

# Harmony Korine Rubs Up Against The American Nightmare in *Trash Humpers*

In his latest film, *Trash Humpers*, Harmony Korine invents a violent, non-existent, virtually unimaginable subculture and populates it with a strange, repulsive breed of imaginary beings, then presents it with affectionate curiosity, as though he has happened upon the last possibility of true (if admittedly perverse) freedom left in America. Shot on old VHS camcorders, the film purports to be the self-documentation of a group of energetic elderly shit-disturbers as they wreak havoc around the dismal suburbs of Tennessee, eat pancakes topped with dish soap, occasionally murder people, and, of course, dry hump trash cans in back alleys. Played by Korine, his wife, and their friends, all wearing rubber horror masks of old people with burnt or scarred skin, the trash humpers are conceived as mischievous, hyperactive, feral, polymorphously perverse creature-people that enthusiastically seek out constant destructive activity to unleash their seemingly endless reserves of energy. They are defined by oppositions that make them impossible beings, not unlike mythic beasts or horror film 'monsters'. They are both elderly and youthful, ageless and decomposing; they seem to be driven by pure instinct, but their appetites are entirely unnatural, inorganic even; their desires are unquenchable and incessant, but they are always cheerful and content; their behavior can be brutally violent, but they don't seem to possess any ill-will, nor to be capable of sustained rage; they proceed with their mayhem unthinkingly and unselfconsciously, yet they possess some awareness of the nature of their existence – this is reflected in their use of language, which for the most part consists of chanting nonsense-rhyme mantras ("Make it, make it, don't fake it." "Shake it, shake it, don't take it" etc.), but occasionally includes rambling quasi-poetic soliloquies reflecting on their marginal status within society.



Thematically *Trash Humpers* doesn't cover particularly new ground for Korine. *Gummo*, *Julien Donkey-Boy*, and *Mr. Lonely* all portray marginalized characters that lead peculiar, discarded lives on the outskirts of American culture (though set in Europe, this still basically applies to *Mr. Lonely*). However, *Trash Humpers* revitalizes Korine's central formal and thematic concerns and moves them in significant new directions. Korine has described *Trash Humpers* as 'Vaudevillian horror', and the description serves well to underline the differences from his previous work, in which the Vaudevillian comedy and the horror elements had to always remain just below the surface of the essentially realistic aesthetic. The new level of abstraction inherent in the concept of *Trash Humpers* pushes Korine into more explicitly critical territory and enables him to side-step the problems his other films faced at times in establishing the perspective of the film in relation to its subject. At his best, Korine has mined the confrontational tension between provocation/exploitation and recognition/sympathy to create some of the most complex, ambiguous, and strangely exhilarating moments of recent cinema. However, this tension inevitably limited Korine's ability to critique the conditions that produced the problematic milieus he portrayed because he always had to undercut their disturbing aspects with a 'non-judgmental'

perspective. In *Trash Humpers*, Korine can openly present the monstrous elements of his characters and their environments. Meanwhile the intimacy provided by the 'first person' perspective ends up creating an uncomfortable familiarity and even affection for the characters, which is always explicitly problematic and disturbing. This allows a degree of distance and critical thought that in the earlier films was often be subsumed by Korine's constant doubling back between disgust and sympathy. The film usefully brings to the fore the somewhat irresolvable conflict in Korine between his nihilistic despair over the state of American culture and his celebration of the peculiarities and diversities of the parasitic sub-cultures that exist, invisibly or detested, on its fringes. By giving us an imaginary subculture peopled with a non-existent breed of outsiders, and then emphasizing the grotesque and repulsive nature of their perverse form of community, *Trash Humpers* explicitly denies us the comforts of both vague general despair and the sentimental romanticization of outsiderdom (which almost took over completely in *Mr. Lonely*).

*Trash Humpers*, like Korine's other work, proudly strives to attain a kind of sui generis quality. While the novel VHS format does provide Korine new means of expanding his unique palette of haunting, rough-hewn, seemingly-haphazard sounds and images, the film also wears its influences fairly clearly on its sleeve, and it gains significantly in impact from the reverberations of these various influences as they accumulate unselfconsciously. As in all of Korine's work, traces of Herzog can be detected, especially *Even Dwarves Started Small*, which, along with Lars von Trier's *The Idiots*, provides the closest cinematic precedent. With its performative elements, its masked characters, its use of incessantly repeated infantile language, and the toying with affect that results from its grotesque confusion of real and artificial, particularly in relation to the body, *Trash Humpers* is most overtly reminiscent of the collaborative videos by Paul McCartney and Mike Kelley, such as *Family Tyranny* and *Heidi*. Equally significant, if less direct, is the relationship of the film to low budget American horror films of the 1970's, such as *The Hills Have Eyes* and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. Like these films *Trash Humpers* is interested in the wasted, forgotten, 'nowhere' regions of the American South and features a quasi-family of grotesque, violent characters. This latter element of these horror films was already an influence on the McCarthy/Kelley collaborations, but Korine takes it in a somewhat different direction. *Trash Humpers* is less concerned with critiques of the family unit as such and more interested in imagining a violent debased sub-community that exposes a kind of underside of American culture, a sub-world that is both an instinctual rebellion against the dominant culture as well as a regurgitation of its most poisonous (unacknowledged) characteristics.

In his influential essay "The American Nightmare: Horror in the 70's" Robin Wood argued that many of the 'monsters' of American horror films could be seen as manifestations of the toxic aspects of their culture (namely, patriarchal capitalism). The trash humpers can be fruitfully viewed as peripherally belonging to the tradition of American horror Wood discussed. Like swamp creatures deformed by a polluted environment, or zombies reared on consumerism, the trash humpers can be seen as horrifying but blameless, indeed innocent in a certain sense. Impulsive, violent, remorseless, and incorrigibly horny, the trash humpers are cheerfully and unthinkingly driven by their need to gratify inhuman desires and to satisfy unnecessary needs; as such they are the unnatural natural inhabitants of a perverse culture, perfectly at home not just in Tennessee but any dismal suburb, forgotten small town, or abandoned industrial corner – any place where the truth of the American nightmare is left to fester unconcealed. But if there is something uniquely American about the trash humpers, the cultural void they reflect has broader implications. While these characters are nothing if not destructive, they are not so much examples of the Walter Benjamin's 'Destructive Character' as they are a kind of return of the repressed from a world still haunted by the type Benjamin memorably defined.

- Mike Vass