

DISGUSTINGLY QUEER:
GEORGE KUCHAR'S VIDEO DIARIES

By

LIZ DEEGAN

Bachelor of Arts in English

Graceland University

Lamoni, IA

2012

Submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate College of the
Oklahoma State University
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for
the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS
May, 2018

DISGUSTINGLY QUEER:
GEORGE KUCHAR'S VIDEO DIARIES

Thesis Approved:

Dr. Graig Uhlin

Thesis Adviser

Dr. Jeff Menne

Dr. Megan Burke

Name: ELIZABETH DEEGAN

Date of Degree: MAY 2018

Title of Study: MASTER OF ARTS

Major Field: ENGLISH: SCREEN STUDIES

Abstract: In the realm of underground film and video, George Kuchar is primarily discussed in connection with his twin brother, Mike, and their trash-spectacular narratives that injected the queer underground movement in the 1960s with a taste of the bizarre. These collaborative films have long overshadowed the individual work that both George and Mike made since ceasing to work together in the late 1960's. Since their amicable split, George not only left their Bronx homestead to teach at the San Francisco Art Institute until his death in 2011, but also made a significant switch from 16mm film to video in 1985. By switching to this more affordable and accessible format, George embarked on what would become a vast body of diaristic videos. In shifting from film to video, Kuchar kept some of the thematic foundations from his collaborative films with Mike, but instead focused on his cross-country travels, mainly his summer-long excursions in Oklahoma, on the lookout for tornadoes. In creating these personal videos, Kuchar presents himself as an affable, unserious person whose life is steeped in lowbrow culture or kitsch aesthetic. Kuchar focuses on the culturally and socially undervalued, and he is not interested in elevating its value status. Instead, he desires to join the muck. This thesis examines Kuchar's video diaries for their specifically queer investment in the debased and devalued. I consider them in relation to the affect of disgust, and I argue that these videos show disgust to be a complex response to "low" forms, whether aesthetic, cultural, or social. Disgust is conventionally understood as a gesture of refusal or aversion, a rejection of the object or value deemed disgusting. Kuchar's queer form of disgust, by contrast, savors impropriety and excess, and revels in the violation of boundaries.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. INTRODUCTION	1
II. THE CASE FOR DISGUST	6
In Aesthetics.....	10
In Film.....	13
III. DECODING KITSCH	18
IV. READING FOR FILTH: ANALYSIS	28
Proximity to the Body	29
Technology and Form	37
Commodity, Trash and Dirt	42
V. CONCLUSION.....	46
REFERENCES	48

INTRODUCTION

*“When I view my body of work, I’m sometimes as repulsed
as when I view my physical body.”*

- George Kuchar, “Cans and Cassettes”¹

The article most indicative of George Kuchar’s video diaries, queer materiality, and his critique of commodity culture is his dirty underwear. There are images and discussions of underwear in the majority of the videos utilized for this study, and they are always dirty. In *The George Kuchar Experience*, Steve Reinke notes, “It’s not that George’s white cotton briefs are always dirty. He just has no reason to show us his clean ones. What would be the point?”² What would be the point, indeed? Clean underwear would relate too closely to new underwear, just out of the plastic packaging. Dirty underwear, however, speaks volumes about the person who continues to wear them, continues to air them out in front of an audience. His underwear of choice are tight-whities, which are perfect for showcasing the variety of stains and grime that have amassed while holding Kuchar’s loins close, urine, semen, sweat and shit alike. We see his underwear in two ways, either laying around his living quarters, or actually on Kuchar, usually accompanied by no other clothing and a lot of crotch groping. In *Cult of the Cubicles*, while Kuchar is visiting his mother in the Bronx, she pesters him about his underwear and he loudly exclaims, “It’s not *that* yellow!”³ This is a regular discussion topic, the filth of his underwear

¹ George Kuchar, "Cans and Cassettes," *Journal of Film and Video*, no. 57 (2005): 84.

² Steve Reinke, "The George Kuchar Experience," in *The George Kuchar Experience*, ed. Steve Reinke (Pleasuredome & YYZ, 1996), 8.

³ *Cult of the Cubicles*. Directed by George Kuchar. USA: Video Data Bank, 1987. DVD.

pushing back on whether it's fit to wear. Instead of buying new and clean underwear, Kuchar recycles the same stained pairs over his decades of video diaries, continually adding more secretions into the mix.

In the realm of underground film and video, George Kuchar is primarily discussed in connection with his twin brother, Mike, and their trash-spectacular narratives that injected the queer underground movement in the 1960s with a taste of the bizarre. These collaborative films have long overshadowed the individual work that both George and Mike made since ceasing to work together in the late 1960's. Since their amicable split, George not only left their Bronx homestead to teach at the San Francisco Art Institute until his death in 2011, but also made a significant switch from 16mm film to video in 1985. By switching to this more affordable and accessible format, George embarked on what would become a vast body of diaristic videos. In shifting from film to video, Kuchar kept some of the thematic foundations from his collaborative films with Mike, but instead focused on his cross-country travels, mainly his summer-long excursions in Oklahoma, on the lookout for tornadoes. Reinke addressed this distinction between the melodramas George made with his brother, and the "documentary" videos he made on his own. He writes that "the difference between his melodramas and documentaries is that the turds are fake in the melodramas, but real – and always his – in the documentaries. The melodramatic turds are fashioned from dog food. The documentary turds ostensibly function as evidence of the over-consumption of sausages and pizza, the plight of Kuchar's aging body as it eats its way through America's junk (food) culture."⁴ This switch, then, allowed for a more authentic representation of some of the themes that were regular tropes in the Kuchar brothers' work – the body and its excretions, and kitschy, disposable plasticity, except now they take on a more intimate tone. In creating these personal videos, Kuchar presents himself as an affable, unserious person whose life

⁴ Steve Reinke, "The George Kuchar Experience," in *The George Kuchar Experience*, ed. Steve Reinke (Pleasuredome & YYZ, 1996), 7.

is steeped in lowbrow culture or kitsch aesthetic. Kuchar focuses on the culturally and socially undervalued, and he is not interested in elevating its value status. Instead, he desires to join the muck. This thesis examines Kuchar's video diaries for their specifically queer investment in the debased and devalued. I consider them in relation to the affect of disgust, and I argue that these videos show disgust to be a complex response to "low" forms, whether aesthetic, cultural, or social. Disgust is conventionally understood as a gesture of refusal or aversion, a rejection of the object or value deemed disgusting. Kuchar's queer form of disgust, by contrast, savors impropriety and excess, and revels in the violation of boundaries.

Within academic scholarship, George Kuchar's work is largely underrepresented. Outside of a few exemplary articles and chapters from the likes of Gene Youngblood, Scott MacDonald, and Juan Suárez, Kuchar is generally mentioned only among the names connected to the underground cinema movement of the 1960's, if he is not ignored outright. There are a number of reasons for the lack of scholarship on Kuchar, specifically his video diaries. Chief among them is their lack of seriousness. Kuchar's videos are regularly met with laughter, and in regards to classification, these diaristic works operate on the margins of the avant-garde, resisting easy alignment with the work of his contemporaries. In "Excrements of Time: George Kuchar's Video Diaries," Reinke compiles a list of impediments to Kuchar's work being taken seriously. He pinpoints the comedic and homemade nature of the videos, the expansiveness of the body of work, and its inaccessibility to most audiences. However, Reinke's central explanation is as follows: "Rather than sticking to camp strategies that are safely ironic or satiric, Kuchar frequently deploys a scatological kitsch viewers may find indefensibly puerile."⁵ This puerility that Reinke aptly addresses is an understandable inference considering that the videos make extensive use of bodily functions – including flatulence, belching, and shitting. It would be a mistake, however, to take Kuchar's

⁵ Steve Reinke, "Excrements of Time: George Kuchar's Videos," *Millenium Film Journal*, no. 50 (2008): 56-7

kitsch aesthetic simply at face value, rather than more carefully attending to his decidedly self-conscious presentation of himself as a body in excess – one that desires, consumes, and expels in the extreme.

Being unserious, in other words, is a specific aesthetic choice, a representational strategy related to Kuchar's exaltation of the undervalued. Kuchar's unseriousness is cultivated in his childlike fascination with his body and its more improper functions, as well as his uncompromised love for the lowly kitsch object. Even in moments of sadness or sentimentality, there tends to be either a disruption, or an exaggeration that cheapens its representation. On the surface, this may not seem to warrant further study, but there is a certain use value in being unserious. Kuchar's video diaries, in my estimation, engage a specifically queer sensibility, related to an interest in camp and kitsch, which places his work in opposition to the solemnity of many avant-garde traditions. By ridding his work of seriousness, Kuchar challenges the class-based devaluation of kitsch and the social devaluation of homosexuality. He does this by leveraging disgust as an aesthetic mode and spectatorial response that discovers the values of the revolting. In the simplest understandings of disgust, it is an affect elicited by an inherently noxious object, and to be sure, Kuchar's videos extensively feature traditionally disgusting items like feces, ejaculate, and snot. However, they also encompass a much broader range of what might be considered disgusting. More importantly, disgust is not only linked to particular objects, but also describes an attitude or relationship towards an object or sentiment. Disgust, then is not just prompted by bodily excess or distasteful and dangerous substances. Its point of reference can also be cultural, technological, or moral. In Kuchar's videos, the disgusting is connected to the formal choice of using video instead of film, to the treatment of Kuchar's aging and improper body, and to the queer recoding of capitalism's ascription of value. Considered in this more expansive way, disgust is more than a subjective response, relative to each individual. It functions instead as a sociopolitical affect that innately addresses social and cultural values and norms and turns them on their head.

To investigate the ways in which Kuchar's videos embody disgust, I address scenes from the following titles: *Cult of the Cubicles* (1987), *Weather Diary 3* (1988), *500 Millibars to Ecstasy* (1989), *Weather Diary 6* (1990), *Rocky Interlude* (1990), *Passage to Wetness* (1990), *Award* (1992), *Route 666* (1994), *Season of Sorrow* (1996), *Uncle Evil* (1996), *The Inmate* (1997), *Cyclone Alley Ceramics* (2000), *Metropolitan Monologues* (2000), *Supercell* (2004), and *Song of the Whoopee Wind* (2005). This selection of videos spans almost two decades of Kuchar's work and is particularly indicative of his reoccurring themes of disgust in both form and content. In what follows, I first consider arguments against the inclusion of disgust within the domain of aesthetics, and I utilize contemporary reevaluations of this particular affect in order to outline an aesthetic of the disgusting. Following this, I address the role of kitsch as a counterpoint to the avant-garde and its devaluation within particular taste cultures. The kitsch object, in my understanding, is capable of producing disgust for its cheap and imitative relation to "proper" art forms. In the final part of the paper, I analyze Kuchar's videos to consider the use and formal treatment of disgusting content including bodily waste, the technological disgust of choosing to work with video and the intimacy of the diary, and finally the undermining of the commodity culture that Kuchar has steeped himself in by way of kitsch items.

THE CASE FOR DISGUST

Disgust may be considered to be an affective response that rejects and/or ejects what is dangerous or odious to the body. This more traditional definition treats disgust as a physical reaction to items like rotting food, dangerous substances, etc., that induces vomiting, or some other significant activity of removal from the vicinity of the body. Eugenie Brinkema, film theorist and author of *The Forms of the Affects*, takes this action of recoiling as a spatial operation of disgust that delimits “zones of proximity that are discomforting versus acceptable.”⁶ This aspect of disgust, then, understands it as a form of instinctual self-preservation, keeping away from items that could lead to death, that are impure. For example, psychologist Silvan S. Tomkins in his work on affect, *Affect, Imagery and Consciousness*, identifies two types of disgust: the first keeps one from ingesting dangerous and toxic substances, and the second distances one from a gross object and/or idea.⁷ In this regard, disgust tied directly to the qualities of specific objects, or in select objects’ specific state of being - for example, anything decaying is inherently disgusting. The category of disgusting objects might include items like feces, bodily secretions, dirt, filthy animals, foods in undesirable conditions, and diseased bodies. However, when Tomkins addresses disgust as an affect, he regards it as ‘contempt-disgust,’ which takes into account the potential of a disgust response to “function as signals and motives to others as well as to the self of feelings of rejection.”⁸ This definition can introduce a kind of disgust that isn’t inherent in objects and may operate in the relationship between objects.

⁶ Eugenie Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 130

⁷ Silvan S. Tomkins, *Affect, Imagery, Consciousness: The Complete Edition* (New York, NY: Springer Pub., 2008), 357.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 356.

Definitions of disgust that reduce it to a physical reaction or a bodily instinct overlook its social and cultural dimensions. According to Carolyn Korsmeyer and Barry Smith, in their introduction to *On Disgust* by Aurel Kolnai, this would be a mistake, as disgust “is an emotion with a highly complex psychology and one that cannot be classed as simply a mechanism that provides quick protection against the dangers that flow from ingesting toxins. It is in fact a highly cognitive emotion....”⁹ This assessment of disgust’s affective properties comes not only from Aurel Kolnai’s phenomenological account of disgust, but also from advancements made on the psychology of disgust responses. Haidt et al. address this specifically in “Body, Psyche, and Culture: The Relationship between Disgust and Morality,” a study that asked people from different cultural backgrounds what they would consider disgusting. This allowed the group of psychologists to delineate different kinds of disgust, breaking it down into three groups:¹⁰ “core disgust,” wariness around contaminated or toxic foods or products that if ingested either by smell or by taste, could cause bodily harm and/or vomiting; “animal reminder disgust,” elicited by objects and/or images that invoke a sentiment of “undignified use or modification of the temple,” the “temple” here stemming out of the faith-based belief of the body being a sort of haven for the soul; and “socio-moral disgust” which refers to a disgust evoked by social issues like racism, disagreeable politics, homophobia etc. that tends to be variable based on culture and time period.¹¹ Kolnai’s *On Disgust* also addressed these moral aspects of disgust by distinguishing between visual disgust and moral disgust in the late 1920’s, even though his work wasn’t translated or widely circulated until decades later.¹² Visual disgust, or material disgust, includes objects like excrement, bodily secretions, dirt, deformations, etc. and are things that remind

⁹ Smith, Barry, and Carolyn Korsmeyer. "Visceral Values: Aurel Kolnai on Disgust." In *On Disgust*, 1-28. (2004)

¹⁰ Haidt, Jonathan, Paul Rozin, Clark McCauley, and Sumio Imada. "Body, Psyche, and Culture: The Relationship between Disgust and Morality." *Psychology and Developing Societies* (1997)

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 111, 112, 121.

¹² Smith, Barry, and Carolyn Korsmeyer. "Visceral Values: Aurel Kolnai on Disgust." In *On Disgust* (2004), 4.

humans of their “animal origins.”¹³ This kind of disgust is akin to “core disgust,” as well as some aspects of “animal reminder disgust” as mentioned above. Moral disgust, on the other hand, can be found in excessive or misplaced sexual expression, infidelity, betrayal, weakness of character, etc., and can be likened to the “socio-moral disgust.”¹⁴ These formulations of disgust, then, deny that it only resides in bodily reactions ruled by instincts. If the role of disgust encompasses more than just bodily reactions, then it can take on psychological and moral components that are dictated by cultural norms. This means that questions of art-making and other cultural forms are instrumental in distinguishing the line between what is or is not disgusting.

The difficulty of thinking about the relationship between disgust and aesthetics, however, stems from an incongruity of sorts: If art as the domain of the beautiful is meant to be visually pleasing, then how can disgust, an affect that induces a stay-away impulse, reside within aesthetics? Due to this conflict, disgust has been essentially barred from many discussions of aesthetics. This in part stems from the foundational tenets of aesthetics as centered on beauty and pleasure. For much of the early discussions of aesthetics, the possibility of disgust to inspire cognitive responses, or to be visually beautiful, was denied. The exclusion of disgust from the category of the aesthetic, on account of its inability to produce a cognitive response (as opposed to a simply physical or instinctual one) or critical reflection, is directly related to Immanuel Kant’s classifications of the five senses in *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, wherein he divides them into two groups: the outer and inner senses, or the high and low senses. For Kant, touch, sight and hearing are senses that relate back to cognitive function, whereas smell and taste are more subjective and embodied. Touch, sight and hearing, according to Kant, require further elaboration beyond the initial sensory event, whereas smell and taste are already interiorized by way of entering the body

¹³ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁴ Kolnai, Aurel. *On Disgust*. Edited by Barry Smith and Carolyn Korsmeyer. (2004) p. 67

through the mouth and nostrils.¹⁵ Disgust operates by activating these two lower senses, and does not require or inspire any cognitive response, therefore falling outside the umbrella of aesthetics. In fact, in his book, *Disgust: Theory and History of a Strong Sensation*, Winifried Menninghaus argues that the eighteenth century's discussions of aesthetics "can be described negatively as a foundation based on prohibition of what is disgusting. The 'aesthetic' is the field of a particular 'pleasure' whose absolute other is disgust."¹⁶ In this estimation of aesthetics during this era, Menninghaus unearths the popular conception of disgust as what aesthetics is not, as the necessary other which shaped these discussions of pleasure.

Kant's aesthetics was instrumental in this categorical exclusion of disgust. In "On the Relation of Genius to Taste," from *Critique of Judgment*, Kant briefly explains the relation of disgust to art. According to him, the power of art is its ability to take something that would be deemed unsatisfactory or ugly in reality, and to turn it into something that creates visual pleasure.¹⁷ However, this aesthetic power does not change disgust, or changes it *too much*. Kant says of disgust: "For in that strange sensation, which rests on nothing but imagination, the object is presented as if it insisted...on our enjoying it even though that is just what we are forcefully resisting; and hence the artistic presentation of the object is no longer distinguished in our sensation from the nature of this object itself..."¹⁸ This introduces a number of important details regarding disgust, the first being that disgust disables the aesthetic response. For Kant, aesthetic responses require a form of disinterested distance to allow for critical insight that comes from being able to separate the object from the aesthetic response. However, with disgust, this isn't possible because the recreated disgusting object creates a too-close relationship to the real-world

¹⁵ Kant, Immanuel. *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. Translated by Robert B. Louden. (2006) p. 45-49

¹⁶ Winfried Menninghaus, *Disgust: The Theory and History of a Strong Sensation* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2003). 7

¹⁷ Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Judgment*. Translated by Werner S. Pluhar. (2010) p. 180

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

object, and the required distance cannot be attained. The aesthetic is defined against the interiorized response of the lower senses, and thus the incorporative nature of smell and taste suggests an inability of the viewer to properly separate their relation to the object. As indicated by Kant, disgust seems characterized by a push-pull experience of attraction and repulsion by which the viewer is drawn to the artistic presentation but repelled by the recreation of a disgusting object. However, because the consumption of art during the time Kant was writing resided primarily in the visual, the ability for disgust to be classed within aesthetics was disallowed.

This disavowal of disgust within aesthetics that eighteenth century theorists utilized to discuss pleasure and aesthetics relied upon a limited definition of disgust. By allowing room for variation within disgust, Kant, Kolnai and Haidt et al. have opened up the potentiality for reactions towards disgust to be more than just vomiting and refusal. Furthermore, considering that some disgust comes from societal norms and moral sentiments, this expansion of disgust now confirms that disgust is not just a physical and reactionary affect. This elaborates upon the single-faceted idea of disgust and now can allow inclusion of disgust within aesthetics, and more nuanced discussions of the role of and response to disgust.

In Aesthetics

More recent studies of disgust across different disciplines, from psychology to philosophy to film studies, emphasize its social and moral dimensions, and help us to pin down a set of qualities of what the inclusion of the disgusting within aesthetics might look like. Specifically, in these studies, disgust is not thought of as an immediate response, dictated by physical sensations, nor do the incorporative properties of taste and smell disable an aesthetic engagement. Instead, disgust can produce an aesthetic attitude toward the seemingly revolting object by introducing a pause in the viewer's response, thereby inviting an extended reaction that can convert aversion

into savoring. Kolnai's phenomenological analysis provides a definition of the qualities of the object that produces disgust. As he explains,

the object of disgust is prone to be connected with something that is concealed, secretive, multilayered, uncanny, sinister, as well as with something which is shameless, obtrusive, and alluring: that is, in sum, to be something which is taunting. Everything that is disgusting has in it something which is at one and the same time both striking and veiled, as is, say, a poisonous red berry or a garishly made-up face.¹⁹

Kolnai asserts that disgust can be both alluring and repellent, and that it may even be 'veiled' in something other than a putrid outward appearance. In this estimation of disgust, it demands attention while also reserving some kind of unknowable quality that urges a second look, a longer look. This alone disrupts much of what disgust is supposed to look like and feel like, and further exploration of the aesthetics of this expanded conception of disgust may allow for a contemplative response to the object, rather than pure rejection.

Disgust fascinates in other words. Beyond an initial gross-out response, the subject willingly returns for a second, deeper experience to investigate. It harkens to an experience I imagine many have witnessed, wherein one smells something gross, something disgusting, and even though it sets into motion a rejection response, what follows is a sort of searching out of the reek. A deeper sniff to find the source, to find what exactly caused the scent, and in that second experience with disgust, there is a tinge of pleasure. Carolyn Korsmeyer, for instance, argues for the possibility of disgust as a source of attraction and pleasure in her book, *Savoring Disgust*. Responding to Kant and Aristotle, among others, who have denied disgust a place in aesthetics, Korsmeyer takes the stance that no matter how disagreeable disgust is, it "can rivet attention to the point where one

¹⁹ Kolnai, Aurel. *On Disgust*. Edited by Barry Smith and Carolyn Korsmeyer. (2004) p. 47

may actually be said to *savor* the feeling.”²⁰ For Korsmeyer, the disavowal of disgust is due in part to the fact that it is generally represented or discussed in its most extreme form and little work has been done to explore the nuances of this particular affect, the subtleties and variations of how it appears. She notes, “It functions one way in comedy, another in satire or politically provocative art, another in tragedy, and each instance differs from the others.”²¹ This greatly expands the potential reactions to disgust in aesthetics from just the traditional discussion of disgust resulting in ejection, as scatological disgust, for example, can elicit laughter and shock rather than an automatic nausea. Furthermore, Korsmeyer’s reevaluation of disgust entails an expansion of the notion of pleasure. She considers pleasure to be more than just a positive response to “absorption in an activity.”²² While this does allow for more instances of pleasure within aesthetics, though, it still doesn’t answer Korsmeyer’s main question: “Why would one be absorbed in something revolting?”²³

Building from Aristotle’s ‘paradox of fiction,’ in which he discussed the potential for tragedy to produce a pleasurable aesthetic experience, Korsmeyer offers, instead, a ‘paradox of aversion,’ wherein despite the aversive effects of disgust, there is the possibility of a positive experience. One of Korsmeyer’s examples involves food - specifically food items like durian, the ortolan bird, and other odious examples that in one way or another, both deter the diner from eating them and also entice them, creating what she calls “the conversion of the disgusting into the delicious.”²⁴ What these discussions of disgust propose is that disgust is not simply inherent to the object, but instead, comes from the attitude towards the object. To take Korsmeyer’s example, in its original form, durian is an unappealing, thorny looking fruit, and when cut open dispels a

²⁰ Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Savoring Disgust: The Foul and the Fair in Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 3.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 98.

²² *Ibid.*, 119.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 72.

rancid odor. However, when prepared and offered up as an “exotic” or avant-garde dish, even despite the lingering smell, the attitude changes toward the fruit and it can be savored and enjoyed with semblances of disgust still intact, and, in some cases, with disgust heightening the pleasure of the meal. In “Gut Appreciation,” Korsmeyer explains how this transition happens between disgust as a rejecting response to disgust as a savored experience. Drawing from Kolnai’s explanation of disgust, Korsmeyer develops what she calls the “pause of disgust.”²⁵ This pause occurs when one comes into contact with a disgusting object, following the initial reaction of backing away. It allows for a deeper, closer look. As Korsmeyer explains, “Since disgusting things are not immediately threatening, we have the leisure to take in their qualities and marvel at their appearance.”²⁶ It is here that savoring can occur. The pause doesn’t erase what qualities made the object disgusting, but it does allow for a more mediated gaze and investigation of the sensory responses piqued by disgust. This, then, allows for a cognitive response to disgust, rather than just a bodily response. In this estimation of disgust, Korsmeyer suggests that all disgust can invoke a cognitive, pleasure response, and thus can be included in discussions of aesthetics.

In Film

In film studies, the consideration of disgust traces a similar trajectory to its discussion in philosophical aesthetics. Disgust is first linked to specific representations, like the depiction of gore, often associated with particular genres like horror, and furthermore, it is understood as the emotional response of the viewer, an embodied reaction to screen content. More recent considerations of the disgust, however, reimagine it as a more complex response characterized by both attraction and repulsion, and further, which is not tied to the represented object but instead,

²⁵ Korsmeyer, Carolyn. "Gut Appreciation: Possibilities for Aesthetic Disgust." *Lebenswelt: Aesthetics and Philosophy of Experience*, no. 3 (2013) p. 198

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 196.

is taken up as a question of form. Much like Korsemeier's assessment of disgust, discussions of filmic disgust tend to revolve around the most extreme images and ideations of disgust, namely horror. Noël Carroll's *The Philosophy of Horror*, for example, addresses disgust in film, but his primary references are to garish slasher-style films and monster movies. Carroll frames the disgust and fear responses of characters faced with horrific monsters as part of the distinguishing aspects of art-horror. It is his claim here, that disgust reactions are borne out of the impurity of these art-horror monster figures, that can be indicated by images of contamination.²⁷ While this is an important discussion, it can be limiting to focus these few mentions of disgust on the over-the-top representations rather than investigating a variety of instances of filmic disgust.

The affective turn in film studies returned focus to the spectator's embodied response to the film image after semiotic and psychoanalytic theories of spectatorship largely ignored this aspect of the viewing experience. This introduces a number of problems in reading film for affective responses, namely with regard to authorial intentionality, and the homogenization of audience members. Purporting not only that the creator has faultlessly instilled the film with specific and deliberate affective responses, but also that all audience members will take up these responses just as expected, regardless of their sociocultural background is problematic and oversimplified. Therefore, when a scholar writes about the affective response to a film, there is a tendency to treat their internal affective response as the only potential response. Eugenie Brinkema distills the problem with this approach succinctly: "However thrilling it may be to write and even read the personal accounts of any theorists tremulous pleasures and shudderings, it is a signature of work on affectivity that must be resisted, for it tells us far more about being affected than about affects."²⁸ According to Brinkema, affect has a formal aspect, and it can be read for in the

²⁷ Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror: Or, Paradoxes of the Heart* (NY: Routledge, 1990), 28.

²⁸ Eugenie Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 31

aesthetics of a film. Disgust therefore involves more than the reflex of turning away from the screen. It is also the invitation to turn back to get a closer look.

Brinkema suggests that affects, such as disgust, have formal properties rather than being emotional responses experienced by the viewer. She argues that affect can be analyzed through film form, rather than just felt as a bodily manifestation. One example she draws upon in particular is the close-up. This comes from the work of William Ian Miller, who suggested that disgust isn't just a set of properties or attitudes, but results from excess, or *surfeit*.²⁹ Surfeit is the overindulgence in a sensation. An example is sweetness, which in a moderate amount is pleasurable and enjoyable, but when one is inundated with sweetness, it becomes intolerably saccharine. This idea suggests that a pleasure response can become a disgust response, and once again, defies the notion that disgust is inherent in specific objects. It is borne out of excess, and for Brinkema, the close-up is a formal element that can, but doesn't always, inform a disgusting affective aesthetic by way of its ability to draw the subject closer, even too-close, to the film image.

In particular, disgust as a formal element of film should not be relied upon to be immediate, as it might be suspected to be, but instead may invite an in-depth analysis. Brinkema comes to this point in her discussion of Kolnai's "temporal lag," much like Korsmeyer's "pause," and the *haut goût* cuisine wherein certain meat products are allowed to decay for a period of time before being prepared. Brinkema writes, "This courting of the revolting does not make the disgusting palatable; Kolnai's recourse to *haut goût* suggests that putrefaction makes certain materials *better*." The paradox of disgust – its blend of aversion and attraction – results in a heightened sensual experience, one that is in the best taste, and that tastes best, by retaining its link to the

²⁹ William Ian. Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust*(Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 42.

revolting.”³⁰ Here, the decay of the object allows for new flavors and qualities to emerge. This can be linked to Brinkema’s discussion of the formal rot of Peter Greenaway’s film, *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*. In her analysis, Brinkema addresses the color in the film and attests that Georgina, by way of being a sort of catalyst of color changes within the film, brings about a formal rot over the duration of the film, a rot that “is the visualization of time’s effects on the features of a textual body.”³¹ Georgina, by way of her color-changing dress, acts as the vehicle of change throughout the film, and through this dress changing to fit the settings she’s in brings forth “aesthetic intensities.” In Brinkema’s reading of this film, the formal disgust that is present doesn’t just erode or decay the film text, but like the *haut goût* cuisine, makes room for different forms that increase the overall pleasure of the film.

A disgusting aesthetic, then, operates not only by presenting disgusting content, but also in a form that highlights the proximity and relationship between two objects, whether it be moral, technological, cultural, etc. Disgust, in aesthetics, relies on an attraction-repulsion concurrence which invites a second look to savor the disgusting. This attraction-repulsion can be utilized to invoke spectatorial responses that aim to critique cultural ascriptions of value. When investigating Kuchar’s video diaries, these assessments of disgust provide significant groundwork in understanding how it emerges through form and content as an aesthetic mode and spectatorial response. Kuchar presents content that elicits core-disgust in the spectator, but in its proximity to the camera, it allows for an excess that accentuates Kuchar’s social and sexual anxieties. Furthermore, Kuchar’s utilization of video technology and the diary mode suggest an uncomfortable proximity to his most intimate and sentimental thoughts, as well as a degraded and kitschy video image. Kitsch is a significant aspect of Kuchar’s disgusting aesthetic, as it represents a lowbrow value set that he upends in order to critique commodity culture and the

³⁰ Eugenie Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 165.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 177.

experimental avant-garde. Disgust as a moral, technological, and culturally bound aesthetic that can attract and repulse provides a clearer insight into Kuchar's work and how it may be presenting a queer critique of cultural values.

DECODING KITSCH

“To call something kitsch is in most cases a way of rejecting it outright as distasteful, repugnant, or even disgusting.”³²

- Matei Călinescu, *The Five Faces of Modernity*

A significant source of disgust in Kuchar’s video diaries is his regular utilization of kitsch. Since the popularization of the term in the twentieth century, kitsch has taken on connotations of the cheap and tacky, while also attempting to be artistic.³³ Kitsch may not seem an obvious expression of disgust; however, it can be understood as part of capitalist society’s excessive production. Kitsch objects are the surplus items meant to fill the void of cultural experience, and thus litter the homes of many in order to provide some attempt at aesthetic beauty, regardless of cheapness. Kitsch is where disgust lies in the art world; it is an easy reproduction absent the sublimity of the original. Tomkins’ work on disgust draws direct connections between aspects of the kitsch object and the affect of disgust. While he doesn’t use the term “kitsch” specifically, he does indicate that disgust can arise as a response to “the counterfeit, . . . the impostor, . . . [and] the poor imitation.”³⁴ This formulation of disgust is tied to the planned obsolescence of commodity culture. As Tomkins elaborates, “Consumers will draw their noses and palates away from last year’s automobile in disenchantment as they eagerly drink in with their eyes this year’s closer approximation to the heart’s desire which dwells eternally as an experimental model in the mind

³² Matei Călinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2006), 235.

³³ *Ibid.*, 234.

³⁴ Silvan S. Tomkins, *Affect, Imagery, Consciousness: The Complete Edition* (New York, NY: Springer Pub., 2008), 415

of the great designer.”³⁵ He claims that disgust plays a role in this process of obsolescence, especially when it comes to items that are particularly inferior. Kitsch, while traditionally thought of as tchotchkes used to adorn one’s space, also refers to a homogenization of aesthetic appearances under capitalism, as in the pre-fab McMansions owned by upper-middle class folks attempting to display themselves as prosperous. In either regard, these items appear as the trash of artistic culture and aesthetic tastes.

What exactly is kitsch, then? It is often associated or even conflated with terms like “camp” and “pop culture,” and the range of objects it can cover spans from low-cost garage-sale items to high ticket adornments that mimic the aesthetics of the cultural establishment. According to Matei Călinescu, in *The Five Faces of Modernity*, kitsch has three traditional characteristics. It is cheaply made so as to be affordable, it must be “sketchy,” as in low-grade, and, in aesthetic terms, it should be considered “rubbish or junk.”³⁶ Furthermore, he identifies two main kinds of kitsch, propaganda kitsch and entertainment kitsch. Propaganda kitsch is best expressed by Hitler’s Third Reich, adorning most objects with the signature red, white and black coloring, as well as the swastika, not to mention the propaganda films, illustrations, etc. For the sake of this discussion of kitsch, I will stick to the entertainment kitsch since it is the only one relevant to Kuchar’s videos. The most important aspects of Călinescu’s discussion of kitsch are that it is a product of modernity, and that it is essentially the aesthetic-lite. The first claim here refers to kitsch’s emergence out of industrial mass production, where kitsch is associated with the disposal object and remains dependent on fads, in that it represents obsolescent cultural forms. A kitsch aesthetic, Călinescu says, is a sign of modernization.³⁷ Secondly, and more importantly, kitsch is “center[ed] around such questions as imitation, forgery, counterfeit, and what we may call the

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Matei Călinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2006), 235.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 226.

aesthetics of deception and self-deception.”³⁸ In this estimation of kitsch, it is something that can only refer to the aesthetic domain, and is therefore inadequate to producing an aesthetic experience - similar to Kant’s discussion of disgust. For Călinescu, this is called the “law of aesthetic inadequacy,” and can be expanded beyond just cheap and tacky objects to encompass the relation of objects to their immediate context. He uses the example of an original Rembrandt painting being hung in an elevator, and explains that this “caricature” of “genuine great art” used as “mere ostentatious decoration” is not itself kitsch, but indicates how, in kitsch, “an aesthetic object [is] displayed as a symbol of affluence.”³⁹ Kitsch, then, can come to mean not only cheap and tacky objects, but also the relation of objects to their settings and the undermining of the sublime response.

Kitsch demonstrates that aesthetics are informed by class difference. As the aesthetic style and cultural taste of the middle class, kitsch runs counter to the cultural elitism of the avant-garde, and this class distinction explains in part kitsch’s association with a degraded or disgusting aesthetic. One of the seminal texts here is Clement Greenberg’s “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” in which he distinguishes avant-garde from kitsch by arguing that kitsch is a “rear-garde” or a kind of culture-lite in which citizens without true ‘taste’ can have the dressings of culture without much of the meaning.⁴⁰ For Greenberg, following the proliferation of literacy and the move from agrarian to industrial work, the working classes had leisure time and demanded a culture to fill it. However, the “city’s traditional culture,” or as Greenberg also refers to it, “genuine culture,” required more time than the working class had in order to fully understand and respond to the artworks.⁴¹ Kitsch

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 228-9.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 236.

⁴⁰ Greenberg, Clement. "Avant-Garde and Kitsch." In *Art and Culture: Critical Essays*, 3-33.

(Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1961.) 11

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

provided an accessible culture that did not make the intellectual demands on its audiences that “real” culture did.

Greenberg says that the avant-garde artist “tries in effect to imitate God by creating something valid solely on its own terms...something *given*, increate, independent of meanings similar or originals.”⁴² This seems to be the main point of contention against kitsch – it is too derivative of what has come before it, and therefore not original enough to produce the desired newness that is indicative of the experimental avant-garde. And while there is validity in this claim, as many items of kitsch are regurgitated pap that has been reformulated at a cheaper production cost, there must be allowance for those who use kitsch in order to turn focus back on the mainstream cultural tastes. Greenberg does make some allowance for kitsch to rise above the low opinion he holds: “Kitsch is deceptive. It has many different levels, and some of them are high enough to be dangerous to the naive seeker of true light....Nor is every single item of kitsch altogether worthless. Now and then it produces something of merit, something that has an authentic folk flavor.”⁴³ However, “folk flavor” is not exactly akin to avant-garde, nor the experimental driving force of high culture, and still, Greenberg believes that kitsch requires no cognitive effort. The main question unanswered by Greenberg’s essay is for whom does kitsch require no cognitive effort? He claims the ‘peasants’ enjoy kitsch because of this lack, but kitsch can operate on a variety of levels. It is questionable to assume that because an object inspires no response for one person, that it goes for all people. There is potential for kitsch to provide more than cheap and empty catharsis for the bourgeois.

Kitsch can even appear within the avant-garde art world. These uses of kitsch within the avant-garde muddles the restrictive opposition of kitsch and the avant-garde, and require some further explanation. One such explanation is provided by Chuck Kleinhans in “Taking out the Trash:

⁴² *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 13.

Camp and the Politics of Parody,” wherein he coins the term “self-aware kitsch,” or kitsch that “gives evidence that the makers themselves were aware of their ‘bad taste.’”⁴⁴ While Kleinhans isn’t necessarily discussing the avant-garde, he does address how self-aware kitsch can invoke a sense of the tongue-in-cheek that invites the audience to play along as well. Furthermore, for Călinescu kitsch can mimic the avant-garde and vice versa. He claims, “the rebellious avant-garde has made use of a variety of techniques and elements directly borrowed from kitsch for their ironically disruptive purposes,” and “the kitsch artist mimics the avant-garde only to the extent to which the latter's unconventionalities have proved successful and have been widely accepted or even turned into stereotypes.”⁴⁵ However, due to kitsch’s relationship to commodification and the avant-garde’s relationship to artistic risk, they still cannot be wholly confused. Perhaps, though, the most apt connection between the two aesthetic modes is expressed by Juan Suárez in *Biker Boys, Drag Queens and Superstars*. He explains, “They were characterized by their striving for the new: kitsch depended on planned obsolescence; the avant-garde constantly sought to replace traditional aesthetic tenets with radically new forms of representation.”⁴⁶ Avant-garde and kitsch are both focused, in a sense, on the move forward, kitsch in regards to a capitalist continuation of consumerism, and avant-garde in a rebellious disruption. And, more importantly, they are not mutually exclusive; kitsch and avant-garde can play against each other and coincide within single works.

The underground cinema of the 1960s, associated with a gay male sensibility, is one point of intersection of kitsch with the avant-garde. Filmmakers such as George and Mike Kuchar, Andy Warhol, Jack Smith, and Kenneth Anger, pulled themes, images, items and ideas from popular,

⁴⁴ Chuck Kleinhans, "Taking Out the Trash: Camp and the Politics of Parody," in *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, ed. Moe Myer (London: Routledge, 2005), 183.

⁴⁵ Matei Călinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2006), 230-1

⁴⁶ Juan Antonio. Suárez, *Bike Boys, Drag Queens & Superstars: Avant-Garde, Mass Culture, and Gay Identities in the 1960s Underground Cinema* (Boulder, CO: NetLibrary, 1999), xiv.

commercial culture, including kitsch objects, and highlighted them in their works. These filmmakers were part of an aesthetic tradition that diverged from Greenbergian notions of the avant-garde, as found in structuralist film and its investment in exploring the conditions of the medium. Their works instead focused on imitation, excess and sentimentality, and directly engaged with the “low” forms of popular culture and commodity objects. Suárez argues that “in their work, the collusion of experimental avant-gardism, alternative cultural politics and figurations of community and subjectivity, and the fascination with pop culture are strongly mediated, albeit in elusive and circuitous ways, by gay sexualities and social identities.”⁴⁷ This inclusion of kitsch within experimental cinema is directly connected with a gay male sensibility and expresses an interest in degraded cultural forms. Matthew Tinkcom, in *Working Like A Homosexual*, addresses this type of kitsch and says, “We might now understand the topic of kitsch as the expression of the revulsion of left mid-twentieth-century intellectuals at the fact that their specific array of taste choices (their habitus) was, like all such choices within the cultural landscape, specific to them as a material class formation and one in competition with the taste formations of the burgeoning working class or, even worse, with queer men.”⁴⁸ Kitsch, then, can act as a refusal of highbrow taste cultures and degrade forms of artistry through its parodic imitation. The turn to kitsch is a rejection of the classist ideals exemplified by Greenberg. For the queer underground, the devaluation of kitsch and the societal disapproval of homosexuality went hand in hand, and reclaiming one was a means of the reclaiming the other.

This “lowering” strategy of the queer underground, in its relationship to the avant-garde and postwar artistic culture, can be seen in the films made by George and his twin, Mike, before the former turned to making video diaries. In “The Kuchars, the 1960s and Queer Materiality,” Suárez addresses the lack of scholarly work grappling with the queerness in the Kuchar brothers’

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, xviii.

⁴⁸ Matthew Tinkcom, *Working Like a Homosexual: Camp, Capital, and Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 20.

films. While my research pertains to the video work that George made from 1985 to 2011, Suárez discusses themes and practices that George retained even after he and Mike stopped collaborating on film. Suárez writes, “Taking as their starting points the most immediate and proximate (bodies and their waste, the plastic consumables in their midst), they unleashed the rage of ‘thundering and torrential nature’ on the insanity of postwar culture, bringing its pieties down to ‘stinking filth.’”⁴⁹ These themes that were regular tropes in George and Mike Kuchar’s work – the body and its excretions, and kitschy, disposable plasticity – became even more central in George’s solo work, except now, they were depicted as autobiographical parts of his life rather than movie props. For Suárez, the Kuchar brothers employ a “materialist reduction” wherein they overwhelmingly attend to physical objects including feces, bodies, and “lowly substances.”⁵⁰ In this way, the Kuchars connect queerness and disruptive sexualities to low-status objects, which enable the viewer to address queerness “through the attractions and repulsions of matter and materiality rather than through the usual routes of subjectivity and identity.”⁵¹ So here, kitsch not only acts as a marker of low culture and impropriety, but it also acts as a physical embodiment of sorts, reflecting their internal queerness into the material world, a process termed as queer-materialism. This drive to materialize the queer comes from the Kuchars’ youth and their obsessions with comics, plastics, tabloid culture, melodramatic, Douglas Sirk films, and B-movies. It was this unearthing of exterior representations of queerness that greatly inspired much of their aesthetics and materializing aspects. Their use of kitsch items and plastic, in particular, are connected to sex in the sense that in the 1960s, plastic was being used to make all manner of sex toys, some more realistic than others, allowing for a “cheap, artificial, and unnatural” sex that “brought bodies into intimate communion with the inorganic.”⁵² This practice that the Kuchars’ employed so regularly throughout both of their long careers can speak, loudly and in a Bronx

⁴⁹ Suárez, Juan A. *The Kuchars, the 1960s and Queer Materiality*. Web. *Screen* 56.1 (2015) 44

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*, 40.

accent, to the qualities of kitsch that require rumination and critical response. Here, a kitsch aesthetic is no longer just empty adornment, but instead, speaks to the specificity of queer experience.

Since working with Mike in the 1960's, George has cultivated these retained themes as well as his own distinct utilization of a kitsch aesthetic. One scholar that has directly addressed Kuchar's video diaries and the brand of kitsch that emerges within them is Gene Youngblood. Youngblood has long been a pioneer of addressing and analyzing Kuchar's video work, having seen over 160 video diaries that spanned fifteen years.⁵³ In "Underground Man," Youngblood discusses Kuchar's performance of "George Kuchar" as a persona that pivots around three themes: happy, horny and hungry, the three H's or "allegories of lack."⁵⁴ In Youngblood's estimation of these themes and Kuchar's on-screen identity, the happy, horny and/or hungry work to reveal, or deny, an undercurrent theme of emptiness. For Youngblood, kitsch acts as an "emblem of denial," meaning that it highlights or emphasizes lack through its failed attempt to fill it in.⁵⁵ Youngblood takes the time to classify the different kinds of kitsch that are present in Kuchar's work, the first being kitsch as an aesthetic value judgement, or as bad art. This breaks down into two smaller subsections of kitsch wherein one offers a "sanitized and idealized view of the world that excludes everything humans find disturbing or offensive," and the second portrays "the dark side in such an exaggerated manner that it becomes caricature" rather than authentic.⁵⁶ Kuchar utilizes both of these forms of bad art kitsch, even simultaneously at times. Then, the second kind of kitsch Youngblood addresses is kitsch as the opposite of art, which is cultural kitsch rather than aesthetic kitsch. This type of kitsch is akin to Greenberg's sentiments – a kind of less-than copy

⁵³ Youngblood, Gene. *Underground Man*. Chicago, IL: Video Data Bank, 2006. 1

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

of actual good taste. Youngblood aptly refers to it as a “pantomime of aesthetic life,” and utilizes the example of McMansions, garish and overindulgent.

What is significant about Youngblood’s reading of Kuchar’s use of kitsch is that he claims that Kuchar is responding both negatively and positively to these variations of kitsch. Much like Suárez’s estimation of Kuchar’s queer materiality, Youngblood addresses how Kuchar uses kitsch items to materialize or exteriorize an internal emptiness. He explains, “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.”⁵⁷ This is the negative portrayal of kitsch, but according to Youngblood, Kuchar also includes positive framing of kitsch: kitsch as anti-art. In this presentation of kitsch, Kuchar is acting out in rebellion by highlighting bad-taste kitsch as a marker for personal expression. Here, Youngblood is addressing the possibility for kitsch to act as a critique of high art wherein “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.”⁵⁸ In this regard, Youngblood infers that Kuchar isn’t condescending toward kitsch, and it is this presentation of it that gives his video works a sense of liberation, freeing itself from the restrictive aspects and class-based elitism of high art. Furthermore, in this turn of kitsch from negative to positive, the three H’s become positive as well, representing a “healthy lust for life, an ardent capacity for pleasure in a culture deeply conflicted around pleasure.”⁵⁹ This can refer us back to disgust once again, to Menninghaus’ idea of the excess, the surfeit, as a form of disgust. If Kuchar is relentlessly hungry, horny, and happy, these states can be distinctly disgusting as an appetite that can never be fulfilled, a sexual desire that is always on the prowl, and a joy that

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

takes over even the saddest moments – emotions that don't fit the stimulus and exceed their acceptable expression. Connecting disgust to this form of aesthetic rebellion, then, may allow for disgust to be liberating just as kitsch can be liberating, as a defiance of the public sentiment.

READING FOR FILTH: ANALYSIS

George Kuchar's video diaries are particularly representative of a disgusting aesthetic, both in content and form. As previously mentioned, a disgusting aesthetic relies on an attraction-repulsion spectatorial response that comes from the uncomfortable and sometimes improper proximity and relationality between the subject and object, or between two objects. In this proximity, a disgusting aesthetic allows for critiques of ideological value systems that rank items and people as filthy or proper based on their ability to behave and conform. This formulation of disgust as a marker of impropriety in society speaks to the treatment of the homosexual as disgusting and less-than. In film, the reaction to this sentiment of LGBTQ communities as devalued has recently seen a distinct change. In his critique of *Call Me By Your Name*, "Elio's Education," D.A. Miller suggests that the mainstream gay movie incorporates a "beautification campaign" that "runs gay sex through such grandiose sentimental misrecognitions that we would no longer know it even if we did see it."⁶⁰ However, Kuchar does not take part in this practice. Instead of aiming to elevate gay sex, Kuchar revels in its low status, its degradation. Here, we can rely on Kuchar to detail his perspective on sex, "my view was sex as horror in people's lives. Obsessions they have, fetishes, urges that they don't know where the hell they got these [sic] but they can't understand it and many times they can't control it, so it becomes a horror in your life."⁶¹ Therefore, it makes sense that his homosexual desire also mimics the disgusting aesthetic.

⁶⁰ D. A. Miller, "Elio's Education," Los Angeles Review of Books, February 19, 2018, , accessed March 31, 2018, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/elios-education/>.

⁶¹ Stevenson, Jack. *Desperate Visions: The Films of John Waters & the Kuchar Brothers*. (London: Creation Books, 1996.) 193

Kuchar is bursting with desire, his camera records his titillating gaze as he peeks through fences and catches friends in their underwear. Yet, his sexual anxiety and aging body create disruptions in his ability to attract, and, in fact, repulses himself and his audiences. In this regard, his bodily disgust and his trashy surroundings act as a sort of self-sabotage wherein he is always attracted, but he keeps his body repulsive to stave off reciprocated interest.

In the overwhelming expressions of disgust through his expansive body of work, there are a handful of themes by which he utilizes disgust as an aesthetic strategy. The first, and most obvious, is the disgust produced as a response to a discomforting proximity to Kuchar's body. This encompasses disgusting items entering and exiting the body, but also the act of entering/exiting the body itself can produce disgust as a breach of boundaries. Secondly, Kuchar utilizes a disgusting aesthetic within his video diaries, not only by using video, but also through the stylings of his camera work and the choice to make video 'diaries.' Thirdly, disgust is expressed as a critique of taste values in commodity culture with the kitsch items and trash he surrounds himself with.

Proximity to the Body

Starting with the most obvious portrayal of disgust, I will discuss the ways in which Kuchar uses his body as a source of disgust, as well as a receptacle for disgusting foods. As previously mentioned, bodily secretions and odious food items are elicitors of core-disgust, the refusal and rejection response. Kuchar's filmmaking career displays an affinity for crude, bodily humor that envelops all manners of physical excretions. This array of corporeal functions places focus on the body by representing the body as an uncontrollable and disruptive force. It is a reoccurring theme within his body of work to get up close and personal with his bodily secretions and flatulence, sometimes as a formal disruption within the narrative of the film.

I'll start where the digestion process starts – with food. As Youngblood notes, Kuchar is perpetually hungry and will regularly disrupt conversations or his own meandering soliloquies to wonder, “What should I eat?” Many of his video diaries include journeys to find food and discussions planning where he will find his next meal. I would suggest that speaking so openly about his body's urges and desires produces an uncomfortable intimacy, presenting the viewer with too much knowledge of Kuchar's bodily needs. Beyond just discussing his rumbling stomach, he regularly records himself and others eating. In *Video Album 5: The Thursday People*, Kuchar joins a friend to eat at what seems like a cultural food fair. The way in which he films cooking meat, kebabs entering mouths, as well as the leftover animal carcasses is reminiscent of what is left over after the meal is finished, as well as our own animal natures. These shots of the process of cooking and preparing the meat connect it to the animal carcasses as its source, such that what is edible is presented with the inedible, the leftover bones and cartilage that typically goes uneaten. Here, the food is not glamorized, it is not mouthwatering; instead, it reconnects it to the animal body it was taken from, to the production of food and how it fulfills an emptiness in the attendees. The close-ups on the masticating mouths emphasizes the hunger drive, our more ignoble motivation for eating, survival. This can connect back to the “animal reminder disgust” that Haidt et al. discovered in their research wherein it is too suggestive of humankind's more primitive nature. However, this example is one of the least suggestive of the disgusting because most of Kuchar's food choices in his videos start at an even lower quality.

As important as the gratuitous presentation of Kuchar's seemingly insatiable hunger is his choice of food items, which provoke class-based disapproval – and even disgust – given their unhealthy qualities. As Kuchar seems aware, there is social guilt in being seen ingesting ‘bad’ foods, in indulging in one's most shoddy food desires. However, Kuchar throws all of his food cautions to the wind, seemingly reveling in the impropriety of his diet. In the majority of his eating scenes, Kuchar is chowing down on foods that would make a dietician squeamish, let alone the general

population. This is especially true in his Oklahoma video diaries, when he is hunkered down in a run-down motel and only able to eat what the local convenience store has to offer. A regular food item of choice is white powdered doughnuts, the mini variety that can be bought in a pack of six. In *Weather Diary 3* as well as *Supercell*, he overstuffs his mouth with them and talks through the obstructive food. Puffs of the white powdered sugar are expelled from his mouth, as well as spewed pieces of spit-covered doughnuts. He eats canned Vienna sausages (*Supercell*), a plethora of candy (*We, The Normal* and *Song of the Whoopee Wind*), Lil' Caesar's pizza (*Weather Diary 6*), plates full of Jell-O (*Weather Diary 3*), boiled hot dogs (*Weather Diary 3*), slop-like homemade meals (*Cult of the Cubicles*), and a banana, presumably as a sexual reference in *Weather Diary 6*.

To accentuate this act of eating what many would consider to be disgusting foods, Kuchar utilizes a consistent camera angle that has been in his repertoire since his early film career. In this familiar maneuver, he positions the camera slightly below his chin, angled upwards, in order to emphasize his mouth and its contents. Referring to this camera angle, Suárez suggests that “the Kuchars’ penchant for narrowing down the visual field and rubbing the spectator’s nose in the action enacts a return of the repressed – smell and therefore bodily waste – and this return is communicated by visual proximity” (37). George continues to utilize “narrowing down the visual field” as a visual strategy in his videos, up to his late work before his death in 2011. The close-up angle distorts his face, making his chin and lower lip protrude and his jaw line exaggerated and uneven. All the while, the viewer is positioned to look directly up his nostrils. On its own, this angle is jarring, but more often than not, Kuchar uses this angle, as Suárez notes, to overemphasize his repellent bodily functions. In part, the camera acts as a bib for Kuchar’s waste, as it is positioned right below his nose and mouth and it records his bodily oozes as they move closer to the lens, and thus, closer to the audience. This camera angle is also used when Kuchar highlights his nasal emissions in *Award* and *Metropolitan Monologues*. In *Award*, Kuchar is

worried about his stench. This obsession with odor is paired with Kuchar's telltale angle, but here, his nose drips with a long thread of snot, headed right for the camera lens. As he talks about how he could have gotten deodorant, his nose is at the center of the frame. These formal choices focus on the sense of smell, representable only indirectly by film, and prompts an inquisitiveness in viewers that refers them back to their own bodies: What does he smell like? What do *I* smell like? In these shots, Kuchar stages the impropriety of his own body, and foregrounds his social anxiety about its excesses and emanations, which subsequently ensnares the viewer in his insecurities. As Brinkema argued, the close-up has the potential to bring us too close to the body and its unsettling transformations. Kuchar's routine practice of eating in front of the camera emphasizes a body that cannot seem to contain what it consumes.

Accordingly, the process of digestion seems to haunt Kuchar's video persona. Unlike a Hollywood movie where food falls into an infinite pit of filmic-stomach, Kuchar calls attention to the waste that inevitably results. In his video diaries, he discusses digestion before eating, connecting the food he's about to eat to the eructation, flatulence and feces that will follow. These belches and farts occur sporadically throughout his body of work, and in *500 Millibars to Ecstasy*, Kuchar makes note of this after a bout of flatulence and says, "Every video has to have at least one gas outburst." And while that might be a slight exaggeration, there is a lot of passing gas and it erupts in a variety of disrupting ways – as it does, for example, in *Video Album 5: The Thursday People*, previously mentioned in my discussion of food. This video is a sort of memorial piece to Curt McDowell, a fellow underground filmmaker and a past paramour and collaborator of Kuchar's. McDowell was dying from AIDS, and the end of the video memorializes the funeral and his mourning friends and family. However, being a Kuchar video, it never gets too sentimental. There are a number of instances wherein Kuchar allows his body to disrupt the prevailing sadness of his subject matter, and this video is no different. Early in the video, Kuchar informs Curt and his family that the San Francisco Art Institute, where Kuchar

worked and McDowell attended school, dedicated their annual film festival to Curt. Because Curt is bedridden, Kuchar had been asked to give a speech on his behalf. Kuchar is writing and practicing his speech, but before reading his draft for the video, Kuchar lifts up one side of his body to release a loud fart. It would be easy to claim that this is just happenstance, but Kuchar chose to keep it in the video and chose to pair it with a movement that exaggerates the act of passing gas. This movement and the accompanying sound doesn't quite operate in the classical scatological humor sense, because it doesn't seem to suggest laughter, but instead a kind of emotional-reset before delving further into his sentimental speech about McDowell. It offers a formal break, a pause before entering back into the surrounding context of the video, the death of Kuchar's friend. This short and precise move creates a momentary pause from the other affective responses elicited by the image of a thin and frail McDowell in bed, and his already-mourning family and friends. Furthermore, by disrupting what is meant to be a sentimental and memorializing speech, this bodily emission reminds the viewer of death and the perishability of the body.

Flatulence and belching occur in a number of Kuchar's videos and do not always follow the same pattern as in *Video Album 5*. While they generally tend to act as disruptions, it is rare that passing gas upends an overly sentimental moment within Kuchar's videos. More often than not, they represent a kind of bodily anxiety. For example, in *Award*, the video starts with Kuchar burping as he anticipates receiving the 1992 Maya Deren Award for Independent Film and Video Artists from the American Film Institute. In starting the video with a belch, Kuchar focuses on his disruptive and rebellious body functions. In this regard, Kuchar's disgusting body separates him from the well-behaved, proper bodies of his peers. In *500 Millibars to Ecstasy*, Kuchar stays with his friend, Jerome, in Wisconsin and is plagued with excessive gas outbursts. He sits in his room and "gets it out of his system" because he spends his nights with Jerome who, according to

Kuchar, is “too frail for something so noxious.”⁶² While it’s unclear whether Kuchar implies a possible sexual relationship with Jerome, the fact remains that he shields Jerome from the disgusting and disruptive habits of his body. Another example is present in *Supercell*, where after filming a can of beans and farting, he asks “When will I ever grow up?”⁶³ These gas outbursts are representative of a social anxiety, where Kuchar is worried about how his body will disrupt his life and portray him as an improper individual.

Following his eating and digestion, Kuchar also focuses on excrement throughout his video diaries. Many of these videos explicitly show Kuchar’s own excrement in the toilet. In *Weather Diary 3*, Kuchar mentions the blueness of the toilet water in his neighbor’s bathroom and says his is “khaki colored,” as he cuts to an image of his own excrement-filled toilet. Shots of toilets are a regular occurrence, both empty and full, in Kuchar’s body of work. In a similar instance to the flatulence in *Video Album 5*, Kuchar also jokes about diarrhea in this video just prior to filming the newspaper clippings announcing McDowell’s death. *Weather Diary 6* engages the subject of excrement and constipation most directly. In this video, Kuchar is in El Reno, Oklahoma awaiting a visit from a sexual partner and he is plagued with a backed-up bathtub, toilet and sink. These images of fetid water accumulated in his bathroom are connected to Kuchar’s own digestive back-up, a back-up that could be the ruination of his impending sexual encounter. Looking for a solution to his problems, Kuchar starts by plunging and running water to try and clear the blockage, but to no avail. When determining which Drano to pour down the drain, Kuchar also includes shots of a laxative box. After the water finally starts to drain, there is dirt residue on the bottom of Kuchar’s tub which he rinses down with more water, mimicking the rinsing step of an enema. Following this movement, there are shots of Kuchar’s clean bathroom intercut with a close up of the laxative box, focusing on the word “laxative.” Unclogging his bathtub and toilet

⁶² *500 Millibars to Ecstasy*. Directed by George Kuchar. USA: Video Data Bank, 1989. DVD.

⁶³ *Supercell*. Directed by George Kuchar. USA: Video Data Bank, 2004. DVD.

means releasing his own digestive obstructions and being able to prepare his body, specifically his rectum, for anal sex. This attention to feces and flatulence is connected directly to his sexuality, as shown in this video, when his backed-up body becomes a problem for his sexual desires and plans.

Another bodily emission that Kuchar utilizes is that of ejaculate, which is clearly already connected to his sexuality. However, it also, much like the rest of Kuchar's bodily functions, is presented in an uncomfortably close manner. This paired with Kuchar's unadulterated desire works to convey an insatiable sexuality, a hole that is unable to be filled. This sexual explicitness has become a kind of calling card for Kuchar's works, and he refers to this within his videos, explaining in *Metropolitan Monologues* that he doesn't show his mother his "filthy" videos, as well as claiming in *Cult of the Cubicles*, "Nobody wants to see my movies anymore because of my nude scenes." This dialogue addresses his sexual and social anxieties about his nude body, and presents a coexisting relationship between desire and anxiety. In *Rainy Season* and *Weather Diary 3* he records his penis while urinating, and in the former, he offers some word play about how he'll "piss away" his money. Kuchar treats some of his videos as masturbation material, and records himself watching earlier parts of a video while sitting in his usually dirty underwear and rubbing himself. In *Cult of the Cubicles* he does this after recording a straight couple fooling around, and in *500 Millibars to Ecstasy*, he spends the duration of the video watching his footage from Wisconsin and intermittently touching himself. In *Weather Diary 3*, Kuchar is enamored with a group of men he records while he walks through town. After sneakily peeping through the slats of a fence to watch these young men play around a pool, Kuchar masturbates in the shower to subside his desire, replete with close-ups of water, or semen, droplets and streams on the shower's sliding door. Finally, in a move that is similar to those mentioned in regards to flatulence and excrement in *Video Album 5*, Kuchar uses semen to distract and disrupt in *Season of Sorrow*. This video takes place in Oklahoma, and it is a memorial to George and Mike's cat,

Blackie. Kuchar is crying while looking at pictures of Blackie and reading condolence letters from his friends. It is a sad and touching moment, and Kuchar does not include footage like this often. However, he interrupts this moment with a quick close-up shot of a semen stain on his shorts. This disrupts the building sentimentality, while also suggesting that Kuchar's sexual drive doesn't quit for anything – the body is in control and needs what it needs. This sexual excess is distasteful paired with the death of a beloved pet, just like his gustatory excess when paired with McDowell's death.

In these celebrations of the body functions that are usually relegated to the private sphere, Kuchar imposes his body upon the audience. He not only explores the substances that leak or spew outwards from his body, but also, he examines its inherent perishability. As the years pass, Kuchar's body remains a constant subject for his videos, and through these videos, his body transforms, changes shape, and shows his age. As the videos progress over time, he mentions his aging body with regularity, specifically how he is going bald, losing teeth, and getting fat. He laments his youth and his desirability, specifically in *Video Album 5*, a discussion assumedly elicited by the impending loss of his friend. In talking about the past, he says, "I was hot then," and, "How quickly youth bloats and empties itself of all appendage fluids in the name of love."⁶⁴ This also refers back to his line about no one wanting to see his movies because of his nude scenes. When Kuchar's videos are considered small parts of a larger, overarching project, then each video builds on each other to show the way Kuchar's lifestyle ravages his body, slowly but surely. His videography follows his slow nose-dive towards death in which his future is fleeting and his body is crumbling. In recording this descent, Kuchar signifies the queer body as a soon-to-be-dead-and-gone body. While celebrating his body and its functions, Kuchar is always aware of the physicality of his existence and the imminent end that lies ahead, yet this doesn't stop him

⁶⁴ *Video Album 5: The Thursday People*. Directed by George Kuchar. USA: Video Data Bank, 1987. DVD.

from filming. However, it would be naïve not to recognize that the aging body disrupts as well, creating a disruption in desirability and ability both. By materializing queerness in his physical form, Kuchar is reiterating the importance of the body while also reminding viewers of their own mortality. In doing this, Kuchar raises these bodily functions that are relegated to the private sphere and chucks them to the forefront of everything on screen. However, because Kuchar's body emissions occur so frequently, the shock factor that is usually tied to these kinds of inclusions wears off, allowing the viewers to look beyond the social impropriety of it all, and instead focus on what it means to be a meat body.

Technology and Form

Part of the way disgust is embodied in Kuchar's videos is through the medium, and the production choices. I have already addressed some of the ways Kuchar utilized camera angles to accentuate camera proximity and savor the disgusting content. However, there are many more ways that Kuchar works to degrade the form of his videos. First, his choice to switch from 16mm film to a handheld, cheap video camera signaled a new association with a homemade and amateur aesthetic, allowing for the use of video effects to play around with and in-camera editing. Second, the choice to make video diaries, focusing solely on himself, his body, and his life, works to portray an extremely intimate, but also heightened emotional image of Kuchar's lifestyle. Both of these choices come together to place Kuchar's work among the lesser, kitsch aesthetic.

It was the 1980's, and Kuchar was a permanent member of the San Francisco Art Institute faculty. However, this didn't mean he had access to extensive funding and materials. Film stock was more and more expensive to develop, and he struggled to find the budget to not only film his class projects, but more importantly to be able to get them developed correctly and in enough time for the class to work on editing. At the same time, the portable video camera became

available on the mass market in a variety of brands. This led to Kuchar's first foray with video in 1985 with *Weather Diary 1*.⁶⁵ In switching from film to video, Kuchar was not only choosing to use a cheaper, more accessible format that fell in line with, and even amplified, his already gritty and low-brow trash aesthetic, he was also choosing a medium that was largely derided by more 'serious' film artists. This choice to record his day-to-day happenings, primarily when travelling, in video acts as a refusal of the avant-garde's gate-keeping in regard to form and quality. Kuchar spoke on this point in his own ornate manner: "Making cheap video productions is easy because you'll be automatically thought of as cheap as soon as you purchase a camcorder (even though some of them go for a hefty sum). Buying a video camera will definitely cause other artists' creative juices to flow, especially other filmmakers who will gladly spit at you with those juices."⁶⁶ This diminishment of the video medium is something Kuchar writes about frequently following his switch. Much of this negative sentiment surrounding video came from the fact that it was extremely accessible, and it was made for at-home hobbyists who wanted to record family events, like birthdays and weddings. This connotation affects the reception of Kuchar's work, and according to Reinke, "The work is unabashedly homemade, celebrating the technological possibilities (and reveling in the limitations) of consumer equipment. Despite the consummate skill Kuchar employs in all aspects of production, by industrial standards it is amateur rather than professional."⁶⁷ Regardless of all of the expertise Kuchar shows within the medium over decades of honing his skills, Reinke suggests that there is no way to shed the amateur vibe that is connected to video. More importantly, Kuchar doesn't seem to want to shirk that label, and allows the amateur video aesthetic take to center stage in some of his diaries.

⁶⁵ Steve Seid, "Mongrel Melodramas and Other Bites on the Leg: The Videoworks of George Kuchar," in *The George Kuchar Experience*, ed. Steve Reinke (Pleasuredome & YYZ, 1996), 19.

⁶⁶ George Kuchar and Mike Kuchar, *Reflections from a Cinematic Cesspool* (Berkeley, CA: Zanja Press, 1997), 55.

⁶⁷ Steve Reinke, "Excrements of Time: George Kuchar's Videos," *Millenium Film Journal*, no. 50 (2008): 56-7

Furthermore, the choice to call these video “diaries” suggests a certain connotation that can be linked to the devalued in a number of ways. First, there is something overly sentimental about a diary, they tend to hold our most exaggerated memories expressed in all their mawkish details. Diaries harken an image of those cheaply made, pink and prissy notebooks with gold-plated locks that were easily broken into; the kind of notebooks you might find at a dollar store, and use to share your most embarrassing secrets and thoughts. The diary is extremely intimate, written for the author’s eyes only, and the possibility of its public exposure can create anxiety. Here, the diary can relate to disgust both in its kitsch aesthetic of a lowbrow item that allows for empty reiteration of important moments, and upon rereading, feels like an easy snapshot of what was once a significant and potentially serious experience. And, secondly, once a diary is taken to the public, its sentimental intimacy of the author’s writings enact a too-close response. A diary may create an uncomfortable proximity to the raw emotions or cloying guilelessness of its author. For Kuchar to call these videos ‘diaries’ is to purposely undermine their seriousness. The use of a term like “journal” might have retained more masculine and less privatized and emotional connotations, but Kuchar strategically embraces a camp presentation of self.

A diaristic mode further suggests that each additional video is another installment of a larger project, undermining the difference between each individual work. Reinke comments on this: “It seems as though as soon as Kuchar picked up a video camera in 1985, he decided to de-emphasize the autonomy of individual titles in favor of an expansive, continuing corpus of work that would not have fixed boundaries. I think of these works as components of one large project – not an autobiography, but a journal studded with self-portraits and portraits of others (often with little distinction of the two).”⁶⁸ These portraits, then, are extremely candid, sometimes too personal. With video, Kuchar had the ability to edit in-camera, while also being able to create a doubled timeline in which he could watch his footage back and re-narrate it from a future

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 57.

perspective. Each portrait is accompanied by Kuchar's response in the moment, as well as, at times his future self's comments on the interaction. This retroactive editing allows for him to add commentary on his real life, retelling, but also not hiding his body and its secretions. This is completely respectful of the diary mode, in that it allows for the author to rely only on their personal responses to the world and their lives, a single-scope. At times, it feels almost like gossip, as if Kuchar is sitting next to you while he shows his video recordings from his most recent trip and regales you with the drama and backstory of the various people that crop up, not to mention his own theatrics.

Kuchar offers his own corporeal metaphor for the ways that video disrupts the "fixed boundaries" of standard film practice, a metaphor that makes clear the link between disgust and his choice of technological format. In his *Reflections from a Cinematic Cesspool*, co-authored with his brother Mike, Kuchar writes:

To many, the purity of film is being threatened by the explosive eruption of video. That eruption was making a lump in my much despised jockey briefs. I tried to hide the stink from my cohorts but it was of no use. The camcorder revolution was just what the doctor ordered... a laxative of cheap non-stop imagery endowed with high flatulating fidelity. I finally lowered my briefs and let drop the digested dollops of diaristic diarrhea. My video career had begun!⁶⁹

For him, then, the use of video was a sort of liberation, albeit a private one. The ease of just picking up a camera and bringing it into the world made it much easier for Kuchar to create a lot of work. This, too, becomes a kind of issue. The common idea surrounding art and worthy film is a requirement of time, hard work, a true and unique message, but when someone is able to bang

⁶⁹ George Kuchar and Mike Kuchar, *Reflections from a Cinematic Cesspool* (Berkeley, CA: Zanja Press, 1997), 123.

out artwork after artwork with barely any time in between, it garners a sentiment of being too cheap, too easy to really be worthy of any study. According to Reinke, after switching to video, Kuchar's rate increased to about a dozen videos a year, anywhere from shorts to "epic features."⁷⁰ However, these are just the ones that Kuchar sent to the Video Data Bank; there could be many more leftover in his apartment, now inhabited by Mike. Regardless, this wealth of videos mimics the proliferation of kitsch, the constant output of cheap aesthetic only to pile up until it loses any relevance.

Kuchar's utilization of video also allowed him to incorporate video effects, both in camera and at the editing bay. These editing features allowed him to perform, simultaneously, as actor and director of the videos and, presumably, of his life. The in-camera edits primarily are used to create very quick cuts, much like the cuts between the backed-up toilet and the laxative box I mentioned in the discussion of *Weather Diary 6*. The speed at which Kuchar cut between different images, creates a quick gross-out that is barely on screen long enough for the viewer to turn away. Instead it operates as a light shock, a quick jolt to the system before continuing to regale the audience with his interactions and journeys. There are also times when Kuchar does the exact opposite – for example, in *Song of the Whoopee Wind*, he plays with a toy that mimics a fart sound, and eventually takes the sound, slows it down and overlays it on top of his New Year celebrations, tainting everything with its sound. However, the more noticeable editing is applied post-filming, and can incorporate superimpositions of Kuchar's drawings and kitsch items (*Route 666*), the television weather announcements (*Cyclone Alley Ceramics*, *Weather Diary 6*), scrolling text and letters (*Season of Sorrow*), intercut scenes from melodramas and B-movies (*Uncle Evil*, *Passage to Wetness*), as well as color-editing like the hyper pigmentation of nature in *The Inmate*.

⁷⁰ Steve Reinke, "Excrements of Time: George Kuchar's Videos," *Millenium Film Journal*, no. 50 (2008): 56.

The video that is most indicative of these post-filming video effects is *Award*, which as previously mentioned, records Kuchar's visit to New York to receive the 1992 Maya Deren Award for Independent Film and Video Artists from the American Film Institute. In his voiceover during the award ceremony, Kuchar expresses his worries that everyone around him can smell his body odor since he decided not to wear deodorant and is sweating profusely. These expressions are paired with overlaying images of the award ceremony, and images of Kuchar shot through the crystal award he receives as he reflects upon his night. In this layering, Kuchar creates a disorienting point of view; in the award ceremony, Kuchar is behind the camera, watching his friends talk to each other and scanning over the crowd, but the semi-transparent image of his face through the disfiguring refraction of the award looms above. In this formal choice, not only does Kuchar create a cloudy and hazy effect that seems reminiscent of the green fog that emits from a cartoon character's body when they smell, but he also creates a mirror in the camera – that while he is looking out, he is also looking inwards. So, while he is looking out into the crowd of people that are supporting him and potentially smelling him, he is also looking at himself and layering his social anxieties on top of the award ceremony, tainting it with his stress. This paranoia grows throughout the ceremony, and then continues to be a conversation topic any time George tells anyone about the award. These video effects work to grime up the image, the visuals of Kuchar's diaries. They also double down on this kind of hokey, amateur style of video-making – an excessive utilization of the tools available to try and class-up the finished product, much like the empty prestige of kitsch.

Commodity, Trash and Dirt

In Kuchar's videography, trash and plastic play a significant role in relaying a disgusting aesthetic and critiquing the ascriptions of value in a capitalist society. Unlike many critiques of

capitalism, wherein a person might try to be self-sufficient and cut down on the waste they produce, Kuchar does not stop investing in the lowbrow pap that commodity culture relies on. In fact, he surrounds himself with kitsch items and commodities that have long lost their value. Nadia Bozak's book, *The Cinematic Footprint: Lights, Camera, Natural Resources*, details consumer culture and technological advances, and how they create an overload of electronic waste. The removal of dirt and trash is more than just a discarding of unwanted products; it is an active move of shifting to make room for more, to buy more. Bozak, in her discussion of Gay Hawkins' *The Ethics of Waste*, explains the role garbage plays as follows: "Ridding our lives of dirt orients us as subjects, defines our social position, and – if we do it properly, at the proscribed time, and via the proper channels – ties us to the state, which ultimately determines what is and is not dirt."⁷¹ This removal process has clear distinctions between the right way and the wrong way to dispose, and if those processes are not followed, then the subject is disoriented. Kuchar then is clearly a "disoriented" subject, a "bad" citizen of capitalism that doesn't throw anything out, instead filling his world with cheap plastic toys and gadgets, newspapers from months ago, crinkled comics, soiled food containers, and dirty underwear. We can rely on Juan Suárez's discussion of queer materiality here, as Kuchar creates an environment that mirrors his queer self – an undervalued, past-its-prime, gay male body.

Originally, plastic was the image of hygiene, as it was smooth and easy to clean. Yet in George Kuchar's videos, it isn't the hygienic, reusability of plastic that is explored. They focus instead on where these plastics will end up – in the trash. Images of trash are a regular feature of Kuchar's videos, even if they are brief. In *Supercell*, there is a shot of the trashcan in his motel room that is filled with remnants of his visit there. The garbage is filled with his baked beans can, the smoked sausage can, other food wrappers and napkins. Usually, dirt and waste removal is done under the

⁷¹ Nadia Bozak, *The Cinematic Footprint: Lights, Camera, Natural Resources* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers, 2012), 155.

guise of privacy, sneaking out in the evening with a trash bag full of the weeks filth to add to the anonymous mass of waste already in the dumpster. But Kuchar holds the camera on these items of “trash,” forcing viewers to focus on them, to focus on what makes something worthy or not. Instead of looking at the items as trash, there is recognition of items that were used up earlier in the video. Kuchar makes his trash public by showing it on video; this garbage is plainly his, and he does not shirk from the responsibility of ownership and accountability for the trash.

Furthermore, Kuchar keeps the trash around. His garbage is full, but he also has containers and cans sitting around the room. Kuchar also regularly shows the expanse of newspapers and comics he has strewn around the hotel room. By returning to these papers time and time again, Kuchar is refuting their daily lifespan, their timeliness. The refusal of consumerism and of the flow of non-bodily waste halts the commodity system and places focus on the trash itself. Consumerism expects that citizens will buy, use, discard and replace in a timely manner, and to adhere to these social guidelines is to be a good, clean citizen. If a person doesn’t take part in this process in a timely manner, they are “bad” citizens that aren’t properly taking part in commodity culture. In this way, Kuchar is holding tight to the items that have been used up and would generally be relegated as trash, and keeping trash, or keeping things around that most would consider trash is queer in that it refutes the role of good consumer and the carefully constructed cycle of consumerism.

One of the ways in which Kuchar upsets the hygienic quality of plastic is through his inclusion of plastic, prefabricated kitsch objects. When new, these objects may have been indicative of the clean and manufactured quality of plastic, but instead, they are old-fashioned and cheap looking. For most “good” and proper citizens, these items would surely have been placed in the trash. In a number of his videos, Kuchar plays out scenes with these kitsch objects, expressing his desires and having the object fulfill them for him. An example is in *Route 666* (1994), which focuses on a small, kitschy marionette. Kuchar sits alone in his motel room only to turn his head to see a

ghostly, dancing marionette that seems to be controlling itself. The marionette distracts Kuchar from his work and leads him into a world of hyper-color that seems to be made up of his drawings. Eventually, he shoos the toy away, and the short ends. This happens again in *Cyclone Alley Ceramics* (2000), with a sculpture of a witch that Kuchar has bought for \$3 in El Reno, Oklahoma. Through video editing, Kuchar makes it look as though the witch is speaking to him and he responds, having a full conversation with the kitsch item. When telling the witch to shut up, he suggests that she “do something about the weather,”⁷² and, of course, the next sequence of shots consist of the lightning and storming outside Kuchar’s hotel room. Her power is so strong that Kuchar is eventually urged to evacuate the hotel due to the significant possibility of a tornado. By making these items have roles in his videos, especially roles in which they are helping Kuchar change his environment to match his desires, he inscribes them with value and purpose. While this isn’t necessarily anything new, by repurposing kitsch items as subjects, it raises the question of what an object is, what has use and value in a capitalist society?

⁷² *Cyclone Alley Ceramics*. Directed by George Kuchar. USA: Video Data Bank, 2000. DVD.

CONCLUSION

George Kuchar's video diaries peddle in excess, the excess of the body, of sentimentality, and of the low-value technology and commodity objects. These representations of the debased and devalued are rife throughout his video diaries and they violate boundaries of propriety to present a queer investment in disgust. The aim of this thesis was to delve deeply into Kuchar's video diaries to attempt to understand his utilization of a disgusting aesthetic, and to explore his unseriousness as it is cultivated in his treatment of kitsch. And while Youngblood and Suárez have both admirably addressed Kuchar's use of the low-value, kitsch object, neither have connected it to his queer form of disgust that savors impropriety and excess. Considering disgust's conventional connotation as a refusal, Kuchar's video diaries afford it a different implication, that of attraction-repulsion which works to uncover the value of the repugnant. In this move, Kuchar is able to engage a queer sensibility that challenges the class-based devaluation of kitsch and the social devaluation of homosexuality. It is my hope that this research can encourage more academic grappling with the unserious, the disgusting, and, hopefully, the wonderfully weird video works of George Kuchar.

REFERENCES

- 500 Millibars to Ecstasy*. Directed by George Kuchar. USA: Video Data Bank, 1989. DVD.
- Award*. Directed by George Kuchar. USA: Video Data Bank, 1992. DVD.
- Bozak, Nadia. *The Cinematic Footprint: Lights, Camera, Natural Resources*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers, 2012.
- Brinkema, Eugenie. *The Forms of the Affects*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014.
- Calinescu, Matei. *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism*. Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2006.
- Carroll, Noël. *The Philosophy of Horror: Or, Paradoxes of the Heart*. NY: Routledge, 1990.
- Cult of the Cubicles*. Directed by George Kuchar. USA: Video Data Bank, 1987. DVD.
- Cyclone Alley Ceramics*. Directed by George Kuchar. USA: Video Data Bank, 2000. DVD.
- Greenberg, Clement. "Avant-Garde and Kitsch." In *Art and Culture: Critical Essays*, 3-33. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1961.
- Haidt, Jonathan, Paul Rozin, Clark McCauley, and Sumio Imada. "Body, Psyche, and Culture: The Relationship between Disgust and Morality." *Psychology and Developing Societies* 9, no. 1 (March 1997): 107-31.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. Translated by Robert B. Louden. NY: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- *Critique of Judgment*. Translated by Werner S. Pluhar. Indianapolis, Ind: Hackett, 2010.
- Kleinhans, Chuck. "Taking Out the Trash: Camp and the Politics of Parody." In *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, edited by Moe Myer, 182-201. London: Routledge, 2005.
- Kolnai, Aurel. *On Disgust*. Edited by Barry Smith and Carolyn Korsmeyer. Chicago, IL: Open Court, 2004.

- Korsmeyer, Carolyn. "Gut Appreciation: Possibilities for Aesthetic Disgust." *Lebenswelt: Aesthetics and Philosophy of Experience*, no. 3 (2013): 186-99.
- *Savoring Disgust: The Foul and the Fair in Aesthetics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Kuchar, George. "Cans and Cassettes." *Journal of Film and Video*, no. 57 (2005): 84-89.
- Kuchar, George, and Mike Kuchar. *Reflections from a Cinematic Cesspool*. Berkeley, CA: Zanja Press, 1997.
- Menninghaus, Winfried. 2003. *Disgust: the Theory and History of a Strong Sensation*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Metropolitan Monologue*. Directed by George Kuchar. USA: Video Data Bank, 2000. DVD.
- Miller, D. A. "Elio's Education." Los Angeles Review of Books. February 19, 2018. Accessed March 31, 2018. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/elios-education/>.
- Miller, William Ian. *The Anatomy of Disgust*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998.
- Passage to Wetness*. Directed by George Kuchar. USA: Video Data Bank, 1990. DVD.
- Reinke, Steve. "Excrements of Time: George Kuchar's Videos." *Millenium Film Journal*, no. 50 (2008): 55-61.
- "The George Kuchar Experience." In *The George Kuchar Experience*, edited by Steve Reinke. Pleasuredome & YYZ, 1996.
- Rocky Interlude*. Directed by George Kuchar. USA: Video Data Bank, 1990. DVD.
- Route 666*. Directed by George Kuchar. USA: Video Data Bank, 1994. DVD.
- Season of Sorrow*. Directed by George Kuchar. USA: Video Data Bank, 1996. DVD.
- Seid, Steve. "Mongrel Melodramas and Other Bites on the Leg: The Videoworks of George Kuchar." In *The George Kuchar Experience*, edited by Steve Reinke, 16-24. Pleasuredome & YYZ, 1996.
- Smith, Barry, and Carolyn Korsmeyer. "Visceral Values: Aurel Kolnai on Disgust." In *On Disgust*, 1-28. Peru, IL: Carus Publishing Company, 2004.

- Song of the Whoopee Wind*. Directed by George Kuchar. USA: Video Data Bank, 2005. DVD.
- Stevenson, Jack. *Desperate Visions: The Films of John Waters & the Kuchar Brothers*. London: Creation Books, 1996.
- Suárez, Juan Antonio. *Bike Boys, Drag Queens & Superstars: Avant-Garde, Mass Culture, and Gay Identities in the 1960s Underground Cinema*. Boulder, CO: NetLibrary, 1999.
- "The Kuchars, the 1960s and Queer Materiality." *Screen* 56, no. 1 (March 01, 2015): 25-45. doi:10.1093/screen/hjv003.
- Supercell*. Directed by George Kuchar. USA: Video Data Bank, 2004. DVD.
- The Inmate*. Directed by George Kuchar. USA: Video Data Bank, 1997. DVD.
- Tinkcom, Matthew. *Working Like a Homosexual: Camp, Capital, and Cinema*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002.
- Tomkins, Silvan S. *Affect, Imagery, Consciousness: The Complete Edition*. New York, NY: Springer Pub., 2008.
- Uncle Evil*. Directed by George Kuchar. USA: Video Data Bank, 1996. DVD.
- Video Album 5: The Thursday People*. Directed by George Kuchar. USA: Video Data Bank, 1987. DVD.
- Weather Diary 3*. Directed by George Kuchar. USA: Video Data Bank, 1988. DVD.
- Weather Diary 6*. Directed by George Kuchar. USA: Video Data Bank, 1990. DVD.
- We, The Normal*. Directed by George Kuchar. USA: Video Data Bank, 1987. DVD.

VITA

Liz Deegan

Candidate for the Degree of

Master of Arts

Thesis: DISGUSTINGLY QUEER: GEORGE KUCHAR'S VIDEO DIARIES

Major Field: English

Biographical:

Education:

Completed the requirements for the Master of Arts in English at Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma in May, 2018.

Completed the requirements for the Bachelor of Arts in English at Graceland University, Lamoni, Iowa in 2012.

Experience:

Graduate Teaching Assistant August 2015-Present
Oklahoma State University
Instructor of record for Composition I & II, which emphasize the writing process, moving from personal writing to academic, with the goal of teaching students to move from the personal to the objective by focusing on genre, audience, revision, and discussion

Professional Memberships:

Reader, OKSTATE Intersections Essay Contest Summer 2017
Oklahoma State University

Member, FACE Intersectional Feminist Organization Fall 2015-Present
Oklahoma State University