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## Film Review: Kenneth Anger's Kustom Kar Kommandos

Kenneth Anger's *Kustom Kar Kommandos* asks us to feel with our ears, to hear with our eyes, to taste with our bodies. Charged with a tickling eroticism and hyperbolically fetishistic aura, this lascivious work of high camp and low culture is infused with an alternately infatuated and critical attitude toward the throbbing iconography of American lore. Automobile autoeroticism at its most perverted, Anger plays around with blood(womb)red imagery to suggest the American garage as the birthing canal of masculine Americana's dreams. More specifically, Anger locates the womb of American industry in the male heart, dressing a boy working on a car in vivid, lurid hues and equating the desire for procreation with symbiotic and parasitic ownership of metal material that bears somewhat striking implications for the notion of offspring as parental property. All of this, of course, is without even glancing at the implications of the title (or the title's initials, more accurately, peerlessly stitching together homoerotic American masculine machinery as a sort of color-blind populist front or a vanguard for the white power movement, but that thread is hidden deeper in this film than in most of Anger's more famous works, so we'll leave it for someone else to find).

As it trucks on though, nothing about *Kustom Kar Kommandos* plays like an intellectual treatise. Anger's sense of exultancy is too infectious to curdle the ferocious buzz of the film into the timid ache of a lecture hall extravaganza. His kaleidoscopic sense of interweaving images, colors, textures (oh good lord the textural contrast in this movie from puffy, feathery pink dusters to unblinking chrome metallic is divine) is a thoroughly liberating slurry of moods and feelings that supersede rational consideration entirely. Fittingly for a film all about perverting the facades of American lore while celebrating them, *Kustom Kar Kommandos* is all about the surfaces. The dormant interpretations just begging to be unpacked are all fascinatingly vague and cagey, but the sensations and perceptions at the forefront of the film dive right into your brain without apology or excuse. It supersedes conventional, detached "significance" or intellectual analysis to form a more symbiotic relationship where the sensations it marshals provoke questions and comparisons and where the film's mysteries cannot be traced or pigeonholed.

Rather than the conventional parasitic relationship between audience and film where we simply draw out meanings from the film and suck its energy dry until it has nothing left to give because it has been answered and rationalized with intent and meaning, *Kustom Kar Kommandos* defies us. We cannot feel as though we have conquered it; we do not draw vampiric meaning from it and thus defang it by identifying its purpose and thus containing it, since it never exists in a finished state in the mind. It is always ballooning and bubbling in the mind with the bristling imaginative energy of slippery questions of man and machine as sexual rapport and sexual tool, of pride and masculine agency and fanciful homoeroticism and the devious caress of a parent

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for its child in a middle-century consumer culture where machine and object was rapidly overtaking human flesh in the desires of the public.

This latter battle plays out at a sensory level on the screen too, in the cocktail of simply watching flesh, shape, geometry, and metal space collide until our categories for what is flesh (when the garage playfully assumes the position of a womb) and what is machine (when the boy functions as a robot in the mechanized ritualistic tint of a Ford assembly line gone awry) dissolve before our eyes. Indeed, much of the film can be read as a slinky parody of a Ford line production assembly that pays tribute to and perverts American work ethic bootstrap sensibility and imbibes in masculine imagery well beyond the pale of mere homoeroticism and into full-blown camp as defiant sensibility rather than mockery. It cannot be pigeonholed as a commentary on an idea so much as a tickle or a twinge, an unclassifiable attitude, a swagger, a tingle in your spine that defeats rationalizing. We could read it as a young boy's sexual fetish for a phallic car object as his only socially accepted outlet for sexual fluidity. Or we could locate a critique of consumer culture. But the most vigorous, lusty, rock-hard impulses of the film create a carnival of contradictions that elude any one meaning. This is cinema that is not wrapped up for us. It floats in existential excitement, charged with the precarious energy of the moment. The meaning of the film bears many textures. But more importantly, the physical film on the screen is overloaded with texture as well.

Rare is the film that even acknowledges texture in an era of smoothing out even wrinkle and kink so that each image is a plastic facsimile of a memory of life. Themes abound, most obviously in the KKK title undeniably resonating with Anger's earlier experiments in Nazi paraphernalia and cheeky deconstruction of the so-called master race linked to imaginations of domestic American whiteness. But even if this is a play on Riefenstahl's master race films, as many of Anger's other films somewhat explicitly are, Anger also embodies Riefenstahl's arena of sensation, flesh, and automaton semi-abstracted from reality. (Anger's abstraction might even read as an imaginative critique of Riefenstahl for coding Nazism within films that hide their sinister intents). This is cinema as lust object and dream lover, so affectively charged that it feels like a shot of synesthesia to the groin. It's also a purgative of the intellectual counterfeit money of middlebrow ideologies common in American film around this time (almost any film not by Sam Fuller dealing with race, for instance), most such films being so staggered and stultified in the way they treat social issues as waxy museum pieces rather than living and breathing contests and processes that are on the move. In comparison to "presenting" social issues for us, Anger motivates camera mischief to plumb the monstrous incongruities of mid-century American identity. His film also seems to know no zones that aren't erogenous, creating a work that feels authentically dangerous rather than merely one that pretends to be so.

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