




History gone soft: performing the scandalous 1920s in *Hollywood Babylon*

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ABSTRACT

Adapted (without permission) from Kenneth Anger's notorious book about early Hollywood scandals, the 1972 sexploitation version of *Hollywood Babylon* is a quasi-documentary that alternates between public-domain footage from silent-era films and softcore re-enactments of some of Anger's most lurid anecdotes. The film's generic reframing of his dubious stories as late-period sexploitation fodder participates in the book's mission of desacralizing the stars, but its reticence to include unsimulated sex softens the punch of its scandalous subject matter, while inadvertently flaunting Anger's fictionalization of history. This article argues that the performances in *Hollywood Babylon* doubly signal the 'softness' of both the filmmakers' depictions of sex and Anger's Hollywood lore, compounding the book's thematic linkage of on-screen decadence, off-screen perversion, and movieland failures.

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Kenneth Anger's *Hollywood Babylon* remains one of the most notorious books about early Hollywood, not least because much of his scabrous lore about the dark side of classic studio stars has been debunked. First published by Jean-Jacques Pauvert in 1959, with extensive photographs drawn from the Cinémathèque Française and the Kinsey Institute, the book's first English-language edition did not appear until 1965, when Associated Professional Services (a shell company with a Phoenix, Arizona, post-office box) released a cheap pulp edition featuring far fewer photographs. According to biographer Bill Landis (1995, 122–123), Anger had already translated two-thirds of his original French manuscript on spec for adult paperback publisher Marvin Miller, but Miller absconded with the translation before a formal contract was signed. Anger claims that Miller himself wrote the remaining third – although whether this was truly a case of Miller inventing (as opposed to poorly translating) additional material is debatable. An official English-language version would not appear until 1975 – but this hardcover edition eschews the 1959 edition's free-flowing, fragmentary montage of text and image in favour of more straightforward narration in individually titled chapters.

Various scholars have written about Anger's (anti-)fannish love/hate relationship with old Hollywood as a camp reading of history/gossip (for example, Tinkcom 2002, 145–153; Hutchison 2011, 193–201; Cagle 2019, 132–136), but virtually no academic attention has

been paid to Miller's doubly unauthorized 1972 adaptation of *Hollywood Babylon* into a sexploitation film (directed by Edward Forsyth, aka Van Guylder). Produced and released by Miller's own company, I.A.E. (Institute of Adult Education) Distributing, this pseudo-documentary alternates between softcore re-enactments of Anger's lurid anecdotes and public-domain footage from silent-era films and newsreels (Forsyth, dir. 1972). Among the dozen or so featured celebrities, the film only mentions the safely dead (e.g. Wallace Reed, Fatty Arbuckle, Rudolph Valentino) by name, while the still-living or potentially litigious are referred to by vague pseudonyms like 'Big Daddy' (William Randolph Hearst) or the 'famous comic' (Charlie Chaplin). Like Anger's book, the film opens with images of the 'Babylon' sequence from *Intolerance* (Griffith, dir. 1916), a benchmark for pre-Code nudity and Hollywood decadence alike, before its first re-enactment (Olive Thomas's fatal 1920 overdose – her body found fully nude here) kicks off the 'terrible Twenties'. But the film ends with the 1929 stock market crash while Clara Bow sexually exhausts a university football team – a fitting enough (anti-)climax for a decade-specific periodization that still omits at least half of the book's available content.

Miller reportedly planned sequels focusing on the 1930s and 1940s scandals from later sections of Anger's book (Weiler 1971), but these plans were soon curtailed by lawsuits. The film's pressbook and other promotional materials trumpet the 'best-selling book' with 'over 2 million copies sold' – even including the book's cover in miniature on several poster designs (Figure 1) – but Anger's name is conspicuously absent.¹

Anger and Pauvert sued Miller for copyright infringement, \$530,000 in damages, and all profits from both the 1965 book and the 1972 film. Miller's lawyers countered that the 1959 edition, as well as much of the underlying gossip, was already in the public domain, and that Anger had been negligent in claiming his rights since 1965 – but Anger had been unable to locate Miller behind the latter's phony business addresses ('Ken Anger' 1972; 'Defense' 1972; 'Lucifer Rising' 1972). While a judge ruled in Anger/Pauvert's favour and the film was withdrawn from circulation, they were not successful in collecting damages – although Landis (1995, 191, 198) claims that the film (and resulting lawsuit) convinced Anger that there was enough demand for an official US edition, finally published three years later.

While its voice-over narration retains some of Anger's moralistic tone (minus much of his dark humour and virtually all of his original wording), the film's selected re-enactments demonstrate which of Anger's stories lent themselves to the (heterosexual) pornographic imaginary, ostensibly 'straightening' the book's focus on Hollywood stars' sex lives. Even as the lurid gossip in Anger's books has always proven popular with both gay and straight readers, the film's rhetorical address is rooted less in (gay) camp than in (straight) sleaze, given the narrator's 'inability to bring a convincing unity or purpose to their disparate elements of actuality footage, awkward reenactments, and endless opportunities for (near) nudity' (Kleinhans 2007, 115). The film's generic reframing of Anger's stories as sexploitation fodder still participates in the book's mission of desacralizing the stars, but it nostalgically paints the 1920s as a 'golden age' of sexual hedonism – if not solely for heterosexual stars, then at least for stars whose sexual predilections might play into the heterosexual male viewer's erotic fantasies. The film focuses more on recurring figures like Chaplin – who features in three separate re-enactments (and whose sex life involving underage girls is, like Chaplin's films, played for broad comedy) – rather than the female stars (such as Mary Astor, Mae West, and Frances Farmer) whose liberated sexuality may have rebelled against the studio system's morality strictures but whom



Figure 1. One-sheet poster for *Hollywood Babylon* (1972), with a miniature cover of Anger’s book (minus his name) in the lower-left corner. Courtesy of Something Weird Video.

Anger ‘does not link ... with narratives of dissolution and demise’ (Tinkcom 2002, 150). Bow is a partial exception in this regard, although the film’s depiction of her sexually voracious affairs still culminates in a gangbang fantasy accompanied by narration about the coming Great Depression.

ONE OF THE BOYS?

He was dashing and handsome, the very epitome of what a movie star should be. Adored by women — and resented by their husbands and boyfriends, he became the screen's most highly rated lover.

A former ball room dancer, he moved with a grace and confidence that sent girls, old and young, into swoons of delight. He became a living legend, worshipped the world over.

Yes, this romantic idol had weaknesses. One in particular was for masculine, domineering women. Twice married, both times to renowned dikes, he played a strange role in their under the table — or better said, atop the bed, affairs. It was rumored that he was a voyeur, and some of

the activities he observed might have turned off a large number of his fans — although some might have enjoyed the view along with him.

When the *Chicago Tribune* learned that Rudy was due in town for a personal appearance, it issued an editorial questioning his virility . . .

To quote in part: 'An astonishing dance-hall, The Sheik, with an exclusively masculine clientele, has recently opened in Chicago.

On August 23, 1926, at ten minutes after noon, **Rudolph Valentino** died in New York's Polyclinic Hospital of Peritonitis . . . so they said. True or not, Rudy, in death became grist for the rumor mills. Emasculation was more like it, some were heard to grumble — arsenic poisoning

by a scorned woman was a more romantic reason that was whispered. But whatever the cause, his funeral took the form of a macabre bazaar. Over one hundred thousand people stormed the undertaker's, each one of them battling for a final look at this 'Star of Stars.' Hysteria ruled the day. The mob was equally divided — one half were women who refused to accept the truth — the other half, men, hungry to confirm it. **Pola Negri** fainted across the coffin and was assisted away vowing undying love. But it was Rudy himself who wrote his own epitaph. Courageously hanging on to a thin thread of life, his final words were "Now, do they still think me a pink powder puff?"

Even now, decades after his untimely death, there are cults that treasure his memories, his achievements, and ignore his weaknesses.



Figure 2. *Hollywood Babylon* (1972) pressbook page, reproducing narration text and images from the Valentino sequence. Courtesy of Something Weird Video.

More common are 'lesbian' scenes, many of them included to suggest the supposed perversions of male celebrities who voyeuristically serve as on-screen surrogates for the sexploitation viewer. Rudolph Valentino's lavender marriage to two 'renowned dykes', for example, is rewritten to depict his preference for watching his wives' same-sex trysts: 'Some of the activities he observed might have turned off a large number of his fans — although some might have enjoyed the view along with him', the narrator quips, as Valentino is shown seated beside the bed — just before cutting to a gay bar scene where a cross-dresser caresses Valentino's prominent portrait on the wall, as if post-humously confirming his queerness (Figure 2). Similarly, a segment about Marlene Dietrich and Josef von Sternberg first depicts Dietrich's affairs with women, but ends with her sleeping with Von Sternberg — although she only manages to arouse him by donning a tuxedo. Finally, an Erich von Stroheim sequence depicts the 'horrible Hun' at home in his gothic mansion, rehearsing a scene between a 'professional female sadist' who takes a whip to another woman. In all of these scenes, then, the queer rumours that Anger's book so campily excavates are framed as little more than spice for sex scenes predominantly rooted in heterosexual spectacle, with women's sexual prowess ultimately celebrated to the extent that it makes them available to the male gaze.

Hollywood Babylon was released on the cusp of a 1970s cycle of 'backstudio pictures' that called back to the pre-1948 era of Hollywood glamour and industrial stability (Cohan 2019, 13–14) — but its cynical tone predicts several of that cycle's sleazier, less rose-tinted entries, including *The Day of the Locust* (Schlesinger, dir. 1975), *Inserts* (Byrum, dir. 1975),

and especially *The Wild Party* (Ivory, dir. 1975), with the latter film inspired by the Arbuckle scandal (2019, 187–191). Although most of *Hollywood Babylon*'s re-enactments claim to offer voyeuristic glimpses into stars' private lives, a re-enactment of Von Stroheim directing an orgy scene on a closed studio set is the closest the film gets to self-reflexively depicting the moviemaking process itself. In that scene, *Hollywood Babylon* more closely resembles Entertainment Ventures, Inc.'s sexploitation film *Starlet!* (Kanter, dir. 1969). In that film (shot on the former Monogram lot), Entertainment Ventures, Inc. depict themselves as one of the major Hollywood studios, whereas *Hollywood Babylon* presents a similar fantasy from the opposite direction: the original majors as hotbeds for the production of sex films.

As I have noted elsewhere (Church 2016, 85–86), adults-only magazines frequently used the metonym 'Hollywood' to conflate the studio system with a geographical locale that was also a sexploitation industry hub, misleadingly implying that studio personnel were involved in the independent production of sexploitation films. (I.A.E. Distributing's central offices, for example, were listed as an address on Hollywood Boulevard.) *Adam Film Quarterly* even ran a series of articles about masculine Hollywood genres and stars (including their scandals), insinuating that the mainstream industry's past had somehow led up to the sexploitation industry's present. Indeed, at a time when larger companies like Entertainment Ventures, Inc. represented the budgetary high end (approximately \$70,000–100,000 per film) for sexploitation productions (Andrews 2006, 60–61), which attempted to garner crossover success under the newly introduced X rating, *Hollywood Babylon*'s cromulent attempts to evoke old Hollywood glamour similarly play upon the imagined convergence of these two Los Angeles-based film industries.

This withdrawn 1972 film would seem to be, then, little more than a historical footnote to an obsolete, 'bootleg' version of a famous book, but the performances in *Hollywood Babylon* doubly signal the 'softness' of both the filmmakers' depictions of sex and Anger's version of Hollywood mythology. That is, the film's reticence to include unsimulated sex softens the punch of its scandalous subject matter, while inadvertently calling attention to the historically dubious status of Anger's gossipy anecdotes. As a sexploitation film, *Hollywood Babylon* fittingly occupies a cultural stratum far closer to the book's 1965 pulp edition than to either of the book's glossy, authorized editions, with its ersatz doubles for well-known stars echoing the 1965 edition's own unofficial status. Yet the inherent inauthenticity of simulated sex in this 'adapted for the screen' version highlights how even Anger's authorized editions of *Hollywood Babylon* rely far more heavily on innuendo than on the indisputably real.

Anger had included the full text of the 1930 Production Code as an appendix to his 1959 edition, in order to ironically juxtapose Hollywood's behind-the-scenes depravity and its publicly trumpeted morality. But it was, in fact, the classical studio system's post-1948 decline that allowed stories like Anger's to legally emerge in the first place, since the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America's 1934 crackdown on screen content coincided with a crackdown on unauthorized scandalmongering, by requiring all fan magazine articles about studio players to receive studio approval. By the late 1950s, however, writers no longer had to register for a 'Hays Card' granting them studio access, so magazines like *Confidential* began to spill the beans (Church 2016, 68–69). Even if Anger, possibly fearing lawsuits, had only published *Hollywood*

Babylon's first edition in French, the 1972 film could take advantage of the new screen freedoms heralded by the Production Code's demise. Indeed, the 1965 edition had already been salacious fodder for men's magazines – including adults-only magazines like *Barred*, which regularly profiled sexploitation films and other symptoms of 1960s sexual liberalization (for example, Anger 1965; 'Hollywood Babylon' 1965).

Yet, despite Miller's pressbook bluster to prospective exhibitors – 'How can you factually reproduce the Fatty Arbuckle champagne bottle scandal and get a "G" [rating]?' – the film's own representational limits (only full-frontal nudity and simulated sex), at a time when adult films showing hardcore content were already severely eroding the sexploitation market, heightens *Hollywood Babylon's* anachronistic tenor. Miller's production, for example, had allegedly been inspired by the 'white coater' documentary *Hollywood Blue* (Benveniste, dir. 1970), which intersperses hardcore clips from old stag films rumoured to feature classic Hollywood stars, alongside talking-head host segments of Mickey Rooney and June Wilkinson (Landis 1995, 190). Likewise, I.A.E. Distributing had previously released *The Sensually Liberated Female* (Cimber, dir. 1970), another white coater featuring plentiful unsimulated sex under the aegis of education. Although Anger claimed the latter film as evidence that Miller and I.A.E. Distributing were purveyors of 'graphic descriptions and illustrations of sexual activity ... bordering on violating ... Federal and state laws governing pornography and obscenity' ('Ken Anger' 1972), *Hollywood Babylon* itself could hardly be considered 'pornographic' by 1972 standards.² Ironically, however, Miller's prior conviction in an unrelated case would soon be upheld in *Miller v. California* (1973), a US Supreme Court precedent that made it easier for local jurisdictions to successfully mount obscenity prosecutions against pornographic materials.

Not just an inexpensive means of padding out the film to feature length, *Hollywood Babylon's* public-domain footage of actual stars in silent-era films might provide the 'redeeming social value' that helped prevent adult films from obscenity convictions. More importantly, though, this actuality footage is ostensibly meant to set up the credibility of the short, biopic-style re-enactments. But whereas conventional biopics might include 'real' historical footage alongside re-enactments of events, in order to strengthen the latter's sense of authenticity, *Hollywood Babylon* is clearly not the typical prestige biopic. As Colleen Kennedy-Karpat notes, representational and presentational acting styles often blur together in the mainstream biopic:

while representational in the conventional demand for the actor to embody the character as completely and believably as possible, biopic acting is also presentational in that the labor of the performance is always obvious. The actor never *becomes* the character in the same way that she could with a fictional character because the real person who inspired the character looms in the spectator's consciousness. (2020, 396; original emphasis)

Even if several of the sexploitation industry's own star performers (including Uschi Digart, Maria Arnold, and Suzanne Fields) appear in prominent roles here, their minorness relative to mainstream movie stars accentuates sexploitation's generic demand for an excessively presentational style that eschews illusionism in the service of displaying the nude body.

In her discussion of 'biopic bodies', Lucy Fife Donaldson (2014, 106) observes that 'The performer's body becomes the film's statement of how it will address biography, and this body thus defines our relationship to events as they are depicted.' In *Hollywood Babylon*, then, the believability of its re-enactments only extends so far – since, after all, those cast

for their resemblance to 1920s celebrities would also need to be comfortable performing in an adult film (rather than, say, a prestige Hollywood biopic in which a brief nude scene might seemingly confirm the 'serious' actor's commitment to inhabiting a role). Take, for example, Digart's portrayal of Marlene Dietrich: the ample embodiment that made Digart such a popular nude model and sexploitation actor may physically differentiate her from 'the ordinariness of sexploitation's amateur female actors ... literally proffering the girl next door' (Gorfinkel 2012, 84).³ Yet because the spectacle of her nude body so gratuitously motivates her scenes, the film's 'statement of how it will address [Dietrich's] biography' calls attention to not just our inability to suspend disbelief (i.e. to imagine ourselves watching Dietrich instead of Digart), but also the unbelievability of such lurid rumours about her private life. Indeed, as Elena Gorfinkel (2012, 84–86) explains, the sexploitation era featured ongoing debates about the merits of on-screen nudity as (non-professional) 'mere action' instead of (professional) acting. *Hollywood Babylon* thus fails (or perhaps does not seriously try) to overcome the resulting analogy: mere action is to the sexploitation film as acting is to the biopic.

Furthermore, with the rise of hardcore cinema's indexical depictions of unsimulated sex, the performative nature of sexploitation's sex scenes became all the more apparent, casting doubt on the film's overall *raison d'être*. In its scornful review, *Variety* was not fooled by the film's 'short of hardcore' scenes of 'sex simulation' and its cynical 'exercises in scandal, and/or libel, as the cases may be', while suggesting that the film's lawyers should get higher billing than its 'amateur' performers (Land 1972). Ironically, Terry Levene of Aquarius Releasing, who handled the film's 30-screen first-run release in New York City (and who was also named in Anger's lawsuit), had originally planned a national publicity tour for these celebrity lookalikes, 'including appearances with Dick Cavett in New York and Merv Griffin on the Coast' (Verrill 1971). *The Independent Film Journal* was far more complimentary, noting that 'the dichotomy between the narrator's [moralistic] speeches and the obviously humorously directed recreations actually enhances it and makes the film particularly palatable'. Moreover, the film's 'biggest blessing ... is that it never dwells too long on any particular sex encounter ... giving the audience the idea (and the thrills), but never hampering the pacing to any great degree' (*'Hollywood Babylon'* 1972). As Chuck Kleinhans (2007, 107–108) argues, this sort of 'dichotomous' pleasure is rooted 'not in knowing or learning, but in sincerely appreciating the spectacle even as we ironically revel in the lowbrow tackiness of the presentation – imagining an absent viewer who would actually fall prey to the narrator's absurd claims' about Hollywood history.

In this regard, Anger's short anecdotes about sexual debauchery are especially conducive to sexploitation's aesthetics of spectacle, compared to the centralized narrative arc of a traditional biopic (also see Hunter 2020, 176). Yet *Hollywood Babylon's* own performances of off-screen perversion ironically compound the book's thematic linkage of on-screen decadence and movieland failures through its unwieldy combination of overtly sexualized re-enactments and enough softcore restraint to compromise the film's underlying ethos of scandalization. Although this particular film's downfall was arguably its failure to acknowledge its original author (as Anger's lawsuit against Miller professed), it also failed to adapt to changing market trends towards hardcore content. Hence, *Hollywood Babylon's* 'soft' approach undercuts the already dubious veracity of Anger's source material, even as the film's own sleazy history, faux-moralistic narration,

and contrived performances evidence a blend of hubris, hypocrisy, and collapse that would not be wholly out of place in Anger's pages.

Notes

1. Here and in the following, references to the *Hollywood Babylon* pressbook and cover letter are from the private collection of Lisa Petrucci Vraney, who continues to make the film available via Something Weird Video. My supreme thanks to Lisa for making these documents available.
2. Ironically, several of Anger's own late-period films, including *Green Hell* (Anger, dir. 2007a) and *I'll Be Watching You* (Anger, dir. 2007b), largely consist of pirated footage from gay porn videos.
3. Additionally, Dietrich and Von Sternberg's collaborative Hollywood period was the 1930s, rather than the 1920s, so this segment does not even fit the film's purview.

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