

ON THE FILMS OF RICHARD KERN

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"Richard Kern" from Dictionary of the Avant-Gardes (excerpt)

RICHARD KERN (Dec. 20, 1954). The nurse who takes care of Jimmy Stewart in Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* has a line that goes to the heart of the film viewing experience: "We've become a race of Peeping Toms." Hitchcock's movie about a voyeur who stares out the window at his neighbors has been taken as an allegory of spectatorship itself. The desire to look runs throughout Hitchcock's work and is literalized in *Psycho* when Norman peeps through a hole in the wall at Marion Crane undressing for the shower. We look with Mr. Bates and we take the bait and become implicated in his voyeurism. In the same year as *Psycho*-- 1960 --Michael Powell released the infamous *Peeping Tom*, a film about a filmmaker who literally kills with his camera as he records the action. This fascination with the dark side of looking-- with the dynamics and aesthetics of voyeurism-- is Richard Kern's theme and it runs throughout his films and photography. In many ways, Kern's work is a culmination of self-referential approaches to depicting the artist's relationship to his "subject." And his subject is looking.

The above invocation of mainstream films is important for a discussion of Kern's early work because in many ways his movies are responses to popular film and commercial culture as a whole. Kern has made this relationship clear: "I take what interests me in the movies and put it in a shorter format so I don't get bored. What interests the American public are sex and violence and the seamy side of life." In his effort not to be bored, Kern moved to the Lower East Side and began a series of Super-8 films that eventually became associated with the Cinema of Transgression (*). His first Super-8, *Goodbye 42nd Street* (1983), is indicative of his approach to movie making: the camera moves down the fabled street of vice and takes in store signs and marquees of porno and exploitation movies. Spliced into this movement down the street are scenes of strippers in booths, a man putting a cigarette out on his face (Kern himself-- the Auteur as Ashtray), various killings (a woman turns Buñuel [*] on his head by stabbing her male lover in the eye) and suicides.

Kern's early career was spent making his films-- movies like *Zombie Hunger* (1984) which depicted a group of people shooting up and then vomiting-- and screening them accompanied by outrageous performance pieces that created a Grand Guignol (*) for the

Lower East Side. In the tradition of Andy Warhol (*) and John Waters, Kern employs actors from his social world and they reappear throughout his films; some of these denizens of the Kern Super-8 include Lydia Lunch, Clint Ruin (aka Jim Thirlwell), David Wojnarowicz, Lung Lee, Karen Finley (*) and the filmmaker who is credited as the founder and first promoter of the Cinema of Transgression (*), Nick Zedd. What this evolving cast depicted in films such as *The Right Side of My Brain* (1984), *The Manhattan Love Suicides* (1984), *You Killed Me First* (1985), and the glorious dark ride of *Submit to Me* (1985) was nothing short of an assault upon the conventions of filmmaking and spectatorship. *Submit to Me* consists of a series of scenes depicting bondage, violence, sex, and suicide, many of which were suggested to Kern by the actors themselves.

As the underground reflection of Reagan's America, Kern's films embraced the subculture of the Lower East Side and the avant-garde impulse of those on the fringe of the established art world. However, a split occurred in Kern's career around 1987 when he decided to quit the Lower East Side to remove himself from its drug culture. This split is depicted in *The Evil Cameraman* ('87-'90), an allegory of Kern's evolution as a visual artist. The first part of the film is made up of two segments depicting Kern "arranging a model" in provocative S&M scenarios; the imagery and music is dark and the threat of violence is palpable. Then the title "2 Years Later" appears and we are given two very different segments of a different Kern-- back from his hiatus-- who works with two "models" who do not play into his "control" as photographer. The film ends with a rejected Kern looking into the camera. This new relationship to the women in his films-- playful, puzzling, rejecting the anticipatory action of "pornography"-- colors his later films: *X = Y* (1990), *Nazi* (1991), *Catholic* (1991), *Horoscope* (1991), and *The Bitches* (1992). During this period Kern also shifted his attention to a different visual form.

Although he has continued work on his own films and on music videos, Kern has lately concentrated on photography. His pictures have moved from the gore and "splatter" effects of his early films to a concentration on the women he photographs. The pictures themselves are more fluid than his films: they easily cross over into the world of pornography (he has contributed work to magazines such as *Hustler* and *Barely Legal*.) But what distinguishes Kern's pictures from prosaic porno is that his work is remarkably beautiful and, more importantly, it continues his play with the force of

voyeurism. Each of Kern's photographs is a mini-movie, a story the viewer steps into and "sees." This "seeing" of a Kern photo is fascinating because after the viewer takes in the picture he/she must take in the effect of their looking. In his preface to *New York Girls*, Kern describes the feeling he has about taking pictures: "For me, nothing compares to the experience of building an environment with light then adding a living person as an unknown to make a temporal image." The "unknown" here is a Kern model, but it is also the Kern viewer: we are the unknown looker encountering an image and trying to decipher its "story." His pictures tell us we are voyeurs and we are then forced to look at our own looking. Each of Kern's photographs tell a different story-- his entire artistic output is *The Story of His Eye*-- but all of them tell us something he once admitted in an interview: "The best part of anything is watching."

John Rocco (2000)

from "Dictionary of the Avant-Gardes" by John Rocco, ed. By Richard Kostelanetz, Schirmer Books, New York, Pages 334-335.

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Richard Kern: Extra Action and Extra Hardcore

Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart famously said that, while he couldn't define obscenity or what constitutes hard-core pornography, he knew it when he saw it. While most of us in the movie-reviewing business - or is it a charity? - would probably admit to the same rhetorical dilemma, we constantly draw lines in the sand ... or have them drawn for us by our readers and editors. It explains why so little adult material, straight and gay, gets reviewed in the mainstream and alternative media, no matter the artistic intent of the director and performers.

The work of photographer and filmmaker Richard Kern provides a perfect example. Most of the material in *Extra Action* and *Extra Hardcore*, if packaged frame-by-frame format between hard covers, wouldn't be considered out of place in the photography section of many mainstream book stores. In DVD form, however, it would be difficult to find outside the adult sections of most video stores. Even then, the material wouldn't be sufficiently gonzo to justify stocking it. The young women aren't doing much more than putting on and taking off their britches, according to the whims of the photographer, and what sex there is wouldn't shock anyone familiar with the *Kama Sutra* or *The Joy of Sex*. Kern's ability to pose his glammed-down models in ways that are intrinsically voyeuristic - or in apparel many viewers wouldn't consider to be particularly fetishistic - is provocative without being dirty, and both photographer and model clearly seem to be enjoying themselves. As well, the soundtrack is comprised of free-form guitar solos by Sonic Youth's Thurston Moore, not the cheeseball music available in bulk form from software catalogues. So, what's a critic to do? In this case, I'll accept it as art, alert those who might be offended by the content, and hope admirers of Kern's work find the DVD. That's all. The set also includes several shorts whose content is more thematic.

– Gary Dretzka, *Movie City News*. March 2008