



Gene Youngblood

Underground Man

Source: Video Data Bank's *The World of George Kuchar, 2006*

Kitsch is the absolute denial of shit.
—Milan Kundera

In the spring of 2001 I embarked upon a project to study all of George Kuchar's video diaries. I wanted to write a book about them. They were obviously unique in film history and I wanted to explain why. I had been thinking about them for a long time and I had some ideas about what to look for. There were recurring themes and motifs, and George had innovated two cinematic strategies that I felt were important contributions to moving image language, unprecedented in the history of the art. My plan was to describe the tapes in detail by talking into a tape recorder as I watched them. I would proceed chronologically through the fifteen years of diaries that existed at that time, while keeping up with new releases. My life was more than full, so progress was slow. Five years later, in the spring of 2006, I had seen all of the one hundred and sixty diaries that the Video Data Bank was distributing at that time. The next step was to begin transcribing nearly one hundred hours of audiotapes. A few months earlier Steve Reinke invited me to write an essay for this collection, so the twenty-six titles he had selected became the first ones I transcribed and parsed into categories. It turned out that I had identified thirty different themes, motifs, narrative strategies, allegorical modes, camera angles, editing techniques and categories of imagery that

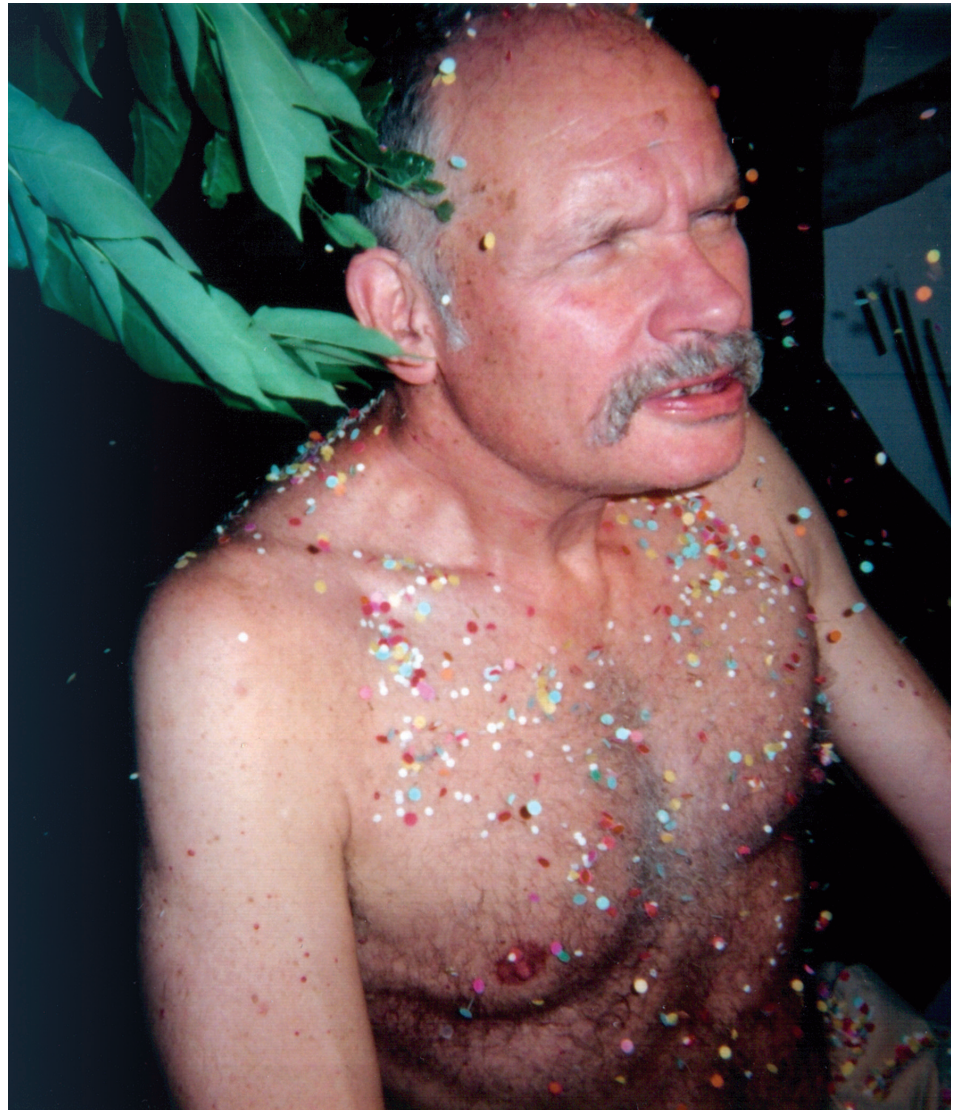


photo by Marie Losier



Weather Diary 6, 1990

run throughout the diaries. I discuss the most important ones in this essay and cite some examples.

I first wrote about George Kuchar in 1968, in a review of *Corruption of the Damned* and *Color Me Shameless* for *The Los Angeles Free Press*. George and his twin brother Mike had been making films for ten years by that time, together at first, then separately. "They poke fun," I wrote in the review, "at glamour myths and sexual fantasies with an originality and incisiveness that is fresh, unpredictable and richly nuanced. But in these apparently lighthearted works I have always detected something more serious, something similar to the corrosive personal vision of Luis Buñuel, though I would not for an instant compare Kuchar to the Spanish master." Today I would. There is no doubt in my mind that George Kuchar is one of the great artists in the history of the moving image. He is a consummate master of the medium, and his narrative constructions are nothing less than virtuosic. We are amazed by the craft, the perfect cues, the skillful edits, the startling images and visual rhymes, the flawless pacing and ingenious continuity, often achieved spontaneously, in camera. His images can be both insanely bizarre and rapturously beautiful, with a hallucinatory otherness seldom achieved by even the most visionary artists in film history.

Kuchar is also one of the great storytellers ever to work in this medium. Few can match

his eccentric imagination, his phenomenal wit, his peculiar way with language, and his ability to construct complex multidimensional narratives, again often spontaneously and sometimes in camera ("He's a walking storyboard," remarked an acquaintance after observing Kuchar at work). The work is transgressive and subversive—transgressive sexually (he's among the pioneers of queer and camp cinema) and in its scatological breach of decorum; subversive in its zero-budget triumph over commodity cinema, the triumph of amateur over professional.

The diaries are a chronicle of an artist and an art form liberated by video. In this medium Kuchar has been able to unfold the full potential of the themes, narrative strategies and cinematic styles that he developed in more than thirty years of working in film. The diaries blend autobiography, portraiture and fiction: scenes from a life, portraits of people and places, fictions constructed by George alone or in collaboration with his friends. Around a central event or set of events in each diary, he sustains an ongoing metanarrative of emptiness and isolation using still photographs, postcards, magazine illustrations, his own paintings and drawings, glimpses of TV programs, clips from Hollywood films, schmaltzy music, voice-over narration, cutaways to other locations, and most notably his asides. The result is a body of work without comparison in the history of cinema.

Underground Man

Kuchar's weather diaries, a subset of the diaries in general, have been compared by some to Thoreau's *Walden*. This is a misreading, not only of the weather diaries but of the entire diary project. *Walden* is about a man who goes into the country to learn how to live in the city. He wants to dissolve the boundaries between himself and nature so that he might understand himself and his place in the world. The weather diaries are about a man who seeks *release* from the world in self-obliterating confrontation with the sublime. Thoreau seeks solitude as an end in itself; Kuchar pursues it as a springboard to oblivion. Thoreau retreats to his little handmade house on Walden Pond. Kuchar retreats to a run-down motel in Tornado Alley where he eats Instant Postum and waits for a twister to lift him into the sky. Unlike that of Thoreau, Kuchar's retreat is neither a duty nor an act of civil disobedience. His very person is an act of civil disobedience. He's transgressive where Thoreau is transcendental. Thoreau regards as bad that which his neighbors call good, and he wants to rise above it. Kuchar calls good that which his neighbors regard as bad, and he pushes it in their face. Thoreau's retreat is an act of refusal driven by a tragic sense of betrayal. Kuchar's retreat is an act of self-sacrifice driven by a tragic sense of existence. He's not trying to escape society so much as the world. Where Thoreau's disobedience is world-



Award, 1992

referential, Kuchar's is just otherworldly. He wants to go away with aliens.

If we look to literature for elucidation of the diaries, a more useful comparison than *Walden*, it seems to me, is Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground*.⁽¹⁾ Dostoyevsky's underground man, one of literature's first antiheroes, is incapable of ordinary human interaction. Kuchar, indelible antihero of the diaries, is quite capable of human interaction but he longs to escape it. "I was trapped," he says in *Award* (1992), "and people didn't want to see me. I wanted to make believe I wasn't there. I wanted not to be there. I wanted to be invisible in the darkness, but they could smell me. That was the problem." Dostoyevsky's underground man lives under the floor; Kuchar hides behind his camera. No one sees the underground man; they only hear him speaking through a crack in the floorboards. We don't see Kuchar in the subjective point of view sequences that dominate the diaries; we only hear him talking from behind the camera. Occasionally he extends a hand out into the world that lies beyond the membrane of that video enclosure, but this only emphasizes his isolation.

Dostoyevsky's nameless character is a passionate amateur, forced by circumstance to take up the pen to fix something, for his own sake and that of others. He is nameless because "I" is all of us. Kuchar too is a passionate amateur, forced by circumstance to take up the camera to redeem the

art of film, and he holds a place for all of us in his invisibility behind that camera. Dostoyevsky's underground man, bearer of modern consciousness, is one of the most remarkable characters in literature; Kuchar, bearer of postmodern consciousness, is one of the most remarkable characters in cinema. Dostoyevsky's character lived underground for forty years; Kuchar has lived there fifty years and counting.

Dostoyevsky's underground man acts out in public; Kuchar acts out in the virtual public of his interior monologues. He hides, but like the underground man he is very much concerned with the impression his words are making. He glances at us out of the corner of his eye, very much aware of us as he speaks. His discourse, like that of the underground man, is not about intellectual activity. It's about the heightened consciousness that attends deep alienation, a sensibility that puts everything in ironic quotes, that sees everything as a representation of itself, especially the identity called "George Kuchar."

The underground man can't contain himself. In the perpetual dialectic of isolated consciousness he breaks decorum, interrupts himself, comments on his own intentions, and defies his readers. Kuchar does all of this too, and like the underground man he frequently couches his thought in the most blunt and crude terms. His lamentation, like that of the underground man, is neither rationalist nor romantic;

he simply carries to an extreme in his life what others don't dare to carry even half way. The inevitable result is the persona he presents in the diaries. "I am a sick man...I am a wicked man." This opening declaration of *Notes from Underground* might well be Kuchar's own.

Written in 1863, *Notes from Underground* anticipated the defining themes of Modernism—the impossibility of genuine communication and connection, the isolation and alienation of the soul, the emptiness and inauthenticity of materialist society. These themes were carried to Modernist culmination in the cinema by Michelangelo Antonioni in his early-sixties trilogy, *L'avventura*, *La Notte* and *L'eclisse*. Kuchar, starting around the same time, has carried them into postmodernism in hundreds of films, most importantly the video diaries he began making in 1985. In these singular and remarkable works Kuchar addresses themes of isolation, disconnection and alienation primarily through innovations in cinematic technique. He engages themes of emptiness and inauthenticity through kitsch and melodrama, through the lurid iconography of pulp horror and science fantasy, and through the construction of "George Kuchar" as an emblematic identity.

Performing an Identity of Emptiness

With *Anticipation of the Night* (1958), Stan Brakhage invented first-person cinema whose protagonist is the filmmaker behind

the camera engaged in an intense act of seeing. The protagonist of any diary is its author, so the same applies to Kuchar's first-person cinema. But in his case the filmmaker behind the camera is engaged most importantly in the construction of an identity called "George Kuchar." He is performing himself. For Kuchar, filming is acting. But this act is as much ontological as it is aesthetic, rooted as deeply in personhood as in some artistic strategy. The word person is derived from persona, which means mask; the persona called "George Kuchar" is constructed around three allegorical themes or motifs—Happy, Hungry, Horny—that thinly mask, and therefore underscore, an inner emptiness. I call them the three H's.

Happy

Outwardly Kuchar is always happy, enthusiastic, appreciative, accepting and encouraging. He always has something positive to say. But there's something forced and exaggerated in all this sunshine. He's a little too happy, too positive, too anxious to deny the dark side. The most blatant example is in *Video Album 5* (1987) when he visits his long-time friend, the filmmaker Curt McDowell, who is dying of AIDS. "Curt, you look great!" Kuchar exclaims as he approaches the deathbed of the skeletal McDowell. Another striking instance is Kuchar's hysterical, almost deranged excitement over the view of Long Island Sound from a high-rise window in *Metropolitan Monologues* (2000). He points to this effusiveness by speaking in a declarative tone, his voice raised in pronouncement. He underscores his lines as speech acts, remarking the banal as if he's delivering an Oscar Wilde aphorism.

Hungry

He's always hungry for food. The diaries are filled with images of, and references to, food and eating. The addict's anticipation is relentless: "When do we eat?" "What's for dinner?" "We better get at the food while it's still fresh." It's a well-known signifier of lack, of the futile attempt to compensate for a different kind of emptiness. The dark side is elimination and gastrointestinal distress.

He's always farting, belching, complaining of diarrhea or constipation. The pleasure of eating is subverted through closeups of George's drooling mouth stuffed with repulsive, slimy, masticated matter.

Horny

He's always hungry for sex but he never gets laid, at least not in the diaries. The most frequent overt sex is George masturbating, as in *Cult of the Cubicles* and *Weather Diary 3*. Otherwise sex is coyly alluded to through nudity, voyeurism and suggestive innuendo; parodied in mock-tawdry performances, or bluntly described in language and depicted in pornographic magazines and movies. Of the one hundred and sixty diaries I have seen, only one (*Rainy Season*, 1987) shows George in bed with a lover (he's lying on top in closeup, they talk and kiss lightly), and only one shows him engaged in a sexual act other than masturbation (his hand grabbing his friend's crotch in *Rocky Interlude*, 1990).

Kitsch and the Dark Side

These allegories of lack are embedded in an all-pervasive context of kitsch, and are thus directly linked to it. In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Milan Kundera famously defined kitsch as the absolute denial of shit—that is, denial of the dark side. He was referring to totalitarianism, which denies shit absolutely (as in Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*), but his insight applies to nonpolitical kitsch as well. In Kuchar's diaries, emptiness is the darkness that the three H's deny or reveal, and he emphasizes this by surrounding them with kitsch, the emblem of denial.

There are many variants of aesthetic and cultural kitsch, and Kuchar uses all of them. As an aesthetic value judgment, kitsch can be bad taste or bad art, it can be the opposite of art, it can be a functional component of "high art" or it can be opposed *against* high art as anti-art. There are two kinds of kitsch as bad art. The first kind denies shit by offering a sanitized and idealized view of the world that excludes everything humans find disturbing or offensive, everything that is unacceptable in human existence. That's

the Third Reich, but it's also every tweety bird toy, every ceramic angel, every TV commercial that invites us to view our own destruction aesthetically.

The second kind of bad art kitsch denies shit by representing the dark side in such an exaggerated manner that it becomes caricature and is no longer authentically dark. This variant of kitsch begins in the *Sturm und Drang* of melodrama and escalates through garishness into the most lurid expressions of popular culture, found most commonly in pulp horror and science fantasy. Kuchar has employed both of these kinds of kitsch since the beginning of his career, and they appear in almost all of the diaries, often simultaneously. The sentimental and mawkish are commingled with the nauseating and unwholesome. A religious figurine, a wind-up toy, an innocent child will be contrasted with lurid pulp horror, as in *Uncle Evil* (1996), where a little boy's birthday party is intercut with appropriated Troma-style scenes of dismemberment, cannibalism and a teenage boy biting off his mother's nipple.

Understood primarily not as bad art but as the *opposite* of art (different from anti-art), kitsch becomes the generic representation of undifferentiated "good taste." This is cultural kitsch. It's the mass franchise variant of good taste, an inferior copy of an original style. It repeats convention and formula, lacks originality, is aesthetically impoverished and morally dubious. It is, as Clement Greenberg remarked, all that is spurious in the life of our times. This kind of kitsch is a pantomime of aesthetic life, ungrounded in personal experience. Vicarious and fake, it sometimes signals class status (like the McMansions in *The Inmate* and *Point 'n' Shoot*) but it is only the residue of somebody else's privilege. This last irony is reflected in *Metropolitan Monologues*, in the contrast between the middle class trio reading George's *Kiss of Frankenstein* script in their "good taste" condo, and the garish white trash called Philly acting out a lurid sexual convulsion in her train wreck of an apartment, using Preparation H as skin cream.



Snap 'n' Snatch, 1990



Kaponga Island, 2004

Kuchar's regard of kitsch is ambivalent and double-edged. He subverts it and affirms it. It is negative and positive. On one hand, he uses the emptiness at the heart of kitsch as a metaphor for, and mirror of, emptiness in our souls. On the other hand, his framing of kitsch as anti-art opens a space for expression that can be more authentic to the extent that it is unrestricted by "good taste." In both cases, Kuchar's use of kitsch as a narrative device is a function of irony. He subverts kitsch by embedding it in shit, by framing it in ironic relation to that which it denies, the dark side, mostly scatological. This is not parody. Kuchar tells us "read this as kitsch," but within his bleak metanarrative kitsch becomes automatically tragic: its empty sentimentality can't nourish the soul, its inflated cheerfulness can't hide a desperate existential crisis, its lurid eroticism is an unattainable ideal, its false nutrition gnaws at a stomach forever hungry.

Kitsch and Rebellion

In this negative use of kitsch, denial of shit eradicates authenticity and truth, leaving the soul hollow and desolate. But this desolation is countered and redeemed by Kuchar's simultaneous *positive* framing of kitsch as anti-art. Here he deploys the two kinds of bad taste (sentimentality and lurid garishness) as an anti-aesthetic against the elitism of good taste. He embraces bad taste in rebellion against the hegemony of high culture, which prevents honest personal expression. In this humanistic and affirmative

interpretation of kitsch, credentialed Art is seen as something that serves *public* expression whereas kitsch serves *individual* expression. Art serves politics and exists for itself; kitsch serves life and addresses the human being. It is not so much the servant of Truth as it is the expression of passion at all levels. It addresses the sheer human capacity to love anything. It's an unavoidable part of being human. Viewed from this perspective, reliance on second-hand aesthetics is not a moral emergency. Liking is liking. Accordingly, there is never a sense that Kuchar feels superior to the kitsch he abuses so flagrantly. There is no condescension. This, together with his extraordinary humor, accounts for the liberating effect of his work in spite of the gloomy metanarrative

In this context we take the three H's literally, not allegorically. Happy, Hungry and Horny are just that, nothing more, and they are good things. What was a taxonomy of emptiness now becomes a register of robust appetites. The three H's now reflect a healthy lust for life, an ardent capacity for pleasure in a culture deeply conflicted around pleasure. This George Kuchar savors every bite of the moveable feast that is life. This George Kuchar celebrates sexuality as an absolute good in any and all of its consensual forms, in a culture that is fundamentally sex negative. He celebrates it unapologetically, rude and crude, in rebellious contrast to romantic kitsch. He is every bit as transgressive, subversive and

liberating as the Luis Buñuel of *Un Chien Andalou* and *L'Age d'Or*, and his cinematic innovations are equally wondrous.

Subjective Suture: Constructing Isolation

As a result of his methods of working, the technology he uses, and the themes he wants to address, Kuchar has made fundamental contributions to two strategies of cinematic narrativity and spectatorship—the interior monologue, and what film theorists call suture. Whereas kitsch is Kuchar's thematic emblem of emptiness and rebellion, he uses purely formal innovations to create and sustain a pervasive sense of isolation.

Conventional movies create in the spectator a subjective sense of being incorporated into the illusory space of the story and its world (what theorists call the diegetic space). This feeling is achieved in two ways: through identification with the camera and through suture (to stitch). Suture refers to the shot/countershot strategy in continuity editing, whereby a second shot allows the first to be shown as a character's field of vision. This establishes a spatial orientation that sutures us into the cinematic illusion, such that we become subjectively one with it, inseparable from it. Because we identify with a camera that is external to the characters (field of view is not the same as subjective view), and because the shot/countershot orients us in the space *around* the characters, conventional suture is "objective."

In the diaries, Kuchar creates a powerful sense of isolated subjectivity by inverting the shot/countershot construction in such a way that suture becomes subjective. Except for certain cutaways and inserts, the diaries present only two views: we are either inside George's head gazing out at the world through his camera-eye, or we are external to him, *gazing with him at himself* through an externalization of that same camera-eye, which is never from anyone else's point of view. When he's talking with someone there's never a reverse angle from their end of the axis of action. There are only alternating closeups that isolate the interlocutors from one another and from their environment. There are no establishing shots and no eyeline matches, and as a result there's no spatial orientation. This is similar to Carl Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc* with an important difference: the absence of subjectivity in Dreyer's film due to the absence of subjective point of view.

Kuchar is not always behind his camera but he is always controlling it. It's always in a position, at an angle, and at a distance that he determines. This is the case when any filmmaker turns the camera on him/herself. The difference is that Kuchar is always the subject of his camera's gaze, not merely its object, no matter where the camera is looking. In effect, we are always inside his head. The field of view is centripetal: he's the center and the axis of a shot/countershot construction that sutures us always and only into his subjectivity, never into the space around him. There's a spectacular example of subjective suture in *Kingdom by the Sea* (2002). George is toasting the New Year with his friend Diane. We see her with a bottle of champagne. He holds the camera out with one hand so that it looks back at him. With his other hand he holds a glass close to the lens. Champagne flows into it. He pulls the glass away from the camera to his mouth, takes a sip, then extends the glass toward the camera again. Cut to his subjective point of view. The glass of champagne has not changed position in the frame, but it is now in the woman's hand, and she pulls it away from the camera to her mouth in medium closeup. The line between the people in this scene doesn't connect them, it separates them. It pivots on that

crucial cut, momentarily disorienting, that spins a reflexive universe around Mr. Kuchar alone.

Reaching Out

Inversion of the shot/countershot simultaneously stitches us into Kuchar's subjectivity and isolates him from the world. He's enclosed inside his video bubble. As I noted earlier, his hand reaching out beyond that enclosure only emphasizes his isolation. The hand reaching out is one of the most frequently repeated motifs in the diaries, second only to the subjective point of view itself, which is less isolating without this gesture. To underscore its function as a signifier of isolation, the hand often moves in a non-natural way. It reaches out slowly, deliberately, ritualistically, an almost robotic gesture, or it moves with a pan as if attached to the camera. In *Metropolitan Monologues* we see only fingers and part of the palm in silhouette, the fingers quivering as with palsy or age.

Closing In

There's a clever variation on the video enclosure in *Weather Diary 6* (1990): We face a video camera on a tripod as George approaches from the other side and puts his eye to the viewfinder, through which he presumably sees "us" (the camera that is looking at him). Cut to the same image, now a reflection in a mirror. Like all mirror shots, this is simultaneously objective and subjective. We are external to George only because we're inside his head looking out at a mirror image of his act of looking. In conventional films, reflexive shots like this integrate the camera and its operator *into* the world, whereas here it reinforces the sense of Kuchar's isolation *from* the world.

In *500 Millibars to Ecstasy* (1989), Kuchar makes it quite clear that the video bubble metaphor is conscious and deliberate. He's inside a plastic bag with his camera because it's raining and he doesn't want the camera to get wet. We don't know this, however. We just see a strangely beautiful semi-abstract image, shot through the plastic bag. "What a pathetic image," Kuchar says. "Me isolated from the world, the elements, from another

human being, yet I'm still looking for a hole. Which way is out? You can get anything you want around here except a hole to go in and out of."

The Doubled Voyeur

As film spectators we identify with something that isn't human, the camera. We are the looker who sees what the camera sees, hence we become it. The shot/countershot in continuity editing positions us within the diegetic space but not within the subjectivity of any character. We are separate from them because we are the camera that sees them. The diaries humanize our identification with the camera because the camera is Kuchar, even when it is external to him. By becoming the camera we become him. The result is a doubled voyeurism that compounds the sense of his (and our) isolation.

Spectatorship is voyeuristic: we sit in a darkened room, anonymous and invisible, privately and discreetly watching the actions of others. The diaries position us inside a second darkened room, nested within the first: the *camera obscura* of Kuchar's head, where we are invisible. In conventional movies where the camera is "objective" there's always the chance we'll be seen, that our voyeurism will be discovered, so the camera's presence must not be acknowledged. Actors don't look at the camera not merely because it ruptures the illusion, but because spectators don't want to be caught in the act. In the diaries people look directly at us because they are looking at George, but we are hidden from view. They can see him but they can't see us.

Voyeurism depends on this insulating distance between observer and observed. But the voyeurism of the diaries is a function of more than mere distance. It's the necessary consequence of an unbridgeable isolation that prevents Kuchar (and therefore us) from being a *witness*. Voyeurs are not witnesses who seek to tell accurately what they experience. Witnessing requires direct involvement, so that the experiences of the observed become the observer's experience. Subjective suture forecloses any possibility of involvement. The diaries are always and only about Kuchar's experience,



Cult of the Cubicles, 1987

never that of others. He reaches out, but he doesn't really *want* to fully engage the world. His subjective enclosure is isolating, but it is also protective, so he retreats into it and he takes us with him.

The Aside as Interior Monologue

In his first few years of working in video, Kuchar often edited his diaries (and films made with students, like *Vile Cargo*, 1989) in the camera. By rewinding the tape and recording new material over parts of existing scenes, he constructed conversations that didn't exist, created cutaways and inserts, and invented a variation on the interior monologue using what might be called subjective asides. Since there was no post-production, music was recorded during photography by playing audiocassettes. People smiled or laughed when George entered the room with his camera because music came with him from a shoulder-slung tape recorder.

In a conventional interior monologue we hear a character's thoughts over a shot of him not talking. We hear him speak but his lips don't move. Kuchar's asides are interior monologues that are directly spoken. They are inserts in which we see and hear him responding to, or commenting about, people he's with, places and situations in which he finds himself, or life in general. Because the inserts are created at different times, in different acoustic spaces, and with different light conditions and camera

positions, they look and sound different from the scenes into which they are inserted. They seem isolated from their context, and as a result there's a strong sense that the people in the scene don't hear what he's saying. It's an interior monologue. He has stepped momentarily out of their world to share his thoughts and reactions with us alone. These are almost always expressions of the dark side, confessions of alienation or depression, feelings of inadequacy or insecurity, complaints about gastrointestinal distress that contradict and betray the forced happiness of his external performance.

It is important to recognize the fundamental difference between the isolated interiority of Kuchar's asides and conventional objective asides in films by, say, the Marx Brothers, Woody Allen or Jean-Luc Godard. Moments of direct address in those films are not particularly innovative cinematically, and they don't suggest any kind of interiority. They are exegetic ruptures, whereas Kuchar's subjective asides don't rupture anything because his entire narrative is subjective. They simply reinforce the sense of isolation that the narrative is designed to produce. In this collection, the best examples of asides as interior monologues are in *Cult of the Cubicles* (1987). This masterful work also contains an ingenious variation on the conventional form of the interior monologue: George is looking directly at us in closeup, not talking, as we hear him comment on his friendship with Larry Liebowitz. This speech comes from a tape

recorder that's in the room with him; we don't see it but the quality of the sound gives the situation away. This means it is diegetic speech, not voice over. He's talking directly to us through the intermediary of the tape recorder (like a mute person signing), so the scene has the effect of a subjective aside while retaining the form of a conventional interior monologue.

Cult of the Cubicles is also filled with a different use of inserts—namely, to construct artificial verbal exchanges, conversations that never took place in the way that we hear them. Kuchar inserts shots of himself asking questions or making comments that frame the speech of his interlocutor in some humorous or sexual or ironic way. But sometimes even these brief utterances seem interior, as if the person responding to them could not have heard them, so that Kuchar seems disconnected even when he's connecting. All of the conversations in *Cult of the Cubicles* contain examples of this. The best are those with Larry Liebowitz and with a woman named Beth who talks about living in Boulder, Colorado.

Paying Attention

The interior monologue has been a central narrative strategy in all of Kuchar's diaries up to the present, but in the 1990s he began using voice-over narration instead of asides to create a sense of interiority. This is especially effective when the voice-over is whispered, as in *Scarlet Droppings*

(1990), *The Inmate* (1997), and *Burnout* (2004), three of the best diaries Kuchar has made. These monologues are brilliantly written, poignant and haunting, and they give resonance and depth to three kinds of cinematic beauty that grace the diaries in different ways. First there is classical beauty. It's in all of the weather diaries as visions of sublime grandeur, but more importantly it's in Kuchar's close attention to atmospheric detail and visual abstraction—patterns of light and shadow, montages of people, places and things that create an elegiac and melancholy mood. These artful moments heighten the sense of subjectivity because they're about George engaged in the act of seeing. The best examples in this collection are in *The Inmate*, *Scarlet Droppings*, *Weather Diary 6* and *Creeping Crimson*.

Then there's the kind of beauty John Cage meant when he said "Art begins where beauty ends." Kuchar's redefinition of beauty centers primarily around qualities we normally think of as hallucinatory or bizarre. Hallucinatory visions are in *Burnout* (George covered with debris, flailing his arms wildly on a glaring movie set; the woman called Philly dancing in fetish stilettos), in *The Inmate* (purple willow trees swaying in the breeze as a man sings "I talk to the trees but they do not listen to me"), in *The Kingdom by the Sea* (a fountain of color in a sphere of stars; a figure silhouetted against Tesla-coil lightning in a glass globe), and in the city-at-night montages in *Burnout* and *Song of the Whoopee Wind*, done in superimpositions, dissolves, slow motion and time-lapse. More bizarre moments are in *Metropolitan Monologues* and *Cyclone Alley Ceramics* (digitally processed facial features that melt), in *Song of the Whoopee Wind* (a closeup of a cat's wobbling head, stretched

and crazed, gazing insanely at the camera) and in *Weather Diary 6* (a young man with a broken neck in a motorized scooter, and a song: "I'm going to leave you, goodbye, where the wind blows so high...").

Only someone who pays total and complete attention to the world, who is *fully* in the world, can create moments like these. The real protagonist of the diaries is not the isolated and emblematic persona they construct; it's the filmmaker behind the camera who, like Stan Brakhage, is engaged in an intense act of seeing. This George Kuchar is in close and vital contact with the world around him at every moment, and no one derives more fulfillment from such focused attention than he does. His soul is far from empty. The sheer joy of the diaries, in spite of their existential themes, is a function not only of Kuchar's great wit but of his obvious reverence for the universe and all of its creatures. "Art," said John Cage, "is paying attention." And Buddhists say, "Attention is prayer."

1. All descriptions and characterizations of the underground man are from Richard Pevear's Introduction to the 2004 Everyman's Library edition of Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground*, published by Alfred A. Knopf. I am indebted to Woody Vasulka for suggesting this comparison.

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