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500 millibars to ecstasy, Kuchar, George, 1989  
The naked and the nude, Kuchar, George, 1957  
Back to nature, Kuchar, George, 1976  
The curse of the Kurva, Kuchar, George, 1990  
Knocturne, Kuchar, George, 1968  
Scarlett droppings, ,  
Lust for ecstasy, Kuchar, George, 1964  
Migration of the blubberoids, Kuchar, George, 1989  
The oneers, ,  
I was a teenage rumpot, Kuchar, George, 1960  
Club Vatican, ,  
Weather diary no. 3, Kuchar, George,  
The nocturnal immaculation, Kuchar, George, 1980  
Unstrap me, Kuchar, George, 1968  
Video album #5 (the Thursday people), Kuchar, George, 1987  
Tempest in a teapot, ,  
Eclipse of the sun virgin, Kuchar, George, 1967  
The asphalt ribbon, ,  
Ochokpuq, ,



San Francisco Film Society

## GEORGE KUCCHAR: LUST FOR ECSTASY

by Albert Kilchesty

For three decades George Kuchar's name has been synonymous with a comic film aesthetic unrivalled in the history of American independent filmmaking for its cheesy brilliance. Preposterous Hollywood melodramas and grade Z adventure films, supermarket tabloid headlines, underground comix, tales of torridly illicit love, unhealthy doses of Catholic dogma, and a generous sampling of other excretions siphoned from the festering bedpan of American sub-culture have all contributed to the creation of one of the most original and idiosyncratic body of films made by any artist who emerged during the 1960s. Noted as much for their buxom leading ladies, unctuous leading men and hilariously chintzy special effects as for their human warmth and underlying, but distinct, sense of pathos, George's films—and George himself, I might add—have become objects of cult veneration throughout the land, consistently drawing large audiences seeking the promise of tawdry thrills, throbbing passion and cheap spectacle. Working exclusively in "amateur" formats—8mm and 16mm film, 8mm video—George Kuchar turns out pictures which would make a dessicated corpse spring to life and gurgle with pleasure.

Although Kuchar was born and raised in the Bronx and remains perennially popular in New York (whose denizens may ultimately attempt to reclaim him in the future), his presence and influence have been very strongly felt here in San Francisco where he has been living, working, and teaching film production classes at the Art Institute for many years. A generation of local artists and aspiring filmmakers have prospered and, no doubt, perspired in his shadow. Many of them would probably agree that a tribute to his career by the San Francisco

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International Film Festival is a terrific idea, but one which is entirely premature. If his recent videotapes (*The Weather Diaries*, *The Thursday People*, etc.) are any indication of his current creative prowess, I would suggest, however, that some of George Kuchar's best work is being produced right now.

In his early teens, fuelled by an unusually hi-octane pubescent zeal, George and his twin brother Mike began churning out a series of exuberant 8mm costume epics at a frantic pace. The inspiration for these films came directly from the twins' seething and unfettered imaginations—sharpened by enforced hours spent in boring Bronx schoolrooms—and from the films they were seeing in local movie houses. George, whose personal memoirs have occasionally appeared in a variety of suspiciously short-lived journals and magazines, would recall these youthful moments with great passion. “[There] in the safety of the theater,” he once wrote, “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, naked monstrosities made from rubber that lumbered out of radiation-poisoned waters to claw the flesh off women who had just lost their virginity. When three hours were up we would leave the theater refreshed and elated, having seen a world molded by adults; a world we would eventually enter.”

During the late 1950s and 60s films such as *The Naked and the Nude*, *I Was a Teenage Rumpot*, *Lust for Ecstasy* and others which parodied (or, some might say, re-invented) the Hollywood cinema's production values and narrative formulae catapulted Mike and George into the midst of the burgeoning underground film scene in New York City. There they discovered an appreciative and eager audience for their films and their reputation as the wunderkinder of the film underground was born.

In 1966, shortly after he and Mike had parted ways to work upon individual projects, George Kuchar produced what has proven to be his most popular and most durable film to date, the legendary *Hold Me While I'm Naked*. Embedded in this universally appealing tale of sexual frustration (if you've never seen it you can't possibly refer to yourself

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with any degree of seriousness as a knowledgeable film buff) are s and strategies which would emerge as stylistic trademarks in most (3 the films made during the late 1960s through the 70s—the period of high camp and funky melodrama most closely associated with Georg The best of these 16mm films—*Eclipse of the Sun Virgin* (1967), *Unst Me* (1968), *Knocturne* (1968), *The Sunshine Sisters* (1972), and *The Mongreloid* (1978)—quickly became canonic staples of the independent “art” cinema and sealed Kuchar’s reputation as its undisputed comedic genius. Populated by brilliantly inept non-actors (primarily George’s friends and often George himself), awash in luridly oversaturated color, and propelled by sappy music lifted directly from B-movie soundtracks, these are films which celebrate the zitty side of life: a world of heaving passion and soiled underwear which Hollywood is too timid to show us—a cinema of forbidden longing and desperation forged and shaped in an alternate universe, born of the darkness behind the screen.

However, one of the great dangers in viewing George’s films as simple comic manifestations of an excremental mind at play is that one can completely overlook the often profound sadness at their core. There is a distinctly self-reflexive and diaristic component in a good deal of George’s work which often contributes to a nagging sense of confusion about when, or if, he might be putting us on and when he isn’t. This is particularly apparent in those of his films in which George figures as a central actor or, in the case of videos like *The Weather Diaries* where the camera behaves like a living organism surgically attached to his person, depicting with equally privileged intimacy the daily ennui of George’s life or a meteorological disturbance in the Oklahoma sky.

In the mid-1980s, while most filmmakers viewed video’s increasing ubiquity with great apprehension and dread, a rival medium which had finally come of age and would soon devour them with surging electromagnetic gusto, George acquired an 8mm camcorder and began experimenting with it in ways which are astounding and delighting a new generation of viewers. As spontaneity and improvisation had always been cornerstones of George’s film aesthetic, video’s immediacy, ease of operation and tremendous cost-effectiveness were qualities which he could eagerly embrace and employ to great effect.

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In addition, the many clunky accoutrements of filmmaking were no longer necessary. George needed only the camera, something at which to point it and...himself. As a result he is turning out videotapes with incredible speed and zest. Very funny stuff, very sad stuff; whichever way the weather turns, George is there to show us.

If alien beings successfully invade and conquer the planet in the next twenty-five years and come bearing bizarre, new image-making devices (for home use only, naturally), I have no doubt that George Kuchar will be the first earthling invited to play with them.

*Albert Kilchesty is a filmmaker and former Program Director of the Los Angeles Filmforum.*



San Francisco Film Society

## A SALUTE TO GEORGE KUCHAR

*Presented in association with the San Francisco Cinematheque*

### SECRET SECRETIONS — 4/27 7:15 KAB

#### A Program of Bay Area Video Premieres

"All the different series of videos are covered here: a weather diary with no weather, edited in-camera; an autumnal episode assembled on two tape decks; a so-called Muzak video featuring nothing but loud music on a track laid over unedited visuals; and a tape made in three days in a foreign city with workshop students. There's also a diary featuring various secretions." —G. Kuchar

Weather Diary #3 (1988, 20 min.)

Scarlet Droppings (1990, 15 min.)

Migration of the Blubberoids (1989, 15 min.)

500 Millibars to Ecstasy (1989, 20 min.)

The Curse of the Kurva (1990, 20 min.)

*Program runs approx. 90 min.*

### Kuchar's Legendary Epic

#### THE DEVIL'S CLEAVAGE (1973, 16mm, 122 min.)— 4/28 9:00 KAB

Soon after he arrived in San Francisco, Kuchar embarked on a filmic city tour in the form of a darkly-lit and dramatized *noir* featuring cameos by many of the most colorful local characters of the post-hippie era. "With considerable energy, ebullience and wit, Kuchar depicts his once imagined California paradise as a forbidden planet long-ruled by celluloid monsters from the Id."—J. Hoberman, *Village Voice*

### ANOTHER KUCHAR SAMPLER — 4/30 7:00 PFA

This evening's salute to George Kuchar presents a different but equally wonderful selection of his films and videos, beginning as a teenager in the Bronx, through his maturing years in New York City, the transition to San Francisco, and finally through his pioneering recent work in 8mm video.

Tootsies in Autumn (with Mike Kuchar, 1963, 8mm film, 10 min.)

Eclipse of the Sun Virgin (1967, 16mm, 15 min.)

Pagan Rhapsody (1970, 16mm, 23 min.)

The Nocturnal Immaculation (1980, 16mm, 27 min.)

Tempest in a Teapot (1990, video, 17 min.)

*Program runs approx. 2 hrs.*

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**AN APPENDIUM OF ACADEMIC ATROCITIES — 5/6 4:00 KAB**

**The Student Collaborations**

**ALL 16mm.**

Since the early 70s, Kuchar has made dozens of films with students from the San Francisco Art Institute and schools around the U.S. Kuchar describes this program as "rarely seen 16mm prints of young people unleashed in tales of mystery and terror. They express the hours we spent trapped together with low budgets and fast shooting schedules, along with difficulties outside of school which helped fuel the plots."

**Club Vatican** (1984, 10 min.)

**The Asphalt Ribbon** (1977, 20 min)

**The Oneers** (1982, 10 min.)

**Summer of No Return** (1988, 30 min.)

**Ochokpuq** (1979, 10 min.)

*Program runs approx. 80 min.*

**A TRIBUTE TO GEORGE KUCHAR — 5/6 7:00 KAB**

Tonight's program offers an autobiographical overview from Kuchar's 34 years of film and video making, including some of his best loved works, "an 8mm movie with old friends from the Bronx, films from the turbulent 60s and 70s, an atrocity or two from the painful 80s, and a 90s video message of goodwill and smeared hope."—G. Kuchar

**I Was a Teenage Rumpot** (with Mike Kuchar, 1960, 8mm film, 10 min.) **Mosholu Holiday** (1966, 16mm, 10 min.)

**Hold Me While I'm Naked** (1966, 16mm, 15 min.)

**Back to Nature** (1976, 16mm, 10 min.)

**Wild Night in El Reno** (1977, 16mm, 6 min.)

**The Mongrelloid** (1978, 16mm, 10 min.)

**Cattle Mutilations** (1983, 16mm, 25 min.)

**Fill Thy Crack with Whiteness** (1989, video, 14 min.)

*Program runs approx. 2 1/2 hrs.*

*Print and tape sources are Canyon Cinema, Filmmakers Cooperative, collection of George Kuchar.*