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"Llik Your Idols" Documents Transgressions of Cinema, L.A. Street Gangs

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By [Lee Gardner](#)

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Once upon a time, you got your subculture news from sporadic Xeroxed "fanzines," and if you read about an obscure film that sounded interesting, you often had to get a money order (a pre-PayPal form of remuneration useful for dealing with persons unknown to you) and mail it off to some specialty video shop in some far-off exotic urban center such as Cleveland or New York City, and the person who received that money order would then mail you a musty-smelling VHS cassette (often an illicit dub) to watch in your crappy Fort Sanders apartment. That's how many of us first encountered the work of the likes of Richard Kern and Nick Zedd, filmmakers with zero budget and zero polish who delved deeply into the subterranean obsessions of the era: sex, guns, noise, inky black humor, violence, outrage, etc. Now Kern, Zedd, and the other filmmakers involved in the so-called "Cinema of Transgression" movement of the early 1980s are feted in the documentary *Llik Your Idols* (Le Chat Qui Fum), a new DVD release available delivered to your door by Netflix or possibly, thanks to some Swedish kid, ready for downloading gratis straight to your laptop anywhere there's wi-fi.

The Cinema of Transgression was of a very different time, to be sure, a fact that rookie director Angelique Bosio makes plain. The early days of the Reagan era, a time now revered as halcyon by neo-cons, was a bleak, economically tough period. The failure of the '60s dream and the damp squib of '70s punk petering out left the New York demimonde at loose ends and sputtering with rage. That led to the rise of the riotous No Wave music scene, where bands like DNA and Teenage Jesus and the Jerks didn't let a lack of experience or proficiency stop them from making an obliterating racket. Some scenesters were similarly inspired to pick up Super 8 movie cameras. Photographer Richard Kern stands as perhaps the scene's most enduring auteur, distilling his personal voyeuristic obsessions into films such as "Fingered" or "Right Side of My Brain" that were short on cohesion but rich in visual distress and graphic everything. On the other end of the spectrum slumps addled would-be *succes de scandale* Nick Zedd, who seems to have always had his eye on a larger audience even as he made sub-competent Ed Wood-like shorts like horror spoof "Geek Maggot Bingo."

Kern and Zedd are both interviewed here, as are scene queen Lydia Lunch, musical cohort Thurston Moore of Sonic Youth, and punk icon/Zedd star Richard Hell, but the Cinema of Transgression scene wasn't about "stars," and neither is this smart and slightly shambolic but fascinating account of it. Though it was always a tiny scene, and short-lived as well, the consistency of the bad-taste expression among the filmmakers and musicians alike bespeaks a genuine *Idols*-more like a retch, really—that was

letting out something that needed to get out. Put another way, it may be easier than ever to make and distribute films, but no one seems to be making films like these now.

Old-school skateboard star/skate-culture entrepreneur Stacy Peralta has built himself a third successful career as a filmmaker in recent years by making lavish, visually grabby docs about once-marginalized subcultures; his 2001 skating origin myth *Dogtown and Z Boys* is one of the best docs made in the '00s and his 2004 big-wave surfing epic *Riding Giants* proved *Dogtown's* verve was no fluke. Unfortunately, the new *Crips and Bloods: Made in America* (New Video) proves his talent has limits, located perhaps a few blocks in from the beach.

After years of headlines, reality-reporting/distorting gangsta rap, and dubious gang films, the story of the rival Los Angeles-based African-American street gangs the Crips and the Bloods is ripe for serious treatment onscreen. Peralta starts promisingly enough by laying out the early origins of L.A.'s black gangs with the help of O.G. talking heads and a subdued but still snappy use of his trademark mix of killer archival imagery, eye-catching camera and editing, and note-perfect musical score. The film spends its first half hour building to an incendiary account of the 1965 Watts Riots, introduces the dawning of the Crips, and then, mysteriously, completely stops telling any kind of story at all. The film literally punts on narrative or any kind of comprehensive account of the titular gangs, settling for a soporific rotation of talking heads chatting about various gang-related topics to little end other than reinforcing that a) gangs are an outgrowth of conditions in South Central L.A., and b) gang violence is very, very unfortunate. It is a sheltered American indeed who will be surprised by anything the last hour of *Crips and Bloods* has to offer, assuming he or she can stay awake for the whole thing.

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