

EYEBLAZE # I

THUNDERCRACK!



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Part 1 of our new regular column in which we give short personal introductions to those unique gems of cinema that stand alone and are unlike anything else. Each week we shall focus on a film that has inspired and influenced our own work as filmmakers or has expanded our understanding of what cinema is and could be.

The film:

Thundercrack! opens with flashes of lightening and crashes of thunder over a cartoon image of an American Gothic looking house. The staggering plonky piano and stock sound of rain makes the film feel more like you are about to watch an episode of *Count Duckula* than a surreal horror porno.

So the film begins, due to the severe weather various young and sexually charged characters seek out shelter in a lone mansion where they meet Mrs Gert Hammond (Marion Eaton), a lonely middle-aged widow whose husband has died, devoured by a swarm of locusts, and whose son 'no longer exists'. She appears to have applied her make-up in the dark and staggers around her home in a black slip, she is somewhat reminiscent of Joan Crawford or Elizabeth Taylor but via a drunk *Coco the Clown*. She rambles aloud about her regrets and lost past in that unmistakable style of the film's writer George Kuchar, which is tragic, vile, hilarious and sensitive in equal measure. She invites her guests to change and make themselves comfortable as she prepares a meal for them. What ensues is a series of what would be standard pornographic scenes if it wasn't for the characters constant monologues about their feelings. This marriage of poetic rambling and hardcore sex serves the purpose of revealing the connections between their sexual behaviours and their emotional traumas – and emotional traumas being the key here!

About midway through the film arrives another guest to this house of melodramatic orgy, Bing, played by George Kuchar himself, who felt that as he wrote the script he had an obligation to also get involved in the action! He arrives in a fluster, his truck veered from the road and crashed, releasing a group of troubled circus animals which he was

transporting. One of whom, a gorilla named Medusa, is now madly in love with him and in hot pursuit. He warns the others of her rage and that there is nothing that will soothe her apart from his caressing embrace.

Thundercrack! is a film that defies easy categorisation to say the least. It is often referred to as a horror porno, but this just doesn't quite fit the bill. It is certainly sexually explicit but whether someone could be aroused by it is unlikely. The horror element is present more in the sense of its B-movie atmosphere than in the story. The grainy black and white photography, stark lighting and exaggerated acting that some may call bad but that personally we think couldn't be better. It is a film that explores how our personal traumas effect and feed into our sexual impulses and activities. It is more a melodrama than anything else and the heightened exaggerated style allows all that is usually hidden and left unsaid to boil over to the surface and leave no dark corner untouched.



Who made it:

This curious exploration of sex on the screen seems to come directly from the meeting of the minds and bodies of the film's director and writer, of Curt McDowell's celebratory and very enthusiastic approach to sex and George Kuchar's guilt-ridden and horrified surrender to lust and desire.

Curt McDowell and George Kuchar were two key filmmakers of the San Francisco underground film scene in the 1970s. Originally from New York, George had been making and showing films since his teens with the likes of Jonas Mekas, Andy Warhol and Jack Smith. He travelled to sunny California in the early 70s to fill a teaching position at the San Francisco Art Institute where he first met Curt.

'The first student I ever laid eyes on was the underground filmmaker Curt McDowell. He was sitting on my desk, wearing cut-off jeans and swinging his bare legs in the stuffy setting. He had on a teeshirt and woven sandals of straw, looking very much like a big boy with a huge appetite for cinematic knowledge (and for his teacher)'. George Kuchar

Curt McDowell was an artist studying painting at the San Francisco Art Institute before he started making films. He had moved to the west coast from Indiana, motioned by a voracious kind of appetite that San Francisco seemed to indulge at the time. George Kuchar has said of Curt that 'God gave him a calling in life, and that was to make pornography'. His film work comprises an original range of approaches to smut cinema, from raw documents of his sexual experiences to films like *Thundercrack!*, *Bogey Depot* and *Sparkles Tavern*, humorous mishmashes of genres, mixing porn, horror, burlesque musical and soap-opera.

Why it's important to us:

Not a film that has directly influenced any of our own projects, well not yet at least, but one that we often refer back to. When writing a script it is very easy to find ourselves trying to make things believable and realistic and this film is a reminder to throw that notion clean out. So much depth and truth is expressed about the strange and wonderful nature of our feelings and attitudes towards sex in a language and performance style that comes nowhere near realism but what is unmistakably real is the sex and it just wouldn't have the same impact if it was implied or simulated, it is confronted head on without shame. This direct approach to subject matter or theme is something that we aspire to, we hope that we can face it as clearly and never hold back from going all the way.



How to see it:

There are many clips and at least one full version of it on youtube, although it isn't very good quality. In London there seems to be at least one screening a year. There is a version available on DVD on Amazon and Ebay but reviews indicated it is of poor quality. Synapse films announced in 2009 that they were working with Curt's sister Melinda on a restored full-length version of the film but this has yet to materialise, we received an email from them this morning saying that they hope to have it ready for next year but it is not clear if they are working from one of the hacked up prints or if they have the original negative.

Further viewing/reading:

If you like *Thundercrack!* then you should definitely seek out more Curt McDowell films if you can find them, we haven't yet managed to track many down. We did once see *Bogey Depot* in a screening at the Tate Modern and *Loads* can occasionally be found on torrents but other than that they are tricky to find. If you find any we would love to hear from you!

Also recommended are George and his brother Mike's other films, they are all worth a look and once you've seen one you'll no doubt be seeking out more. *Hold me while I'm Naked*, *Corruption of the Damned*, *I an actress*, *Sins of the Fleshpoids*, *Craven Sluck* are all on youtube.

Two books essential to any fan of George and Mike's films are *Reflections from a cinematic cesspool*, in which they reflect on their life and their films, and *Desperate Visions: The Films of John Waters & The Kuchar Brothers*, which contains some fantastic interviews, including some information about Curt McDowell and an in-depth interview with Marion Eaton, the leading lady in *Thundercrack!*

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