

THE PANIC ATTACK PRODUCTIONS OF GEORGE KUCHAR

A TRIBUTE



Originally published: One+One Filmmakers Journal, December 3, 2011 by Clara Pais

Cinema has recently lost one of its most prolific and exciting offspring – George Kuchar, American underground filmmaker, has passed away late this Summer. I have only discovered George's films during this year and have been taking most of it to be able to articulate the impression it has caused on me; when I knew of his death, I had an urgent feeling to celebrate him and his work, which I consider to be of great brilliance as a whole, and to somehow pay my respects and speak my admiration, if not personally as it's not possible anymore, by sharing it. As a filmmaker, learning about Kuchar was liberating; as a film lover it was an enjoyment. I can't believe anyone can be left indifferent by a Kuchar film and I dare say that after a few exposures you run the risk of being permanently changed.

Before I was introduced to the Kuchar world, I used to define my concerns as a filmmaker to be exploring film as a language which had the potential to be more truthful than other forms of communication. I was trying to find my position in the world of cinema, trying to fit my pursuits into the boxes I knew of. I was certainly more interested in treating films as artistic projects, explorations of the world, of oneself, of communication itself and that made me diverge from the world of conventional narrative film, though I never despised it and drew most of my love for cinema from what had been produced by Hollywood and European cinemas. But this world seemed to be sinking under the weight of commercial viability, stories and aesthetics developed for profit rather than for inspiration and enjoyment, which made the whole enterprise seem repellent, uninspiring and dull, even in so called independent films that practically carried on working in the ways of the industry. Documentary seemed a territory too murky to go into and anyway I was more interested in fiction as a symbolic or mythological construction of reality. I delved instead into the world of experimental and structural, non-narrative filmmaking, which enjoyed the creative freedom I aspired to. There was a more varied range of subject-matter motivated by questioning, there was more experimentation in both the creation and use of images and sound, the production costs were cheaper, the usual hierarchical roles of conventional filmmaking didn't apply and it wasn't even widely considered as cinema. It was exciting to try and get a grip of oneself in this world, to understand how far a film or video can go before it becomes something else, and what that something might be; however, I felt bogged down by certain constraints of such work, particularly that it



requires a highly intellectual type of engagement which I considered elitist. Overall, it lacked some joy – and then I found Kuchar.

To have an all-round idea of who he is it is best to watch *It Came from Kuchar*, a documentary about the films and filmmaking of George and his twin brother Mike, which was how I got introduced to them. You will learn how the legend started: being given a Super 8 camera by their mother, the young Kuchars started making their own productions inspired by the glossy Hollywood melodramas that were pumped into their eyes at the movies in the fifties. They made their films using everything around them – gathering relatives, friends, relatives of friends and neighbours to play their characters, and using their homes and the streets of Brooklyn as their sets. They aspired to make their films grand and spectacular like the movies they watched, and didn't feel swamped by the restrictions that arise from having little to no money to make them. This resulted in a large number of extremely bold and extravagant pictures that ended up disarming the New York underground film circuit and made the twins something of a sensation in those times. Though they seemed to have enjoyed the parties, they were not doing it to make a name for themselves, nor for money - making films was what they loved to do and so they did.

Their movies (and themselves) were very true to their own conditions, and that was part of their charm. They started by accepting to use consumer products as film equipment. I already mentioned the Super 8 camera that captured their first films. These cameras were cheap, small and handy to serve the home-movie market, which suited the Kuchars just fine as they were literally filming at home. It was easy to fit these cameras anywhere, take them everywhere and not worrying about too many technicalities. Their frames are composed with everyday props, impressive costumes and over-the-top make-up applied to characters who are usually tangled up in some tempestuous emotional business. Their early films, and especially George's for the rest of his life, are full of twisted characters and vile situations which seem to be the more touching as they are revolting. He was looking to provoke great effect: 'I tried to squeeze the essence out of each scene because each scene was expensive. (...) I did know I had a certain language in film. And that was like, do away with extraneous scenes like coming and going out of doors (...) Just have them go around doing their business, and their business, while you're photographing, should be very high key at that moment. Emotional peaks.'¹ The Kuchar take on the melodrama was to blow it up so wildly that including those boring or disconcerting bits of life (that were usually kept away not to spoil the glossy illusion of classic Hollywood) was meant to have some, preferably a lot, of dramatic impact. In order to do this, they made use of any and all of



cinematic devices they knew of, and made it up as they went. Superimpositions, jump-cutting, surreal inserts, stop motion, slow motion, narration, voice-dubbing, use of miniatures and hand-painted models, layers of text and speech bubbles, storms and lightning, colourful dramatic lighting, dynamic movement within and with the frame: the whole shebang. Everything at their disposal is transformed into something cinematic, and not through heavy intellectualisation but by an intuitional critical process that manifests itself through a hands-on approach.



Hold Me While I'm Naked (1966) is a favourite example of this. It was one of

George's first 16mm films starring his regular star at the time (and high-school friend), Donna Kerness – or that's what it would have been if halfway through the filming Donna hadn't stepped out due to illness. Despite that, George carried on making the film by turning the camera on himself and his situation, and composing a very humorous and touching portrait of a lonely filmmaker who can't finish his film because all of his friends are busy having sex. The filmmaking process started to seep into the film, showing us George directing the scenes he had shot with Donna, repeated takes that blur the boundaries between the different films we're watching – the film he began to shoot, the film he's shooting in the film, and the finished piece. George's style relies much on parallel action that reveals the emotional core of the film. *Hold me While I'm Naked* is one of his most successful uses of this technique, as the tension of the film culminates in a sequence where we see all the characters having showers, however, whilst George is alone and miserable beating his head on the wall, his friends are going wild, kissing and groping each other in the water. The film is erratic and imperfect, and I only made sense fully of its narrative logic after a few viewings, however it is very successful in transmitting a feeling that comes from the frustration of someone who aspires to do something but is surrounded by mundanity. Alone with his mother and a plate of pork chops, George ends the film by looking straight at the camera and asking 'There's a lot of things in life worth living for, isn't there?' – characteristically, George crosses another boundary by levelling up with the viewer, who can only have a personal answer after such sincerity.

This kind of process is even more overtly explored in a series he started a few years later, *the Weather Diaries*, which were done over his annual stays in a motel in Oklahoma during tornado season. George was fascinated by the weather and went there in hopes that tornadoes would make an appearance, which usually didn't happen. *The Weather Diaries* started to fill up the tediousness of the place and became a rather intricate form of self-entertainment. They are mostly fascinating as Kuchar's explorations of video – nearly all edited in camera, he would make inserts of sound and image into previously shot footage, constructing an entertaining narrative with a commentary of his day-to-day experiences. 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 even poignant – like *Season of Sorrow*, where Kuchar mourns his recently deceased pet cat, Blackie. Filmed mostly at dark and featuring an unusually quiet and tearful George, the film uses superimpositions and fades to show the cat's presence lingering over his days.

As personal as his best films are, George is not a solitary filmmaker. As he said somewhere, making movies was for him 'a way to get to meet people, having a little of social interaction'. And indeed most of his films have a lot of people involved, especially since he started teaching filmmaking at the San Francisco Art Institute in 1969. His classes are famous for being an eclectic experience of filmmaking, where everyone gets their hands dirty. A special kind of atmosphere is created when the production has practically no money to speak of, everyone is thrown into different roles and have only a 15-minute meeting before starting to make the film while, among the set, walks Linda Martinez in full make-up and costume, an old Kuchar star who doesn't hesitate to do all the crazy things George gets her to do. The films might not be up to the industry's established standards of professionalism, but they are true explorations of what a film can be by a group of people who, for a while, are together embroiled in a Kuchar panic attack production.



To sum up, what I find most inspirational about Kuchar is his amateur approach to filmmaking. Because he does not attempt to be professional, in the sense that the development of his abilities do not come from prolonged training or formal qualification, nor does he expect to commercialise his films in order to make a living. Instead, he takes it as a personal interest so the films have no other purpose than to fulfil whatever personal need he has at that point to make them. The fact that the films, or aspects of his work, can appeal to other people in many different ways, only adds to their value because it means they transcend their own purpose.

In practical terms, this process liberates him in all the ways that I have felt there were constraints before. There is a change in the relationship between the people involved in the films, since they're all unpaid and simply decide to join in the film's particular journey, and phrases like fixed roles, going over-time and over-budget become meaningless too. Through this process, George has allowed himself to have moments of brilliance and of crap in equal measure, remaining always truthful. His resourcefulness should be both inspiring and exciting for any filmmaker in terms of form and process, and that has definitely been what I have taken from him. Not all of his films are fantastic, but once you get a grip of the Kuchar world you realise you'll always find something fresh, something spectacular, definitely worth living for.

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