

Strange Days: Obituaries

Curtis Harrington

Actor and photographer Lisa Jane Persky pays tribute to legendary B-movie director, avant-gardist and esotericist Curtis Harrington, and reports from a very strange memorial service.

By Lisa Jane Persky

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Curtis Harrington, director of famed weird B-movies such as *Night Tide* (1961), *Games* (1967), *Who Slew Auntie Roo?* (1971) and *What's the Matter With Helen?* (1971) was one of very few avant-garde directors to successfully make the transition into commercial filmmaking. He passed away at the age of 80 in Hollywood on 6 May 2007 from complications related to a stroke he had suffered in 2005.

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"HIDEOUS BEYOND BELIEF... with an INHUMAN CRAVING!" was the tagline for Harrington's best known cult classic, *Queen of Blood* (1966); strangely, it could have been applied to his fellow avant-gardist and occult celebrity Kenneth Anger when he made an appearance at Harrington's burial service last month.

I met Harrington in 2006, at an opening for Dennis Hopper's photographs and paintings. We were introduced by Gregory Poe, a friend with an apt last name. Harrington was a lifelong fan of Edgar Allan Poe and he began and ended his career with different versions of 'The Fall of the House of Usher'. Gregory told me that he designed funeral urns and that Curtis had already ordered his. A year later, at the Forever Hollywood Cemetery adjacent to Paramount Studios, Harrington was ready to put Mr Poe's handiwork to use.

Harrington's memorial service was an open-casket affair held in the cemetery's small chapel. Among other guests was Kenneth Anger, who arrived with a cameraman in tow. Best known for his films *Fireworks*, *Inauguration of The Pleasure Dome* (in which Harrington appeared, alongside Anais Nin) and *Lucifer Rising*, Anger is also the author of two compendia of trashy Hollywood scandals, *Hollywood Babylon* and *Hollywood Babylon II*, and his name is often linked to those of Satanist Anton LaVey and the notorious Aleister Crowley.

According to Harrington's executor, screenwriter Robert Mundy, Harrington and Anger had been 'friends' since childhood but had carried on a lifelong feud, during which Anger had repeatedly been cruel to Harrington. Because of this, as well as the attendant cameraman, Mundy asked Anger to leave. Anger informed Mundy that he would have to call the police to get him off the property. Eventually, they reached a compromise, and Anger turned off the camera. But this didn't prevent him from kissing the embalmed face of Harrington or from taking a seat in the front row. Anger, who is also 80, looks hardy and sports the intense, bullet-headed look of Aleister Crowley in his later years.

Actor Jack Larson (Jimmy Olson in the 1950s *Superman* television series), who was to be the only speaker at the service, described the Hollywood milieu that he and Curtis entered in the 1940s. He had barely started when he was interrupted by Anger, who shouted juicy 'corrections' to Larson's speech. Larson persevered as Anger continued to provide a running commentary in a we-of-the-theatre tone. Larson referred to a mutual friend, 'Paul' from Pasadena, who ran a 'coven' which attracted many people, including Harrington and himself. At this, Anger shouted "NO! NO! It was an order of the Ordo Templi Orientis and it was of as high a degree as 33rd degree Masonry. I am a 33rd-degree member through Crowley." Previous to this, Larson had already mentioned Crowley and Anger had corrected his pronunciation: "Crow as in Crow. Then Lee."

Larson mentioned that 'Paul' had supposedly created a homunculus. Anger agreed - "OH HE DID! I saw it. It held my hand. Its little hand, like a tentacle, wrapped itself around my finger. There were 33 others in the crib, but not in full-fruitation like this one" - suggesting that degrees of Masonry and homunculi litter have something in common. A number of actresses were involved in the "coven", one of whom reportedly saw the homunculus. Anger informed the guests that whoever sees a homunculus is henceforth responsible for its life, and this, he suggested, may be why she ultimately became a recluse.

Larson recounted that 'Paul' supposedly had a tail. Anger concurred. "I SAW IT!" he shouted. "I showed it to Kinsey and he said that wasn't so unusual - one man in 50,000 has one." In the 1950s, the sexologist Alfred Kinsey became interested in Anger and his films, and in 1955 the two visited the site of Crowley's 'Abbey of Thelema' in Cefalu, Sicily.

According to Larson, 'Paul's' home burned to the ground. Anger explained why. "HOWARD DID IT!" he exclaimed. "Howard Hughes, who was crazy because he had syphilis of the brain." For once no one disagreed, although this did produce some uncomfortable laughter.

Toward the end of Larson's speech, Anger announced that he and Harrington had both been dying of prostate cancer (although Harrington didn't die of this) and that he had told Harrington that he would outlive him. Anger then informed everyone that his own memorial would be here, in the same place. He turned toward the crowd and said "Oh yes, It's been confirmed. I know the date of my death. On Hallowe'en 2008. My memorial. RIGHT HERE! HALLOWE'EN 2008!" Then, as an afterthought, he added, "INVITATION ONLY! Sorry."

Across from Anger's seat was a huge floral bouquet. The card read: "For my old pal Kurtz (sic) from his old rival Kenneth Anger". The note, which usually bears the name of the deceased, read "Dr. Kenneth Anger," making it look as though it was Anger's funeral instead, well ahead of schedule. One of the themes Harrington explored in *Queen of Blood* and other films is that of beings who feed off others. With this in mind, one assumes that Anger won't starve to death.

A second memorial service sans Anger was held at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences on historic Vine Street. Speakers there included scream queen Barbara Steele, directors Peter Medak (*The Krays*) and Bill Condon (*Dreamgirls*), and Dennis Hopper, who appeared in Harrington's early work *Night Tide*. This film also featured Marjorie Cameron, the widow of Jack Parsons, the scientist at Pasadena's Jet Propulsion Laboratory who was also a follower of Aleister Crowley. Cameron appeared in Anger's *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome* and was part of the occult bohemia depicted in John Carter's *Sex and Rockets: The Occult World of Jack Parsons*, and it's quite possible that Parsons was the 'Paul' that Superman's pal and Crowley's devotee had argued about at the previous service. Parsons blew himself and his house up in an 'accident', although there are suspicions it may have been suicide. Then too, they may have been speaking of Paul Mathison, the art director and actor who played Pan in *Inauguration of The Pleasure Dome*.

In a short documentary screened at the Anger-free event, Harrington had the last word: "There is the exoteric and the esoteric... That's what I'm interested in. The esoteric. What goes on beneath." He also had a sense of humour. "Did you know," the husband asks his wife in *Games*, "that Aimee Semple McPherson was buried with a telephone?" "Why?" "Just in case," a nod, to be sure, to Poe's "The Premature Burial." Harrington is now entombed at Hollywood Forever in an urn made by another Poe, in which, sadly, there is no room for a telephone. The obituary in *Variety* claimed Harrington had no survivors, but this isn't true. He has Anger, whether he wants him or not, along with a coterie of friends and admirers. Most importantly, he is survived by the prints of his films, which have been willed to The Motion Picture Academy.

Curtis Harrington, director and occultist, born 26 Sept 1927; died Hollywood 6 May 2007, aged 80.