (paraphrasing the multiplicity of consciousness of the central character, or simply keeping the viewer aware of the physical complexity of the event) and as an important kinetic contribution, allowing the 'base' shots to become more formal and static in contrast.

In *Psyche*, this development is hinted at in the rapid recapitulation of the major scenes in the final minutes. In *Lysis*, the shots Sitney describes are all static (no camera movement) and equal

in length—the editing being performed entirely in-camera. The film is projected as shot. Markopoulos developed this discipline in later works, in *Ming Green* (1966), *Through a Lens Brightly: Mark Turbyfill* (1966) and in the portraits, *Galaxie* (1966) and *Political Portraits* (1969), taking it to unprecedented heights. The rewind mechanism and frame counter of the Bolex camera, which he uses almost exclusively, allow him to make superimpositions, frame clusters and complete rearrangements of the time-scale in sequences while photographing them, adding a new dimension to the process. With the growth of the 'underground' movement, the use of in-camera techniques has become quite widespread, but Markopoulos' formal application has remained unique. No other film-maker save Brakhage can make as complete statements from so little material. In *Ming Green* Markopoulos creates, through a series of overlapping and interrupted images, a still-life of a flat in New York (his own objects, still photographs, colours, etc., linked and contrasted by 'thought images'). In *Himself as Herself* (1966) the repressed (male/female) duality of the central character is suggested in a 'human still-life' lasting nearly an hour. In a later work, *Gammelion* (1967), a 'fable' in the form of an exploration of Il Castello Roccasinibalda, the entire film is created in short image clusters introduced and ended by black-to-white fades.

Markopoulos' use of sound is no less sophisticated. Again, *Twice a Man* revealed the mature style. The original script included brief exchanges of dialogue that related, but were not synchronized, to the action; in a second preparation they were reduced to key words and phrases, to be spoken 'without translation into meaning', that is 'spoken as they would be in daily life', and in this version he recorded it. For the first time ever, a film-maker makes the assumption that if images can be chopped up and given significance in a non-ordinary sequence (the basic premise of the edited film), then so perhaps can words. The device is extraordinarily successful, and Markopoulos repeats it in his interpretation of Aeschylus' play *Prometheus Bound—The Illiac Passion* (1964–6). In *Twice a Man* the word clusters are accompanied by blocks of sound, which act as their 'basic image'. Thus the film begins with a four-minute block of rain pattering, introduced by a clap of thunder, while the screen remains in darkness. Markopoulos established at once the importance of sound, which works hereafter in counterpoint to the other elements.

Since *Gammelion*, Markopoulos has been working in Europe and has largely withdrawn from the American scene. His European works have included two operas for Bavarian television, the longer one *Alter Action* being edited directly on Ampex videotape equipment, using his distinctive technique, and a feature *Mysteries* (1968) shot in Munich.

Like Anger and Markopoulos, Stan Brakhage also established a reputation as a film-artist even before the co-operative movement began. Of the three, Brakhage's contribution has been by far the most radical—the subject matter and techniques of his works are completely foreign to the (once) accepted concepts of the serious film. His films have no story, no symbolism, no acting, no posed photographic beauty; the drama is the drama of the skies, light and shadow, movement, trees, windows, people, corners, animals, single blades of grass—in fact, the drama of vision, a vision that implies a belief that the first priority is to see