



Sins of the Fleshapoids

Filmmaker: Mike Kuchar

Production Company: Mike Kuchar

Music Assemblage: Bob Cowan

Cast:

Bob Cowan (*Zar*)

Donna Kerness (*Princess Vivianna*)

George Kuchar (*Prince Gianbeno*)

Maren Thomas (*Melenka*)

Julius Mittleman (*Ernie*)

Gina Zuckerman (*Zar's owner*)

USA 1965

97 mins

16mm

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Sins of the Fleshapoids

One million years into the future, human-looking androids known as Fleshapoids break into revolt when their masters become too lazy to service their needs and desires. A whole other universe is uncovered in Mike Kuchar's status quo-busting, new-love seeking, unbounded, camp, sci-fi, midnight movie success. John Waters said of the film, it 'really shows what an underground movie was'.

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Mike Kuchar's first 16mm movie (he and his twin brother George, here cast as the villain, began making 8mm epics in the Bronx some 11 years earlier) at once celebrates, parodies and outdoes the entire Hollywood pulp science fiction tradition. Insofar as its poverty-row origins are never for a moment disguised, the movie in effect reverses the pretensions of its Hollywood models, which invariably seek to appear more expensive or elaborate than they are: Kuchar constructed the sets and backdrops in his bedroom, and assembled the costumes ('a combination of dresses, jock-straps and beads') from 'the racks of various thrift shops'. The use to which he puts these modest but splendiferous means evokes a broad 'pop-art' spectrum: from comic strips (unable to afford synchronous sound recording, Kuchar uses 'speech bubbles' to convey dialogue) to Andy Warhol (whose gallery of glamour girls, muscle-boys and freaks Kuchar anticipates, simply by drawing on neighbourhood 'talent' for his cast).

Against all the odds, this bizarre mixture of absurdities, contingencies and calculated bathos yields a movie that is both very funny and quite magical, a piece of total artifice in the Méliès vein. The introductory scenes, for example, have the narrator's fruity tones exclaiming 'Humans now live in a true paradise!', while the camera glides over baskets of succulent, polished fruit and then cuts to Julius Mittleman lounging on a leopard-skin rug against sumptuously crimson drapes and hangings, looking the archetypal American baseball star but clad only in a diaphanous blue loin-cloth and bedecked with jewels, eating candy floss.

The sheer innocence of Kuchar's enthusiasm immediately banishes the notion of vulgarity; the camp taintness is transmuted into a delirious, dime-store expressionism. Something similar happens when, soon after, an ultra-stylised painting stands duty as Prince Gianbeno's palace in long shot (it looks something like a huge egg on stilts), and Bob Cowan as the improbably heroic Zar is introduced into the foreground groping through real bushes to get a look at it. Later scenes take on a darker colouring (the princess' murder of her lover, for instance, contains distinct visual echoes of *Psycho*), paving the way for the hilariously attenuated climax, which cross-cuts between three separate but equally intense crises. The pay-off, described by the director as 'a milestone in the history of toys', manages to be simultaneously outrageous and a conventional 'happy ending', thus consolidating the film's line in astute Hollywood mimicry while preserving the hokey sense of poetry intact.

Some of Kuchar's subsequent work extends the use of dramatic cliché and overblown imagery that pays such striking dividends in *Fleshapoids*, while others of his recent movies explore the bleak realities of the Bronx community in which he grew up. His career demonstrates, if proof be still needed, that success in film has nothing to do with technical or financial resources, and everything to do with imagination and a capacity for putting it to work.

Tony Rayns, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, March 1975