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 dash soap, occasionally murder people, and, at one point, drive 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 nonsensory 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.

Harmony Korine Rubs Up Against The American Nightmare in Trash Humpers

Thematically Trash Humpers doesn’t cover particularly new ground for Korine. Gummo, Julien Donkey-Boy, and Mr. Lovely 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. Lovely). However, Trash Humpers revitalizes Korine’s central formal and thematic concerns and moves them in significant new directions. Korine has described Trash Humpers as ‘Vaudveillian horror’, and the description serves well to underline the differences from his previous work, in which the Vaudveillian comedy genres that Korine 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 a literal exploration of the limits of his creative imagination by forcing 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 desires and discontents of American society and translated them into lifelike, mournful, sometimes amusing images of a violent debased sub-community that exposes a kind of hyperrealistic horror 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 peripheral yet 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 satisfy their most case-and-when-needed 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 their characters are nothing if not destructive, they are not so much the acme 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