

EYEBLAZE #3

IT CAME FROM KUCHAR



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Part 3 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:

It Came From Kuchar is a documentary about underground filmmaking legends George and Mike Kuchar, who are famous for their low-fi home movies that draw upon everything from 50's melodrama, B-movie horror and sci-fi to the experiments of the 50's and 60's avant-garde film scene. In our eyes, they represent the best of American cinema and *It Came From Kuchar* is the perfect introduction to their films. It certainly gives us an invaluable insight on the men behind the no-budget masterpieces *Hold me While I'm Naked*, *Craven Sluck*, *Sins of the Fleshapoids*, *The Secret of Wendal Samsom* and *Eclipse of the Sun Virgin*, amongst others.

The great thing about this documentary is that it is built around extensive interviews with George and Mike, letting them unfold their own story and shed light upon their wonderful and bizarre legacy. The Kuchars started making films together when on their 12th birthday they received a Super 8 camera. They recreated the scenes they saw on the movie screens, scenes of melodrama, action and adventure, but with their friends as stars and the Bronx as their set. They speak without affectation or pretentiousness about the films they love and the images that stuck in their minds and slipped into their own films, like Elizabeth Taylor's black eyebrows and white slip in the opening scene of *Butterfield 8*, or Lana Turner's romantic encounters in *Imitation of Life*.

In the early days they made films together but the majority of their films have been made separately. There is certainly a similarity in style but George seems more drawn to scenes of melodrama and sci-fi whereas Mike is more interested in sword and sandal fantasies, homo-erotica and psychodrama. Some films seem to be started by one



and finished by the other. One example is the film *Corruption of the Damned*. It was started by Mike, starring George, but Mike soon got bored of it and started cooking up another picture, a futuristic sci-fi where life-like robots revolt against their masters in order to experience love and a life free from oppression, which was to become *Sins of the Fleshapoids*. So George took over *Corruption of the Damned*, a melodrama with sprinklings of crime movie scenarios mixed in to spice it up. In *It Came From Kuchar* we get to hear how the film made an underground movie star out of their friend and collaborator Larry Leibowitz's mum.

One of the joys of watching their films comes from seeing reoccurring actors blooming into stardom, stars made from their friends or people that they could convince to be in one of their pictures. We grow affection for these actors who seem to be channeling the spirit of Hollywood stars such as Elizabeth Taylor, Rock Hudson or Lauren Bacall. The voluptuous Donna Kerness, the pained Bob Cohen, the nickerless Linda, Mother Kuchar, often as herself, and the greatest star of them all, none other than George himself!

Conventionally speaking, the Kuchars films appear unpolished and unprofessional but artistically they are making use of every cinematic strategy to suit their needs as flexibly and plastically as a sculptor uses their materials. What most filmmakers see as restrictions or mistakes, is taken apart and turned on its own head by the Kuchars, liberating and allowing themselves to use anything to make the film work and deliver the most unique and imaginative plot lines and moments seen on the silver screen. Watching their films we can gain a deeper understanding of the modes, conventions and archetypes of cinema, they use the language of films which they have absorbed as viewers, it flows from them naturally and with sincerity, defying cliché.

George worked as a film tutor at the San Francisco Art Institute from the 70's until he died in 2011. The documentary was made by one of his former students, so we spend quite a lot of time in the class with George, which gives us a real insight into both the films and his teaching methods. We see him and his class on the roof of the institute as he casually asks who wants to operate the giant inflatable spider while a bare-chested student swings at it with a plastic bone, acting with all his heart. His way of teaching is to make one of his films and use all the students as cast and crew, everybody gets their hands dirty, either in front of the camera with a wig or a costume on or behind the scenes doing everything from setting up a cookalorris to creating earthquake effects by shaking the set. Everyone is clearly having a great time and interviews with some of his students confirm this, I can't imagine many universities allowing this approach to teaching, certainly not in the UK, but what better way to learn than by working in the team directed by someone as resourceful, imaginative and open as George.

'George Kuchar has been a very influential teacher of mine. He's a real hands-on filmmaker who teaches by example. I learned from him to never give up and to persevere, even if a budget was cut down to 20 bucks. Everyone is a star with George. He'll pull a bag lady off the street and treat her like Marilyn Monroe.' Christopher Coppola, former student at SFAI



In addition to the student films, George still made his own movies and his *Weather Diaries*, which, when anyone mentions them in the documentary, sound like the best-kept secret of underground cinema, an aura of awe and fascination creeps into their words and you're left to wonder what treats they must be! The *Weather Diaries* are in fact holiday videos made by George on his annual trip to Oklahoma during tornado season. Shot on his video camcorder, the *Weather Diaries* featured whomever he met or visited him during his stay. They document his observations of nature, people and places and his voracious appetite for food and hot company, if somewhat guiltily admitted and rarely shown. When you get the chance to see a few of these videos (they're not very easy

to find), you'll see why everybody talks about them with such reverence. Part-confessional, part-observational, the *Weather Diaries* show George more up-close and open than in any of his other films. With nothing else but himself and the camera, the underlying themes and motivations of his work come through more clearly than ever and his process of filmmaking becomes directly present in his use of the video camera's options, making these videos an astonishing body of work, both spontaneously engendered and carefully crafted. Every year the experiment went in a different direction, sometimes producing something remarkable, other times just an interesting document, but very often being quite amusing and sometimes deeply moving – like *Season of Sorrow*, where Kuchar mourns his recently deceased pet cat, Blackie. Filmed mostly at night and featuring an unusually quiet and tearful George, the film uses superimpositions and fades to show the cat's presence lingering over his days.

Mike comes across somewhat more reserved in the documentary. Friends comment how he is known for his lack of eye contact, they relate this shyness to a soul searching trip to the Himalayas in which he got lost and had a bad drug experience. But even though George is the more outgoing of the two it would be wrong to see him as the driving force or the better filmmaker, the two brothers have as much creativity and individuality as the other and we should not forget that their most famous film *Sins of the Fleshapoids* may star George but it is directed and written by Mike. As well as making films, Mike is quite well-known for his artwork and especially for his erotic comic illustrations. In fact, both twins were trained as commercial artists and one of the delights of the documentary is to be able to see some of the drawings, paintings, illustrations, comics and posters that they have both created during their life, not just as an extension of their films but as another way to explore their interests and obsessions. Mike and George seem to have a truly unstoppable creativity that is both inspiring and contagious!



Who made it:

It Came From Kuchar was made by one of George's former students, Jennifer Kroot, and it is clear that the documentary has been made by someone who is both a friend and a fan of the Kuchars. The affection rubs off and it is hard to imagine anyone not being touched by this loving portrait.

Kroot is currently working on a new project, a documentary on George Takei, mostly famous for playing Mr. Sulu, the helmsman from the original *Star Trek* television show and movies. The film chronicles Takei's rise to fame, and how he went from a *Star Trek* celebrity to becoming an active voice in civil rights and marriage equality, after he publicly came out at the age of 68.



Why it's important to us:

This movie is inspiring for many reasons, it gives us an insight into the lives of two of our favourite filmmakers, it has allowed us to understand their films in a way that would have never been possible without it. But what it gives us as filmmakers can be summed up in two quotes from a letter we received from Mike last year giving us his advice as we set out on making our own film *Savage Witches*:

'Remember: movies are an illusion and you can 'say something' expensively or you can say it inexpensively. With a lot of money or no money, it will, and can, express the same thing with window dressing or without window dressings.'

'I've learned that the act of creation is to create something from nothing or with what ever one has to work with, which might not be much, but luckily we have imagination so nothing can stop us.'

How to see it:

There is an NTSC DVD available but the numbers seem to be dwindling on Amazon so it's probably worth snapping it up soon!

Further viewing/reading:

Many of Mike's and George's films are on youtube but there are hundreds more which may not ever see the light of day, many have copyrighted music on the soundtracks and this is one of the reasons why there isn't currently a DVD release. Their films really deserve to be restored and released in a box set, something like the BFI's Jeff Keen Collection or Criterion's Stan Brakhage collection.

Some of their films can be seen on here:

<http://www.ubu.com/film/kuchar.html>

<http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Kuchar.php>

And of course there is George's collaboration with Curt McDowell, *Thundercrack!* which we talked about in EYEBLAZE #1. In this blog post you'll also find a few more reading suggestions to learn about the Kuchars.



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