

"It was just a scratch Jim, really!" - Edward Scissorhands (1990)



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TRANSGRESSION CONFESSIONS: INTERVIEW WITH RICHARD KERN

by Graham Rae (2007-09-12)

The Cinema of Transgression was a loose-knit subterranean film movement that blossomed like a demented opiate hothouse flower in post-punk New York's Lower East Side from 1984-1991. Psycho-psyche innerspace cadets like Nick Zedd, Lydia Lunch, Lung Leg, Tommy Turner and Tessa Hughes-Freeland made extreme Super-8 movies that set out to trash every human taboo imaginable in their explorations of sex, death, exploitation, religion and more.

Central to this thunderground community was photographer-cum-filmmaker Richard Kern. His angry, sick, amusing, abusing, sexy, idiotic, nihilistic, voyeuristic, psychotic shorts and twisted music videos provided the fulcrum around which the COT revolved. The lo-fi director filmed various fractured extreme artistic personalities doing what they did best and beast and worst, often to the pounding proto-industrial music of Foetus. Kern set up his camera and let his subjects (including himself) just do whatever yanked their mentally unbalanced crank, often painting Bosch-like cinematic Rorschach screams of angry people twisting in their own interminable internal winds on broken wings of pathology and agony. It certainly wasn't pretty, that's for sure.

Even though many of the films haven't aged too well (or weren't too well made in the first place) there is still a raw visceral directness in their extreme approach that is still challenging and extremely contemporary. The excellent new documentary "[Llik Your Idols.](#)" by first-time French director [Angelique Bosio](#), provides a comprehensive overview of the Cinema of



"It always is possible to be transgressive in some manner..."

Still of Richard Kern from "Llik Your Idols"



"Submit To Me Now' was made when I was an all out junkie..."

Still of Lung Leg from "Submit to Me Now"



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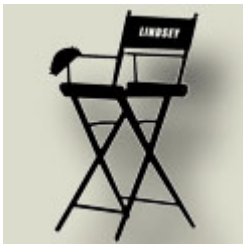
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Transgression. Film Threat caught up with Richard Kern to speak to him about the new doc, his old films and his new career as a nude photographer. He spoke to us with directness, a lack of pretension and candor, a man changed from his deranged dazed days of the 80s...

How did your involvement in "Llik Your Idols" come about?

Angel contacted me about being in the doc. I told her I had to meet her first. Once I met her, I told her I'd be happy to be in the film if she would model for me. Our first interview took place after I shot her in her room at the Chelsea Hotel.

I understand you haven't actually seen the documentary yet. Why is this? Any plans to watch it?

Yes, I'll watch it. The last thing I want to do when I sit down at the end of the day is watch something with me in it.

How many films have you made in total?

It depends on how you count them. I think there's about 13 movies on the "Hardcore Compilation" and maybe 5-10 that aren't available from that period. Then there's 60 one minute "clips" on the DVD that's inside my new Taschen (German art book publisher - Graham) book "Action".

Any films lying about in the vaults that have not been seen and you plan on releasing (or not)?

Yes, if I ever get around to it. I shot an entire "Submit to Me" type film that's all black and white from the time when I was shooting the book "New York Girls." Taschen wanted to release this with the book but there were release issues, plus I felt funny looking at that stuff after these years.

Why did you stop making films?

I ran out of ideas and the desire to make them. I felt that I needed to either move into larger projects or do something else. I worked on a feature for about a year but stopped.

Any films from back then that you're particularly proud of, or ones that you can't stand, and why in both cases?

I think "Fingered" accomplishes what I intended it accomplish. Most of them did, but I cringe at a lot of the production qualities (which were nonexistent) when I watch them. Most of what I feel when I watch them is a sense of wonder about that time in my life.

What did you actually think you were doing back then? How do you view the whole thing now?

Back then, I felt that making the movies finally gave me something to do and a sense of purpose. Like a lot of people who haven't planned out their entire



"It was something fun to do but... I took myself very seriously back then..."

Still of Jackie from "X is Y"



"The girls usually contact me. Sites like MySpace and ModelMayhem make it easy for girls to post tons of photos of themselves and invite people to look them over..."

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lives by the time they get out of school, I sat around a lot thinking of ways to spend my time. I went to art school so I was supposed to be an artist of some kind.

Instead I made some fanzines, walked around taking photos and spent a lot of time talking bullshit about what I wanted to do. Plus I had to work a dumb job. When I got that first movie camera and some encouragement from some people I admired, I finally had something to do with my spare time. This was a lifesaver.

Now, I look back that those movies and wonder what people saw in them.

How influential do you think the whole Cinema of Transgression thing was?
I don't know.

Can you see an influence in any modern filmmakers?
Again, I don't know how to answer.

The whole SuicideGirls shtick seems to sort of be what you were doing two decades ago. Do you find that whole esthetic a turn-on, turn-off, exciting or boring these days?

Well, I was just photographing the girls around me, I didn't create that look. Lydia Lunch was doing that scene long before I was. It all seems to go back to "Faster Pussycat, Kill, Kill". I think SuicideGirls really did a good job reaching out to and capitalizing on that look and mindset.

The look doesn't do it for me now though. I rarely shoot girls with tattoos anymore.

Has your own taste in films changed over the years?
Movies seem to have gotten more boring but that's probably just because I'm older.

Who were and are your own favorite filmmakers/films?
I often go back and watch films over and over again to see if they still hold up over the years. I used to really like Goddard but have a hard time with him now.

I still watch old Antonioni and Eric Rohmer films. Michael Haneke and Martin Scorsese are modern filmmakers whose films I look forward to. I don't keep up with directors like I used to.

Do you think it's more difficult to shock people now?
I don't know. I haven't watched any of the "torture porn" films although I used to see every slasher film that came out. I watched Haneke's "Funny Games" again recently and was still shocked by it. I understand he's doing a remake of it. He's such an intellectual it will be interested in seeing how he handles the concept of a remake.

Any stand-out memories of your association with Film Threat?
Yes. At one point in the early 90's, Film Threat wanted to publish a book of my photos. This was around right after Larry Flynt had purchased the magazine and they were looking for projects. I laid out my photos for Dave Williams (the editor at that time) and realized I only had about 20 good images towards a book. This was a big shock to me because I considered myself something of a photographer. Becoming a photographer with a published book became my new goal. I started shooting girls all the time. These photos became my book "New York Girls."

You told me that you sell 100-200 of the "Hardcore Collection" DVDs a month through Music Video Distributors. Does this surprise you? What do you think keeps people buying them, and could you ever have foreseen this?

Yes, I would have thought that the market would have dried up ages ago.

Would you ever want to make films again? If so, hypothetically, what kind of films would they be? Same message and lo-fi technical medium?

Maybe but I find film making not as interesting as I once did. Now, when I think of movies, I think more about sitting on my couch in my living room than changing the world with my important ideas.

Photo by Richard Kern



"GG and I were planning to do an update of my film 'You Killed Me First' with him playing the father and Kymbra Phaller playing the mom..."

Photo by Richard Kern of GG Allin, taken hours before Allin's death by overdose

I do like how Larry Clark moved from his photography into making "Kids". It was a good movie that seemed to be an extension of his photos.

Japanese experimental cyberpunk writer Kenji Siratori said of you that "Richard Kern rapes the nude brain of a chemical=anthropoid and generates a cyber-pornography for a drug fetus." What the fuck does that mean?

It means that the English language is still an exciting medium for him to express himself in.

What's this French documentary you mentioned to me about the New York filmmaking scene between 1975-1985? The director "Llik Your Idols," Angelique Bosio, is French too. Is this just coincidence, or do your movies have some sort of cult following in Europe? Are they viewed differently over there as opposed to in the US?

I don't know the answer to these questions. I do know that when I get models in France, they usually see what we are doing as art rather than work.

How would you characterize the main difference(s) in your pre-and-post-drug-addiction filmmaking?

"Submit To Me Now" was made when I was an all out junkie. That was the only movie that ended with the words "The End". That was supposed to be the last movie and the end of my drug usage. I left New York shortly after that, hoping to leave it all behind. A year later I came back to NY and got off drugs and finished the movie "The Evil Cameraman". It's pretty obvious that when I was on drugs I took myself way more seriously than I did after I quit. The second half of the movie makes fun of my drug persona. I was more interested in humor after I got clean.

You started out as a photographer in art college, went to filmmaking, and are now back doing photography. How do you find your photo subjects? Any of them fans of your work and want to be photographed by you because of that?

The girls usually contact me. Sites like MySpace and ModelMayhem make it easy for girls to post tons of photos of themselves and invite people to look them over.

Yes, the girls are usually fans of my work but not the film work. Most of them don't know the film work unless they are from somewhere like France. Most of them now find me because of The Vice Magazine TV show "[Shot by Kern.](#)"

Do you think your photography background helped you choose interesting and striking images and subjects for your films? Was there a crossover, in your opinion?

Yes.

You've done music videos for people like The Breeders, Cop Shoot Cop, King Missile and Marilyn Manson. How did these come about? Did they like your work and contact you? Did they give you a free reign or were they quite set in what they wanted and needed done?

I did music videos briefly in the mid 90's. These bands were all bands that came to me with their ideas. Music videos were not profitable at the level I was doing them so I quit.

What's the best negative reaction or opinion to your film work you ever provoked?

During the late 80's in Berlin, a Feminist group took over the small cinema that was screening "Fingered," robbed the patrons and poured paint on the projectors as a protest against the films. These idiots obviously had never seen the film cause the film they destroyed was not mine but the co-bill.

In another German college town the school shut down the screening. We moved it to a secret location but again hooded feminist showed up and threw paint at the screen. This was in the early 90's.

"Fingered" was selected for the Berlin film festival in 86 or 87. When I went up to introduce the film, I got booed. I introduced the film this way: "This film was made as a response to people like you – FUCK YOU!" while giving the audience the finger. This stunt got the film on the front page of *Variety* the next day but made the festival head cancel further screenings.

I don't think the film would cause this kind of reaction today. In Germany, my film gave the radical Feminist movement something to rally against. 20 years later, the same groups praise the film.

Do you still get people coming up to you and talking to you about your films?

Yes, a young film geek came up to me in a restaurant the other day. It was an embarrassing encounter for both of us.

Do you think we're all a nation of voyeurs now and can't help but be so because of the electronic society we live in?

Yes. My next book, "Looker" is all based on voyeur and paparazzi photos.

Any of your old film actors ever embarrassed by what they did these days, now that they're older? And what about yourself? Anything you'd rather not have done?

I wish I hadn't lost it on drugs in 87. That fuckup costs me about 3 productive years and all the money I had saved up. But that negative period probably gave me good insight into my present life.

I understand you have a young son. What age is he and would you object to him taking the same kind of photos or making the same kind of films (only for his generation, obviously) that you did? Any plans to show him your stuff? How do you think you will explain it to him?.

Yes I have a son and yes he sees my stuff although obviously not tons of it. He was embarrassed about it before but I think he understands it now. He can do whatever he wants although I hope he skips the drug stuff.

Do you still keep in contact with anybody from the Cinema of Transgression dazed days?

Tessa Hughes Freeland lives downstairs and has a kid my son's age so I see her often.

Do you think the whole Cinema of Transgression thing has been over-intellectualized and lionized, or do you think it deserves the critical approbation it has received?

This is a long interview. (Irony here noted and smiled at, Richard – Graham)

You associated with GG Allin. Why did you never stick him in a film? He would have seemed like a natural Kern subject.

GG and I were planning to do an update of my film "You Killed Me First" with him playing the father and Kymbra Phaller playing the mom. I had a 20 year-old girl and 20 year-old boy to play the kids. In this version, the dad and mom were going to have sex with their kids. We had been planning this film for some time. The day before he died, we had finalized the plans.

Do you think that art can change anything these mass-produced days?

I went out and brought some new energy efficient light bulbs after watching "An Inconvenient Truth."

Is it even possible to be transgressive in such a numb, unfeeling, image-saturated age?

It always is possible to be transgressive in some manner.

What's taboo to Richard Kern these days? What would you want to attack in a film?

Nothing.

Did you ever take filmmaking all that seriously, or was it just fucked-up fun at the end of the day?

It was something fun to do but as I said above, I took myself very seriously back then.

Visit RichardKern.com for more on Kern's films and photos and catch Kern in the documentary "[Lilik Your Idols](#)" at the [2007 Erotica Film Festival](#).

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