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*Submit to Me*

*Snapshots from Hell*

**RICHARD  
KERN**

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**Kern's trashy teens fight and fuck their way through an incomprehensible world**

BY GARY MORRIS

Transgression seems more like concept than reality in these no-boundaries days, but in the '80s and early '90s there was in fact a Cinema of Transgression, a mini-movement devoted to the far fringes of [sex](#) and violence among alienated, tribal urban youth. Based in New York City and closely allied with the music of Sonic Youth, Jim Thirlwell (of Foetus fame), Dream Syndicate, et al., its luminaries included Nick Zedd, Lydia Lunch, Beth B, Leg Lung, and most notably, Richard Kern.

Kern, born in 1954, has had a dual career as photographer and filmmaker, but in both realms he works the same themes and motifs: New York as Boschian hellhole, pierced and pouting [drug-swilling youth](#), Mansonesque tableaux of [guts and gore](#) (rendered in cheesy special effects), big guns, big knives, and [rough hardcore sex](#). This DVD collects a hefty sampling of his filmography (180 minutes<sup>1</sup> worth, or 13 of his 26 films) from throughout his career, 1985 to 1992. These are shorts, running from a few minutes to more than half an hour, shot in video and Super 8 (often in black and white), starring Kern's sleazy stock company and friends: Lunch, Zedd, Henry Rollins, Karen Finley, David Wojnarowicz, Lung Leg. Kern himself appears occasionally, making up in [dick size](#) what he lacks in star power.



Lydia Lunch in  
*Submit to Me Now*

One of the earliest entries here is the 1985 **The Right Side of My Brain**, which could have been subtitled "Or Salvation Through Face Fucking." This exercise in psychosis and paranoia stars Lydia Lunch (who also wrote some of the droning, dissonant music) as an urban casualty who talks in voiceover about being "sucked into an endless vacuum" and entering "a place where reality was no longer necessary." The usual rituals of daily life are suspended in this study in psychological free fall, as Lunch spends her time squirming in bed, undressing, fondling her tits, and submitting to some violent sex with a mysterious grunge boy with a gun. [New York](#) never looked so grim, reduced here to dilapidated apartments and dirty streets that recall the work of novelist Hubert Selby.

Also from 1985 is **You Killed Me First**, whose main inspiration seems to be

[John Waters](#). This critique of middlebrow American life has hilariously bad, Waters-style declamatory acting by several of the superstars of '80s performance art. Zucchini fucker Karen Finley plays Mom; the late art-queen David Wojnarowicz is Dad; and Lung Leg, the '80s answer to Mink Stole, is the demented daughter who screams "I really hate you!" and "You're just as disgusting as I am!" before mowing down the family at a Thanksgiving dinner. Waters isn't the only influence here. The [Warhol](#)/Morrissey touch is noticeable in mangled dialog that Kern doesn't bother to reshoot. Like both Waters and Warhol/[Morrissey](#), Kern gives full play to the personalities of his stars, and no doubt a personality like La Leg is as crazed in real life as she is here. Despite the tinny trappings and amateurish feel, **You Killed Me First** succeeds as a grainy snapshot of a particular time and place: Richard Kern's brain in the mid-1980s.

Gore also dominates **Death Valley 69** (1986), which features "the bad kids" running amok, far from the institutions society has erected — the family, school — to control them. The film is a catalog of violent teenage wish-fulfillment fantasies via giant switchblades, martyred teens who've been eviscerated (shown in loving tacky detail), and attacks by cops with tear gas. Sonic Youth provides the soundtrack to these twisted lives, and Kern employs some crudely effective, if now dated, montage work.

One of Kern's most ambitious works is **Fingered** (1986), whose sarcastic disclaimer says "Although it is not our sole intention to SHOCK, INSULT, or IRRITATE, you have been warned that we are CATERING only to our own preferences as members of the SEXUAL MINORITY." The film opens with Lydia Lunch as a phone-sex operator chatting up an adult baby who turns on her: "You don't give one good fuck for me, do you Mommy!" From there the film devolves into an evil road trip with Lydia and her boyfriend, who have rough sex and assault various friends, strangers, and a hitchhiker played by poor Lung Leg. There are echoes of Terence Malick's **Badlands** and of course the Manson family here. Typical of Kern's world, gratification must be immediate, and every slight, real or not, is answered with a knife in the gut or a gun in the head. The ever-versatile Lunch provides some of the music here.

Two of Kern's more notorious works are **Submit to Me** (1985) and **Submit to Me Now** (1987), which dispense with narrative entirely, being simply a record of brief performances by some of Kern's friends and actors. [Self-mutilation](#), crucifixion, bondage, blow jobs, and other divertissements are on florid display here, accompanied by the music of the Butthole Surfers. Kern himself appears in the 1993 **My Nightmare**, which features masturbation (by the naked Kern), spanking, and bondage scenes. In the quasi-epic (35-minute) omnibus film **Manhattan Love Suicides** (1985), a loopy David Wojnarowicz's arm falls off and he's sketched by a creepy artist.

Kern's background as a photographer is evident in the attention to posing by his characters, and their general objectification. In the 1992 **The Bitches** (not to be confused with Chabrol's **Les Biches**), Annabelle and Linda (per the credits) glare, dress up, give attitude, change clothes, curl their hair, read, smolder, and make over an anonymous guy who also glares, gives attitude, etc. They abandon these formal rituals briefly to jack off their new pal, and he eventually embraces more of their insular little world by playing dress-up with them. Eventually he gets plugged from both ends by the now strap-on



wearing girls. **The Bitches** reveals other influences that run through Kern's work: [Ed Wood](#)'s softcore sleaze scenes from [Glen or Glenda](#), and the bondage fantasies of legendary photographer Irving Klaw. Jim Coleman's dissonant clatter soundtrack adds a disturbing frisson. Also from 1992 is **The Sewing Circle**, which preserves for all time (or until the mylar in the DVD disintegrates) the sewing up of Kembra Pfahler's vagina by ace seamstress and performance artist Lisa Resurrecion. Pfahler's seeming delight in this event — "It's so fabulous!" — undoubtedly bolstered some critics' view of Kern as a misogynist taking pleasure in the literal suppression of female sexuality.

*The Sewing Circle*

Despite his work's often laughable special effects, arguable misogyny, and dogged insularity, Kern successfully showcases the pleasures of trading bourgeois life — and the angst that inevitably accompanies it — for sex, violence, drugs, and music. His films are at the very least a welcome tonic to those sleek, empty, picture-perfect teen dramas from the John Hughes school that occupied so much cultural space in the eighties.

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**ACCESS:** This collection can be had for a mere \$29.95 list price from [Music Video Distributors](#) or any of the usual venues. Richard Kern has his own [web site](#). There's a [useful interview](#) at Kulture-Void. Also, an enchanting site called [nerve.com](#) has a gallery of [naked guys](#) by Kern that merits attention. You have to join nerve to get access but it's free and well worth it. Jack Sargeant wrote a book on the movement, *Death Tripping: The Cinema of Transgression*, for the estimable [Creation Books](#).

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