



Kuchar, George (1942-2011)

by Gary Morris

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Film historian Jack Stevenson tells the story of how George Kuchar dealt with a problem that many directors have faced: a recalcitrant actor. On the set of his 1961 *Night of the Bomb*, the film's Puerto Rican female star refused to do the nude scene the script called for. Without hesitating, George substituted his own buttocks for hers. Born in 1942, he was at least about the right age.

This "can-do-in-the-face-of-chaos" attitude informs all of the work of one of the founding fathers of underground cinematic camp. He and his twin brother Mike were born on August 21, 1942; they made innovative, if engagingly threadbare, epics from 1954, when *The Wet Destruction of the Atlantic Empire* saw the light of day, until near the end of George Kuchar's life. In the case of *The Wet Destruction of the Atlantic Empire*, the boys' appropriation of all available materials included their mother's nightgown.

According to George, "At the age of twelve I made a transvestite movie on the roof and was brutally beaten by my mother for having disgraced her, and also for soiling her nightgown." Mrs. Kuchar's reaction was the Kuchars' first bad review, but it is a testimony to how endearing they and their work are that by the mid-1960s she was making regular cameo appearances in her sons' work.

Devotees of comic books, pornography, and commercial Hollywood cinema, George and Mike tried to replicate on film what they saw in their working-class lives--or filter it through their own gay sensibilities--using their 8mm camera and whatever locations, props, friends, and families were available.

In a 1998 essay "Schooling," Kuchar recalls his artistic beginnings in language as lurid as his work: "After school my twin brother and I would escape to the cinema, fleeing from our classmates; urban urchins who belched up egg creams and clouds of nicotine. In the safety of the theater we'd sit through hour upon hour of Indian squaws being eaten alive by fire ants, debauched pagans coughing up blood as the temples of God crashed down on their intestines, and naked monstrosities made from rubber lumbering out of radiation-poisoned waters to claw the flesh off women who had just lost their virginity."

Wet Destruction was followed by many other works in the comic chaos mode, torrid two-dollar melodramas based on Kuchar favorites such as Douglas Sirk's *Written on the Wind* (1956). Some of the titles are as notorious as the films themselves: *Corruption of the Damned* (1967), *Pussy on a Hot Tin Roof* (1961), *Hold Me While I'm Naked* (1966). Many featured shoestring special effects that included floods, earthquakes, and tornadoes, rendered with stock footage, backyard assemblages, and matte paintings by the talented duo.

The Kuchars were innovative exhibitors as well, setting up informal cinema clubs to show their work, which scandalized some of the attendees with its sexual frankness, anarchistic air, laughable plots, and grade-Z special effects.

Eventually members of the haute underground--Andy Warhol, Ken Jacobs, Jack Smith--took notice, and the Kuchars' films became both infamous in creating their legend and influential in showing others that neither



George Kuchar lighting a set in 2008. Photograph provided to Wikimedia Commons by contributor Calliopemichael under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license.

large budgets nor good taste were necessary conditions of film art. (John Waters cites them as a major inspiration.)

In the 1960s the brothers began to work independently, with George refining the steamy camp melodrama, using a stock company of friends, and, later, working in a diary format that allowed him to record with droll humor the nuances of his daily life and his self-proclaimed "favorite topic," Midwestern tornadoes. In the early 1970s he became a cartoonist in the underground comics scene but continued to make films.

In 1975, George Kuchar collaborated with the late gay filmmaker Curt McDowell for one of the underground's best-known titles, *Thundercrack!*, a lewd sendup of the "old dark house" genre from 1930s Hollywood, which George co-wrote and acted in.

From 1971 until a year before he died, Kuchar has taught filmmaking to scores of students at the San Francisco Art Institute, often collaborating with them on their projects and corralling them into working on his.

A scan of Kuchar's titles from the past several decades shows that his sensibility remained pure: *The Devil's Cleavage* (1975), *Ascension of the Demonoids* (1985), *Summer of No Return* (1988), and the unusual self-portrait called *I, An Actress* (1977).

Kuchar's latest major work, funded by the Rockefeller Foundation, carries his obsession with earthly, fleshly things into the literal stratosphere. *Secrets of the Shadow World* (2000) is a 140-minute digital video epic ostensibly tracking George's attempts to make a "big UFO movie," but it is really an excuse to display the filmmaker's scintillating sensibility and eccentric gallery of friends.

In a bizarre tableau that reaches the giddy heights of camp, he shows the Roswell, New Mexico alien as a sex fiend, stretched out on top of his friend Linda Martinez, who thrills to the touch of its plastic paw and moody, ovoid bedroom eyes.

On September 6, 2011, Kuchar died in San Francisco as a result of complications from prostate cancer.

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