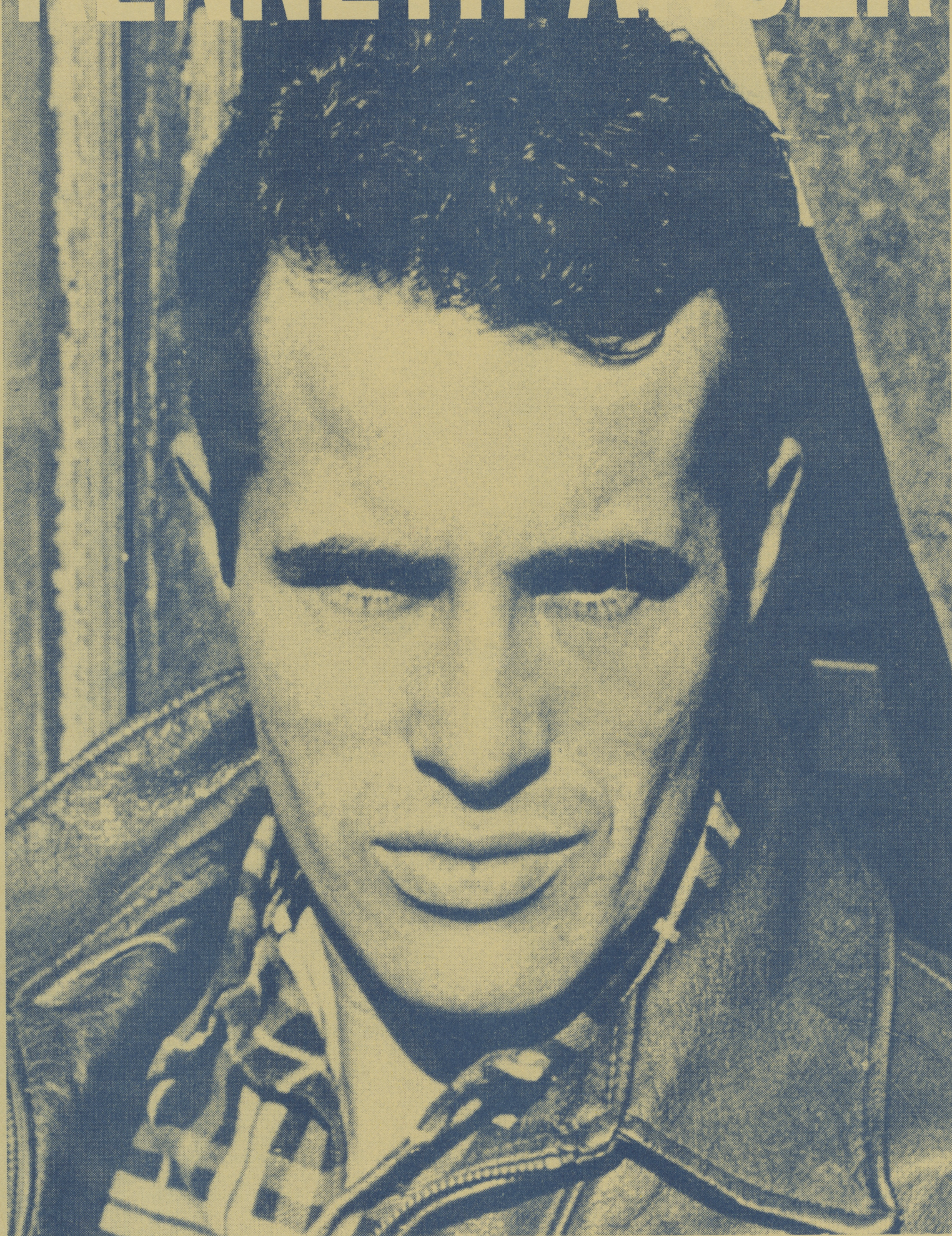


KENNETH ANGER



Modesty and The Art of Film

Kenneth Anger, 1951

"Capturing the immediate moment" is unquestionably the principal condition of artistic creation. The poet who can seize the first spark of his inspiration at the very second it strikes and preserve it on the back of an envelope with the stub of a pencil; the native who because he is happily in love takes a bit of clay from the river bank and a few minutes later leaves an insouciant divinity to dry in the sun... how we envy them, those of us who work with film.

The problem, for every artist, is to hold this reflection of the divine fire of inspiration in the direction and the essence of his work, since he well knows how this transient fire, this flash of light which appears out of the night and has to be given expression - and yet which sometimes has the incandescent force of a newly born volcano - is a fragile thing: a witch's light, St. Elmo's fire.

What Eisenstein called "the first vision."

What a strange paradox, then, is the film medium, that magnificent and terrible instrument born out of our time to tempt and torture our creative imagination. Without in any way lessening our enthusiasm for it as an art form, I don't think we - the children of this era - are wrong to call it an imperfect medium... imperfect and terrifying.

Let us look quite honestly for a moment at some of these imperfections, at once trivial and monumental, while never forgetting the specificity of an art in which the smallest speck of dust can quickly assume the menacing proportions of the Rock of Gibraltar.

Every artistic discipline needs its tools in the finest condition. Taken separately, those of the cinema have a capricious fragility: they have to be adjusted and handled with extreme care; they are not at all suited to untidy minds. Considerable scientific knowledge is recommended before going near these machines... which are also depressingly heavy, large and inflexible and need great strength to handle. They are all so interconnected that the slightest mistake in the procedure from the movement of the camera which unwinds the virgin film stock to the setting of the projectionist's arc lamp - can ruin the whole enterprise.

To master the complications which these machines present, the filmmaker inevitably has to accept the collaboration of assistants, advisers, technicians... something that is more difficult to handle than the machines themselves: individual personalities. The actual material - film - has to be handled with care, because it can quickly be destroyed or irreparably damaged by a change in temperature, a chemical defect, or simply by oil, dirt or dust. Finally: this means of expression is the costliest ever. The artist cannot avoid taking into account that anti-poetic object - finance and that incomprehensible being the financier, who is forever invariably and unforgivably asking the same question: why?

Of course, we force ourselves to overcome these imperfections and to accept them as the challenge thrown down by this age of technology, since above all else we love cinema. These difficulties can in no way lessen the attraction of this promise of immortality, this certainty that there finally exists a mirror held up to the fleeting face of nature, a means of holding on to "the inexhaustible flow of visions of beauty" which endlessly die and are reborn and which make of the contemplation of beauty a feeling imbued by the sadness of its disappearance, a way of holding on to the moment, a weapon with which to challenge the implacable unfolding of time - there is the miracle, the true miracle of film.

Breaking through the barrier of these mechanical shortcomings can only be achieved by a conscious return to simplicity, to the direct relationship between the camera and the artist.

The widespread idea that films necessarily involve the complex farce of the commercial cinema has its antithesis in a field of Japanese rice, where Okamoto wades in with a 16mm camera in his hand and achieves a totally different creative result. This Japanese film poet cut himself off from the script department, the studio, projectors,

film crews and even the camera tripod, and went off by himself into the countryside in pursuit of his celluloid poems. His wonderful visual "silent songs" - intimate and totally free - elicit my unbounded admiration. There is even an additional poetry in these slightly flickering images that are freed from all contingencies. Heir to a culture traditionally enamored of the small and the refined, this poet does not scorn the 16mm camera, considering its lightness and its small size to be every bit to his advantage. He started out with an 8mm camera, and had it existed he would have used a 4mm camera. The dream of a personal, free, pure cinema can be fulfilled as long as you are modest.

Using the simplest of means of an art with lyrical associations is the very basis of the Japanese aesthetic and my own most precious memory of that culture. I shall never forget how the lesson was taught me, when I was a child, by my Japanese drawing teacher.

I had done a sketch of a seascape, a holiday memory, on which I'd worked laboriously and I took it to my master for criticism. He looked calmly at my grimy "Western" page, on which in my enthusiasm I'd tried to put everything I had seen, and then with a slight smile he took a sheet of rice paper, dipped his brush in the ink, and in a flash there before me was the essence of the scene: three brush strokes, the outline of Mount Fuji, the island and its pine trees, the sweep of the bay.

This Japanese love for economy of expression is found in tanka, poems in five lines, and in haiku, which have a mere three lines.

Mastery of these forms of expression is regarded as the highest literary aspiration. The story is often told of the pupil who had composed the following haiku:

Clipping the wings
Of a flying dragon
Is pepper dust.

To which his master replied:

Pepper dust
Give it wings
It's a flying dragon.

A magical evocation born out of the rigors of choice. In their extreme limitation some forms have the suggestive force of an echo resonating endlessly in the imagination. Witness this brilliant example by the classical master Bashu:

What a piercing cold I feel.
The comb of my deceased wife on the floor of the room
Under my heel.

Western poets could profit from such an exercise of discipline, just as we filmmakers might bear in mind the lesson of Okamoto's films, which evoke in two or three images of high lyricism the poignant drama of an orphan, an aquatic flower, devotion to a doll or to a "perfect friendship."

Let's give our Western poets the opportunity to reflect on the possibilities offered by three lines, by three brush strokes, and - or our film poets - by three images. The result may well be surprising.

In contrast to this art of lyrical evocation, the Western tradition - from Michelangelo to Griffith via Beethoven - most often aspires to the grandiose, the epic, to the "big." Though of the works of these artists it is not the "smaller scale", more poetic, more personal ones that we cherish most: we don't prefer Michelangelo's sonnets to the Sistine Chapel, Beethoven's quartets to his symphonies, *Broken Blossoms* to *Intolerance*.

We admire the epic, but we are moved by the lyrical. This is even more evidently the case with comedy. What better example than the crystallization of the meaning of improvisation in Keaton or Chaplin - a meaning which, in the field of cinema, already belongs to a "lost art." It is the improvised moments that remain the most precious.

In the art of film, the divine spark of intuition very quickly arouses the desire for total control. The studied composition of the epic leads us to the "frozen realms" of Eisenstein and late-period Dreyer, Sternberg and Bresson. We admire the formal beauty of these works but their coldness fails to move us. The spectator must "appreciate" the quality of these works before "feeling" them, competently analyze the ingenuity of the camera movements and the merits of the lighting before being involved in the action. The veil of judgment is drawn between the spectator and the drama.

Since it is now an imperative of the film industry that a film must be carefully prepared, designed and rehearsed in advance to avoid financial disaster, it is not surprising that the "greats" of cinema have tried to overcome these complications through a rigid intellectual control. But these proceedings increasingly take the form of rites, and in sacrificing freedom and spontaneity in this way the "icy masters" have at the same time stifled audience "response": Their works are increasingly becoming "ends in themselves," exercises in highly refined style, but they lack the irreplaceable qualities of improvisation.

Looking at the work of these film intellectuals, we find ourselves watching something where concern for perfection of detail and nuance has led to the filmmaker betraying the motivations and the object of the drama. The dynamic elements of the drama of the dramatic structure have been ousted, the flow of emotions dissipated, and with every gesture and every shadow becoming more perfect the rhythm gets progressively slower until the film is no more than a carefully studied series of vignettes. The initial value as drama, the power of catharsis, is lost.

Note also the growing tendency in today's commercial films to break the action up into "frames" or flashbacks, often accompanied by the inopportune presence of a commentary whose superimposition on the visual action constantly means us having to switch from the realm of the immediate to that of nostalgia for the past. To put it another way, the filmmaker is saying "This happened" or "This happened to me" rather than the vital "This is happening" or "I am."

This widespread neutralizing of the essential point of cinema - its power to simulate real experience - enshrines its more off-putting tendency. So we are now in the cul-de-sac of stylization. From the mouths of the half-dead people who pronounce the oracles of the contemporary screen should come a freedom charter: the restoration of the persuasive poetics of the lyrical image. A freedom that is only possible through the artist's intimate view through the lens of his camera, in a word through "personal cinema."

It was precisely this "cinematic" potential for expressing spontaneity that attracted me as a form of personal art. I saw its disruptive strength: a way of bringing about a change. This means of expression can transcend the aesthetic to become experience. My ideal was a "living" cinema that explored the dynamism of the visual communication of beauty, fear and joy. I wanted my personal cinema to transmute the dance of my interior being into a poetry of moving images that would create a new climate of spiritual revelation where the spectator, forgetting that he or she was looking at a work of art, could only become one with the drama. I knew that an art like this needed only the simplest of means: Okamoto and the lesson of Japanese aesthetics had shown me the way.

With a hand-held 16mm camera I shot my first series of short haiku. This was my apprenticeship in the marvels that surround us, waiting to be discovered, awake to knowledge and life and whose magical essence is revealed by selection. At 17, I composed my first long poem, a 15 minute suite of images, my black tanka: *Fireworks*.

I had seen this drama entirely on the screen of my dreams. This vision was uniquely amenable to the instrument that awaited it. With three lights, a black cloth as decor, the greatest economy of means and enormous inner concentration, *Fireworks* was made in three days.

An example of the direct transfer of a spontaneous inspiration, this film reveals the possibilities of automatic writing on the screen, of a new language that reveals thought; it allows the triumph of the dream.

The wholly intellectual belief of the "icy masters" of cinema in the supremacy of technique recalls, on the literary level, the analytical essays of a Poe or the methods of a Valery, who said: "I only write to order. Poetry is an assignment."

At the opposite pole to these creative systems there is the divine inspiration of a Rimbaud or a Lautreamont, prophets of thought. The cinema has explored the northern regions of impersonal stylization; it should now discover the southern regions of personal lyricism; it should have its prophets.

These prophets will restore faith in a pure cinema-of sensual revelation. They will re-establish the primacy of the image. They will teach us the principles of their faith: that we participate before evaluating. We will give back to the dream its first state of veneration. We will recall primitive mysteries. The future of film is in the hands of the poet and his camera. Hidden away are the followers of a faith in "pure cinema", even in this unlikely age. They make their modest "fireworks" in secret, showing them from time to time, they pass unnoticed in the glare of the "silver rain of the commercial cinema. Maybe one of these sparks will liberate the cinema....

Angels exist. Nature provides "the inexhaustible flow of visions of beauty. It is for the poet, with his personal vision, to "capture" them.

Up to now, poetry has followed a wrong course: rising to the heavens or crawling along the ground, it has ignored the principles of its existence and, not without reason, has constantly been rebuffed by decent people. It has not been modest... the finest quality that ought to exist in an imperfect being.

— Lautreamont, *Les Chants de Maldoror*

Statement

Kenneth Anger, 1969

I have always considered the movies evil; the day that cinema was invented was a black day for mankind. Centuries before photography there were talismans, which actually anticipated photographs, since the dyes they used on the cheap vellum produced patterns when they faded in light. A talisman was a sticky fly-paper trying to trap a spirit—cunningly you printed it on a "photograph" of the demon you wanted to capture in it. Photography is a blatant attempt to steal the soul. The astral body is always just latent in a person, and certain cunning and gifted photographers can take an image of the astral body. The whole thing is having an image of someone to control them. If you're out of your mind with love, it becomes understandable. Any crime is justified in the name of Love. In fact, it shouldn't have to be a "crime": Anything is justifiable in the name of Love. My films are primarily concerned with sexuality in people. My reason for filming has nothing to do with "cinema" at all; it's a transparent excuse for capturing people, the equivalent of saying "Come up & see my etchings" ... it's wearing a little thin now ... So I consider myself as working Evil in an evil medium.



17/06/2023
15:00

The Royal Academy of Fine Arts
(School of Sculpture)
Kongens Nytorv 1
1050 København K

Terrassen presents Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome (1956) and The Man We Want To Hang (2002) by the recently deceased Kenneth Anger this Saturday at 3 pm in The Sculptor's Garden of The Royal Academy of Fine Art on the occasion of JASON Ultimo, "a one day festival marking the end to the JASON exhibition program and celebrating great independent exhibition making and artist run initiatives." The two screenings will be accompanied with a reading by Terrassen of Anger's text "Statement" from 1969.

Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome – 1954, 38 min., color. 16mm

Based on one of Aleister Crowley's rituals, this bacchanalian masquerade features lush, dreamy superimposition and possesses the magic of both silent movie expressionism, opera and old Hollywood musicals. The cast includes an interesting line-up of cult celebrities, among them Sampson DeBrier, Anaïs Nin, Renate Druks and Curtis Harrington.

The Man We Want To Hang – 2002, 12 min., color. 16mm

An evocative remembrance of Aleister Crowley (1875-1947), the legendary occultist, as told entirely through his paintings. With the classical music of Anatol Liadov providing mood-enhancing accompaniment, Anger's lens glides over the mystic-pagan images and the viewer is left to discern their meanings without aid of narration or text. Functioning both a languid contemplation and a suitably sinister tribute, this was Anger's last film on 16mm.

All souls eternally exist,
Each individual, ultimate,
Perfect - each makes itself a mist
Of mind and flesh to celebrate
With some twin mask their tender tryst
Insatiate.

'Some drunkards, doting on the dream,
Despair that it should die, mistake
Themselves for their own shadow-scheme.
One star can summon them to wake
To self; star-souls serene that gleam
On life's calm lake.

That shall end never that began.
All things endure because they are.
Do what thou wilt, for every man
And every woman is a star.
Pan is not dead; he liveth, Pan!
Break down the bar!

To man I come, the number of
A man my number, Lion of Light:
I am The Beast whose Law is Love.
Love under will, his royal right –
Behold within, and not above,
One star in sight!

– Aleister Crowley,
One Star in Sight.

Terrassen is a roving cinema in Copenhagen. All screenings are free and open to everyone. For information on past and future screenings visit terrassen.bio.



STATENS KUNSTFOND

DET DANSKE FILMINSTITUT