Erotic Power: "Scorpio Rising" and the Spectacle of Impurity

Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising* (1963), born out of the same volatile New York juncture that J. Hoberman chronicles in *Everything is Now*, reassembles America's obsessions with sanitization, commercialization, censorship, and the commodification of media. The blurring of art and obscenity reached a peak in the 1960s, in tandem with the rise of crucial underground filmmakers and was emblematic of Jonas Mekas' new "Baudelairean Cinema," a "world of flowers of evil, of illuminations, of torn and tortured flesh…at once beautiful and terrible, good and evil, delicate and dirty" (Mekas, qtd. in Hoberman 113).

In this essay, I argue that through *Scorpio Rising*'s delirious montage of chrome, leather, and rock 'n' roll, Kenneth Anger transforms postwar iconography into a shrine of contradiction, revealing the inseparability of to the erotic and the authoritarian J. Hoberman groups Anger with Jack Smith, Barbara Rubin, and Shirley Clarke under the aegis of a new "Baudelairean Cinema," one where, as Jonas Mekas wrote, "the camera shall know no shame" (qtd. in Hoberman 117). Yet *Scorpio Rising* operates less like poetry than collage. As Hoberman notes, "the Baudelaireans films [*Flaming Creatures, Christmas on Earth*] were related to Happenings. *Scorpio Rising* was closer to Assemblage" (122). Anger's film, then, is a cinema of fragmentation. Images of violence, fetish, pop music, and fascist ritual coalesce into revelation. Rather than romanticizing the corruption in order to expose it, Anger edits it. In doing so, he exposes the circuitry that links pleasure to discipline, rebellion to commodity, and the sacred to the profane.

Across *Everything is Now*, J. Hoberman traces an America oscillating between technological optimism and moral paranoia. Chapters 4 through 6 follow a nation caught

between the explosion of consumerism and modernity and the beginnings of a postwar malaise. Hoberman notes that "Pop Art ascends" as artists and filmmakers "embraced the image, and the nation celebrated itself as a trademark" (105). His observations imply that television and advertising had turned experiences and the human condition into a commodifiable image, and suburban expansion and Cold War fears had, to some degree, aestheticized everyday life toward control and order. Against this backdrop, *Scorpio Rising* then can be reframed not as an anomaly but as direct consequence and product.

The underground film scene, in New York especially, responded to mainstream America's packed-and-sold identity by unraveling those very codes. Hoberman narrativizes the successive releases of improvisational films such as *The Connection* and *Pull My Daisy* and the visual assaults that were *Flaming Creatures* and *Christmas on Earth* as works that abandoned sanctimony in favor of sensual necessity. As Mekas writes in *On Obscenity*, these filmmakers had "become more frank" (Mekas 133). This rebellion though, as Hoberman indicates by Chapter 6, had itself become marketable in that rock 'n' roll had "become a Thing" (159). The spectacle of that pursuant underground movement had started showing the signs toward becoming mainstream, circulating through the rungs of various media. Hoberman observes that within the rise of The Velvet Underground, Bob Dylan going electric, and Andy Warhol's critique of consumerism, there were elements of the "Happenings [transforming] into multimedia spectaculars" (159). Perhaps most notably, Dylan's meteoric rise to the top of the charts, especially off the back of an LP with a song ironically called "Outlaw Blues," exemplifies this gradual transformation (166-80). The spectacle of transgression and rebellion had entered mass consciousness, and therein became 'acceptable'. It is within this historical framework that Anger assembles his fragments. Pop music, bikers, James Dean, christianity, Nazis, homosexual

intercourse, piss, profanity—an entire archive of American desire and denial, spliced together until devotion and ritual becomes indistinguishable from moral decay. Anger pulls disparate elements from the cultural gutter and high canon alike and forces them to coexist in one frame. In this way, *Scorpio Rising* stands out as less of a product of censorship or morality battles than as a response to a deeper ideological conundrum: how can artists truly be transgressive within a culture that eroticizes both purity and control?

Anger's montage is built by rearranging these pre-existing parts of an archetypal America. This method places *Scorpio Rising* closer to Joseph Cornell's found footage films, where "all chronology collapsed into elliptical mismatched reaction shots and jump-cuts clusters" (Hoberman 123), rather than, say, Jack Smith's lyrical surreal visualizations. This form of assemblage explicitly declines hierarchical clarity because each fragment carries a unique yet equivalent charge. The film's meaning, then, lies in how these charged images clash with each other. Anger stages Elvis and swastikas, skulls and college diplomas, crosses and motorcycles in the same psychic schema. He uses decay, usually reconfigured by the Underground into beauty (see Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures'* decomposing film stock, overexposure, and word-down setting), as grammar. Instead of finding beauty in the obscene, Anger deliberately keeps it indecent and in doing so, renders a confrontation. The result is what Vincent Brook, in his article for *Journal of Film and Video*, calls "Anger's first full realization of postmodern camp" where "gay/straight, fanciful/horrific, new/recycled, sacred/profane—all binary oppositions [are] camped into oblivion" (Brook 12). Here, Brook christens Anger's structural cinema. The film's delirium and "chronotopal dissolution" is engineered to create a tone of fascination and disgust all mixed together. This rhythm, what Brook calls the "telematic spirit [of] switching channels" of the film, mimics the logic of the underground rebellion itself (11).

The opening sequence transforms mechanical care into erotic devotion. Hands polishing metal, screwing in lug nuts, engines gleaming under blue light, the occasional insert shots of skeletons, leather jackets and belts, and shirtless male bodies—all these gestures are ritualistic, performed to almost the exact pulse of early-sixties pop music. This carries on through the rest of the film. Bobby Vinton's "Blue Velvet" and Ray Charles' "Hit The Road Jack," among others, synchronize image to beat. Where Jack Smith "had nostalgically employed dated pop music;" Hoberman writes, "Anger broke new ground by incorporating the current Top 40 rock 'n' roll in ironic counter-point to his visceral images" (122). The sounds of the current mainstream direct the fascist bikers' movements as they rehearse their revolt. Pleasure here is inextricably linked to supremacist discipline. This produces an allure of what Mekas describes as "poisonously sensuous" (qtd. in Hoberman 122).

Furthermore, Anger stages the biker not as an outlaw but as an icon. He is a figure assembled from the byproducts of consumerism. The leather jackets, the chrome, the crucifixes and swastikas are all symbols that carry both moral charge and market value. When Anger cuts between a Nazi donning his biker uniform to footage of Marlon Brando, of a Temple menorah, or of Christ leading his apostles and followers, the blasphemy becomes apparent not in direct comparison, but in how these images carry similar weight in popular consciousness. Anger effectively showcases how the spectacle of power, whether in religion, nationalism and supremacy, or pop celebrity, ultimately depends on the similar principles of conformity or obedience. Bodies are idealized, uniformed, and disciplined, just as public consciousness is hypnotized into popular media practices and patriotic imagery. Here, "the pull of fascist strength, muscle and steel and speed" (Mekas qtd. in Hoberman 122) mirrors that same pull of consumerist culture and pop culture's weaponization toward a common, state-sponsored cause.

America answers this pull by bleaching art clean and turning provocation into product. Any art resistant to this order gets obscured from view.

By the mid-1960s, censorship had become a staple of the underground. Hoberman's *New York Unfair* chapter recounts raids of screenings of *Flaming Creatures* and the public trials of Mekas and other figures (131-35). However, he also seems to be comparing this moral crackdown to Robert Moses' World Fair Corporation's hopes for the Fair to have "a decidedly avant-garde look" (*New York Times*, qtd. in Hoberman 133). So, evidently, pop culture's own mass proliferation coincided with suppression of the actual "avant-garde." The same socio-political structure that "confiscated the print of *Scorpio Rising* for being 'a purely homosexual thing'" also got Anger sued by the American Nazi Party for "desecration of the swatsika" (Hoberman 132n4). This contradictory ideal that pursued avant-garde style without avant-garde content is precisely the machinery *Scorpio Rising* aims to reveal. The state and the market both depend on spectacle to both discipline and sell. Anger fuses those functions, showing how repression and consumption run on the same erotic current. The rebellion becomes something for the media machine to profit from rather than profess. Desire is equated to institutional hypnotization.

Scorpio Rising's montage replicates the logic of 1960s media culture. As Brook contends, Anger's postmodern camp transforms subversion itself into aesthetic currency, turning rebellion into an object of fascination within "the logic of late capitalism" (Brook 9-12). Rebellion is fetishized, and so Anger satirizes mass culture's ability to turn defiance into commodity. The biker's aesthetic mirrors the advertising of freedom as a product; red white and blue flags, bald eagles, rock music, and movie stars are all reconfigured to make the equivalence visible. *Scorpio Rising* does not outwardly or explicitly say anything about these mechanisms, rather it stages

them in plain sight in order for the audience to watch their implosion. The fatal motorcycle crash at the end of the film proves as much. This further illustrates the cogency of Hoberman's conception of "Assemblage" as naming Kenneth Anger's method of placing fragments of erotic or hegemonic structures up against each other as a means toward collapse. Pop, religion, fascism, and art all constitute the mostly hidden interconnection that all of these structures constitute.

By turning the American image-making "business," equated by Daniel Boorstin to "the making of illusions" (qtd. in Hoberman 105), *Scorpio Rising* converts apparent spectacle—whether positive or negative—into critique without any explicit didacticism. In the film's chrome plating, polished by fascist, image-obsessed, devout, homoerotic hands, Kenneth Anger strives to reflect the same impulses in American culture during the 1960s.

Works Cited

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