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Jennifer Krasinski (/contributor/jennifer-krasinski) on *The George Kuchar Reader*

George Kuchar's Voice

October 11th, 2014

ANYONE WHO HAS ever been an audience for auteur and artist George Kuchar will never forget *that voice*. His tart Bronx honk was a "sonic signature" of sorts, heard throughout the almost 350 films and videos he made over his lifetime. Perhaps equally unforgettable was Kuchar's way with words. Whether scripted or off the cuff, his cine-inflected gift for gab was wrapped in the pulp-fabulousness of film's other, less lofty languages. His speech possessed a screwball wit, a flare for melodrama, as well as a fondness for ripe metaphors and relentless alliteration.

Kuchar was a glamorizer in the spirit if not the style of Hollywood who understood that cheap tricks could spellbind just as potently as big budget ones, but with far greater privilege. Writing for *Film Culture* in 1964, he articulated the virtues of making films "underground":

The New American cinema has helped us by opening up new windows that we can jump out of, thereby plummeting into the depths of a new freedom. But if we are to protect ourselves from splashing into the pavement of indecency, we must have something to say. And I have this to say: Strip me naked you immoral world of vice and pleasure and I'll show you the lilly [sic] white flesh of truth!

Until his death in 2011, Kuchar produced a body of work that bared flesh, truth, and — most beautifully and radically — the universe as viewed and captured by the filmmaker himself. *The George Kuchar Reader*, edited with palpable reverence and intelligence by filmmaker/curator Andrew Lampert, gives audiences a new angle on Kuchar's domain, offering up a generous cross section of his lesser-known roles as screenwriter, essayist, illustrator, comic artist, diarist, and correspondent. The book is a grand opportunity to lap up his language, and to spend time inside *that voice*, a force of nature even when relegated to paper.

Included in this engrossing collection are rants and raves he wrote for film magazines, which double as manifestos on filmmaking: "You can do good, you can do bad, or you can do nothing." There are excerpts (some hilarious, some haunting) from his dream diary: "I'm in a school with Michael Snow and there are students around. I have respect for him and so I read some poetry he has composed ... When I begin reading it his groupies hit me on the head repeatedly with clubs ..." One wellspring of unexpected delight is a series of recommendation letters written for his students at the San Francisco Art Institute, where he taught for almost 40 years. Kuchar's pen transforms this otherwise drab academic duty into funny, fiery sales pitches on behalf of the gifted-and-aspiring: "This young man would make a fine addition to any classroom or payroll account. Grab him while he's still hot and feel some flesh of fury in its most potent position ... as top banana!"

Among the *Reader's* other earthly delights are selected pages from *The Movie Book*, one of 30 volumes of press clippings, programs, reviews, and ephemera collected by Kuchar. In the blank spaces of the pages that held his Scotch-taped souvenirs, the filmmaker illustrated characters both real and imagined. (Chalk it up to more proof that the underground auteur always knew how to make the most of the margins.) At the top of one particularly eye-catching page, he penned the words "THE CHICAGO BUNCH" in



The George Kuchar Reader

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publisher: Primary Information
pub date: 11.30.2014
pp: 336
tags: [Film](#) (</genre/film>)

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thought bubbles over the heads of a pitiable looking group including a naked man with oversized toes and a teeny penis, and a woman sporting a serpentine coil of shit unspooling from — or perhaps screwing itself back into — her ass. Perhaps we should read these as portraits of people Kuchar met on a bum trip to the Windy City? (You're welcome.)

Fans know very well that the auteur never met a bodily function he couldn't make good use of. If there were a map of his cosmos, poop might stand as the proof and mark of human existence. (It's the "stuff of life," after all.) When images of swirling turds in toilets appear in his videos, see them as Kuchar's "expulsions from eatin'." (Herein find a pleading aside for an uninhibited scholar to expound at length upon the filmmaker's gift for *diarrhetorics*.) Via the *Reader*, one may also come to appreciate (or not) Kuchar's recurring metaphor for the pains and pleasures of cinematic production — for the medium's far-wafting reach and heady powers: flatulence.

Fire storms which burn eternal in the buns of Beelzebub, creating demon winds of inspiration that blast free from his constricting hell hole to fumigate our consciousness with a whiff of Shangri-La. Oh, sweet mysteries of light and shadow, how thy flickering upon the silver screen brings such gold into the teeth of our torment!

Filmmaking was, according to him, a vital act of release from deep within. Although the products of these labors could sometimes be smelly and embarrassing, their purgative powers were unparalleled.

With one burst of abdominal wind, my film will blow down the barriers to freedom and joy, leaving me cleansed to begin a new film about the Miss America beauty pageants and the sinister deeds that mar it's [sic] floral displays.

In film and art as in life, to hold back is dangerous, even fatal. (In the *Reader*, repressed gas causes the death of at least one character.) In short, Kuchar's advice to the morbidly uptight might be expressed thusly: *let it rip*.

"As an actor you play different roles for different scenes, and the same is true in real life," wrote Kuchar to his close friend and erstwhile leading lady, Donna Kerness. ("Her face could launch a thousand ships. Her body can eject a hundred guided missiles.") The *Reader's* third act comprises correspondence from the filmmaker to his confidante, most of which is from the last year of his life. Kuchar wrote to Kerness with great candor about his sexual appetites, his desire to be loved, and the humiliations he experienced in its pursuit. He aches for the undivided attention of his lover Larry, with whom he had an ongoing affair for almost two decades, at one point interrupting himself to puncture the poignancy of his confession by humbly offering life up to art: "(hey, Donna, this sounds like a great radio script, huh?)"

Although no one would ever accuse Kuchar of living disingenuously, the filmmaker expressed regret for sometimes not having lived more openly. Fearing that the prostate cancer for which he was undergoing treatment could eventually take his life, and then learning that it would, he shared with Kerness his fear of being forgotten, of his life's work disappearing from sight.

I don't want the fire to die. I can die but not the flame. It has to keep dancing to create all those shadows on the wall moving. Those shadows are what my life has left for others to view.

About his legacy, the filmmaker's fans will vehemently disagree. He produced no shadows, only fantastic, phantasmagoric stories forged from light and life. George Kuchar's singular "big stink" will no doubt linger for a very long time, propelled as it is by his freakish tenderness for the vulgar, oddball world of ours he left behind.

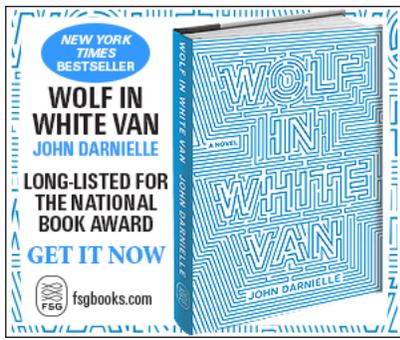
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