

# Trash Humpers: Another of Harmony Korine's exploitive freak shows

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Harmony Korine's *Trash Humpers* was shot in a loose hand-held style, intentionally made to resemble a "found" home video. The cameraman and sometime narrator (played by Korine) is one of the "trash humpers," a group of Nashville, Tennessee, locals who engage in various acts of vandalism. A majority of the action focuses on scenes of simulated sex with garbage bags and trash bins; there are lewd jokes, prank-playing, brief glimpses of "local" life, a murder, and moments that Harmony Korine described as "an ode to vandalism." That is the totality of the film.

Korine's works purport to deal with themes of American poverty and mental illness, and have no doubt been colored by his disposition toward his Tennessee upbringing. In films such as *Gummo* and *Julien Donkey-Boy*, an articulate, coherent expression of discontent with the "American nightmare" he relishes in is rarely reached. The films are characterized by an extraordinary lack of compassion for their unfortunate subjects (victims). *Trash Humpers* is more of the same.

Explaining why he chose such a literal title for his film, Korine says, "I didn't want anyone thinking it was anything other than what it was." The joke is that while the filmmaker pretends not to stoop so low as to attach larger meaning to his work, the audience walks away with quite definite notions and attitudes, about rural and working class America in particular. After a barrage of nonsensical imagery featuring distorted, freakish "Americans" at their worst, an audience member later proclaimed, "This isn't a lie or exploitation. This is what real people in the South are

like!" As a matter of fact, it is both a lie *and* exploitation.

The grotesque images beg for an authoritative, conscientious voice in defense of the population. Unfortunately, Korine (born 1973) is not interested in offering an alternative to his cheap and one-sided expressions of disillusionment. His peculiar assaults on ordinary people are quite marketable, and he is highly praised in some circles for his explorations of the "dark side." (The deeply confused, retrograde work of Danish director Lars von Trier is perhaps relevant here.)

As in his previous films, Korine defers to form, distancing himself from any meaning and refusing to acknowledge a conscious artistic impulse. Instead, Korine draws attention toward the stylistic elements: the cultural references (the self-referential trope of the "found" home movie as artifact), costumes (purposefully awkward styling and fetishizing of the poor), art direction, locations, and general shooting format.

As to why he chose to shoot the film in such an outdated style, Korine speaks as if on behalf of a lost underground: "Everyone's so obsessed with pixels and perfect picture quality and being able to see everything so clearly, I think there's something nice about the absolute worst quality. It forces you to look longer, harder, and to work more, and there's a kind of beauty in that analog, VHS tape." The longing for a purer cinematic form may be legitimate depending on the context; but when the content of that form is "the absolute worst quality," there are bigger issues than "VHS versus 35mm" that need to be addressed.

Moments of clarity are deceptively passed off as incidental, when in reality Korine knows exactly what

he is doing. In one scene, one of the locals (who all wear masks made to look like burn victims) takes a momentary break from the destruction in order to cradle a newborn baby; another goes on a seemingly improvised, stream-of-consciousness soliloquy about the “entitled elites,” while firecrackers haphazardly explode around him. The primary feeling conveyed here is of a world gone awry, an American wasteland where one can occasionally find a bizarre trinket that catches the light of the sun. Our attention is drawn toward these fleeting moments of beauty, which are supposed to redeem the overall nonsense.

The “humans” in the film are simply blank slates that the filmmaker uses according to the whims of a given scene. An investigation into the reasons these characters behave the way they do, or into the causes of their apparent nausea, would mean admitting that there is a critical consciousness at work. It would require, ultimately, a deeper understanding and articulation of the conditions surrounding these characters. This is a process that Korine is too lazy or indifferent to engage in at the present time. To add insult to injury, the filmmaker adopts a noncommittal front in regards to his work; which cheapens the effects of the already lurid and repetitive imagery. The film, in many respects, feels “abandoned” by its creator.

This refusal to commit to a meaning or to openly subscribe to any particular ideology is popular in the artistic circles that Korine frequents. Sincerity simply leaves one open to attack, and any signs of it must therefore be quickly qualified by cynicism. This self-conscious, self-absorbed milieu, which in the face of artistic truth always defaults to the ironic, is cowardly, and it is the framework that primarily shapes Korine’s output. This is why an experimental indictment of American consumerism, which could have been something, is replaced by pastiche in the retro style.

The American artist Paul McCarthy, whose best known piece “The Garden” depicts mechanical figures humping a tree in a desolate, manufactured garden, comes to mind. Whereas Korine denies any creative responsibility on behalf of his “Trash Humpers,” McCarthy is fairly open about his artistic impulses. As the website Art.net explains, “The graphic content of

The Garden is its hopelessness. Metaphorically, it’s man banging his head against a tree. There are no genitals. It’s not erotic in any way. The hard part is confronting the dark, troubled, moral issues it brings up.”

Korine’s supporters like to identify his “gut-driven” approach with guilelessness, but in truth this “rawness” is a thinly veiled and manipulative opportunism. There is hardly anything less spontaneous or honest than this kind of work.

In regard to the characters (and deprived social layers) he continually lampoons, it is one thing to laugh with someone; it’s another to laugh at them, continually. One eventually has the right to draw certain conclusions. Korine has long-standing and disturbing issues with the American poor and mentally ill that he has not even begun to criticize or work through at this stage in his career.

Hypocritically, he creates explicit scenes of people engaged in inexplicable acts of “evil,” on the one hand, and on the other, announces, “It’s maybe more about what’s not said...about the pages missing in all the right places. It’s what’s undefined that’s the signifier.”

There are too many pages missing in *Trash Humpers*, and almost none are in the right places.



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