

Harmony Korine - The Anti Dreamer –

by Kuriko Sato

Fashionable media darling on the one hand and bad boy intellectual on the other, writer and director Harmony Korine makes films that have a place all of their own. Kids, Gummo and Julien Donkey-boy may provoke decidedly mixed reactions, but a man who will risk (and indeed serve) a prison sentence and end up in hospital for his art deserves admiration. Albeit bewildered admiration.

This interview was held at the Rotterdam Film Festival in early 2000, where his film Julien Donkey-boy had one of its first European screenings.

Were you at the festival screenings yourself?

No. I never watch my own movies.

Why?

I don't know. I haven't figured it out. When I'm editing I watch them. I work so intensively on them that by the time they're done I just never have a desire to see them again. I've only been making movies for about seven years now. I haven't watched any of them since I started. Maybe when I'm old I'll watch them, but probably not. It's like you watch them so many times, for me at least it's almost like giving birth. By the time I'm finished I know what it's about.

When you go to film festivals in other countries, the audience reaction to your film could be different. I just watched the screening here in Rotterdam and it was very different from the screening in Venice. Here people laughed more.

Yeah. Everywhere you go is different, because of the translation. Or the way people kind of translate the humour or the drama. That is an interesting thing, to watch the audience's reaction, to really listen to it. Because a lot of times things you meant to be funny come out very serious or silent, or things that were meant to be very serious, people laugh at. Which I like.

I don't think there were subtitles at the screening today, but when you have subtitles, it's always so different to the way it was written. I'd almost like to write an alternate movie, you know, have completely different subtitles, like make up

subtitles that have nothing to do with the movie. I think that would just be a fun thing to do.

Do you ever feel like you're kind of afraid to watch your own film again?

No, I'm normally not fearful. I don't know what it is, I'm just not compelled to do it. When you're making them, I put so much into it. You work very hard on making the film that you want to see, that by the time it comes out I'm so familiar with it, it seems like it's the past. The movies always seem old to me. It's almost like when people talk to me about Kids or Gummo or whatever, even though it's a few years ago, it seems like a child that I want to abandon. I think I have to let go of it. Once it's done, I kind of let go of it. I try not to concern myself with it.

What happens to you when you finish the film? Are you relieved or are you depressed or do you feel empty?

I feel all those things. At different times. Once the film is done you go through a lot. It's not that you go through those emotions necessarily because of how you react to the film, although that's true sometimes. I don't know, you feel differently about the work, but at the same time it's more like when the movie's done, you have to start over again. It's like a process of sometimes two years. From the idea to the writing to the production to the editing to the distributing to the promotion, and then it's up there. So you go through this multi-process.

Like right now, this is over for me. This is the last thing I do. This is in Europe, it's already come out in the States. It's already about beginning again. Which is good, it's exciting. For me it's an emotional undertaking.

At the Q&A session after the screening today, you told the audience that you used lots of cameras, fifteen to twenty of them. Did you use different types of cameras too?

I wanted to have such a really wide range of cameras. I wanted to be able to go from something like a macro, if I wanted to film from a mile away. Or use both at the same time and not have the cameras see one another. So what we did was, we went to people who make spy cameras. We went to a place in the US where they manufacture cameras for the FBI. For instance they can make cameras inside a tape machine or put little cameras the size of a pin in your watch.

We would have actors wearing cameras on their shoulders. That way it's like if you have a scene where we're at a table and each one of us are talking back and forth and I'm wearing a camera and you're wearing a camera, I could give you some kind of direction and leave the room and have you just go on and on for, if you wanted to, an hour. And I'd have all these matching one-shots to cut back and forth from. So that was the idea how it began.

In the beginning I was only going to shoot with spy cameras. But then I wanted images to come from all directions. I wanted to be able to go anywhere, almost to be able to edit mathematically. Like if I had twenty cameras, to be able to say without looking let's go from camera 1 to camera 7 to camera 8.

Depending on the camera the picture differs in the film. Did you do that while shooting or after?

The actual quality of the image came from purposely degrading the image. I wanted it to look like it had no time, like it could have been made at any time during the last thirty years or since colour film exists, or since the seventies. Because we were using three chip digital, mostly. So the image was very clear in the beginning. We blew the entire film up to Super 8. And then from Super 8 to 35 millimeter. So in that process you lose lots of detail, but lots of colour bursts and different things happen. It was also a process of distraction in order to get this kind of end result.

About the casting, there are all these great and unusual people. How did you find them?

It's weird. Like the blind people, obviously I didn't want to use actors pretending they were blind. So I went to different schools for the blind and cast kids there. Ever since I made movies, I've wanted to film blind people, because I was always curious about how different people react to a camera. And I always felt that the most truthful reaction would be from someone who couldn't see the camera. Someone who wasn't aware of where the camera was or wasn't forced. Because in movies, no matter how truthful you think the movie is, it's always a lie. Because there's always a performance element involved with actors. So I wanted to shoot with blind people.

Then the guy with no arms, it took me a few months to find him. He had thalidomide. These women back in the 50s and 40s used to take a medicine that would help them have babies. It was called thalidomide. All the babies were born with birth defects. Like some of the people were

born with no arms or no legs, or half a head or whatever. This guy was really excited to do it. I had written a part for a guy with no arms who could play the drums with his toes. So that was really a hard thing to find, as you can imagine.

You have to convince these people to appear in the film, since they're not actors. But for them to agree, they have to trust you. How did you make them trust you?

You never can make anyone trust you. You have to somehow appeal to them, I guess. I don't know. A lot of times people don't want to be in a movie. It really depends on your rapport with the person. If they can see that you're not wanting to make fun of them, necessarily. For me, it's never exciting, or I never have any interest in making fun of someone. It's very easy to do that, to film someone and look down on them or belittle them. But I've always had a curiosity for all my characters. It's something I want stare at and want to see and examine. So I guess if you're earnest in that way, a lot of times they're inclined to give you their trust.

How did you work with them on the set? Do you rehearse with them or do you just let them do whatever they want?

Generally it depends on the scene. Like the blind people, I wouldn't really need to rehearse with them, because they are already in character, they are those people. A lot of times in my movies I'm not casting actors. If I write a part for a man with no arms or even for a brick layer, if it fits, I'd rather find a brick layer than ask Tom Hanks to play the guy with no arms. So those people, if you cast for them, they already are them.

What I try to do is, I think of the scene before and I'll explain it to them sometimes, but sometimes not. It's like a chemical reaction. And then I work with the cinematographer and figure out where the camera should be. I always say it's a mistakist art form. When I'm making a movie, it's like mistakist, because everything comes out of weird mistakes and strange juxtapositions. So what I do is I say action and then just let it happen, just document it. I just want to photograph it. I always want to work in something chaotic, with things happening at all times. It's like forming the explosion, then making sense of it afterwards.

Once I interviewed Michael Anderson, the midget from David Lynch's Twin Peaks, and he told me that he felt David Lynch was on their side and that he could

understand. So probably in your case, those people thought you were on their side too.

Yeah, you can kind of tell when you see the movie. You can judge for yourself almost as well as I can if someone is willing to give a lot of themselves. Then you know there's a level of trust involved. Otherwise you could see through it very easily.

Generally do you like David Lynch?

I liked *Wild at Heart*. I don't always like all his movies. He's never been like an influence on me. I think he's a great American director, though. I would never say anything bad about him. I think *The Elephant Man* is a beautiful movie that he made. I think he's very strong visually. I didn't like *Lost Highway*. As soon as Henry Rollins came out, I had to go do something else.

What about Eraserhead?

I don't really like that one. It reminds me of junior high school. It might have more to do with me than the movie. But everything he does is crafty. He's got a vision, he's trying to do things. I would never say anything bad about him, but at the same time I don't often reference his movies that much. But I like *Wild At Heart*, it was a good movie.

I'm curious to hear how you feel about Buffalo 66.

I didn't even see that movie. I won't see anything that guy did.

What about Vincent Gallo?

I could only tell you that off the record.

He talks about you in public.

I know. What does he say? He said I was a hack or something.

He doesn't like your film.

I don't even want to go into this. It would be too easy. I think everyone already knows what I think of him.

In Venice you told reporters, including me, "I am not an independent filmmaker".

I don't really think I'm an independent filmmaker. I don't really understand what that word means anymore. Because there's a difference with independent thinking. For me, I admire someone like Clint Eastwood as much as I admire, you know, Godard. And I don't see any difference in what they do. They make movies. Clint Eastwood makes movies for people.

When I make movies, I use money from a studio. Studios give me money, but when I make movies, I make them the way I want to make them. I don't collaborate with other writers or directors. I always make my own film. In that way maybe it's more independent minded, because I make my own films. But at the same time, I make movies that hopefully people will see.

It's all about labelling. Usually when I hear someone say independent film, it's just a regular movie that looks worse, you know. To me John Cassavettes was independent, or Fassbinder. Because they weren't working in the studio system and that was before there was this wave of independents. Anyone that makes a movie now, if it's going to be shown, it was either made by a studio or bought by a studio to be distributed. It's never really important to me. Either a movie is good or bad.

Maybe like Clint Eastwood you make movies for people to see, but you don't make the films to please them.

Exactly, I never make movies with an audience in mind. Like Hitchcock, he used to make movies with the audience in mind, always anticipating what the audience would think. I don't do that, I'm not concerned with that. I hope there is an audience for the movies I make, because you want to make movies that appeal to some people - not to all people, that's a horrible thing. When I'm making a movie, I'm not thinking about the audience, I'm thinking about the kind of movie I want to make. But then, when it's done, you hope that it works like that. But I think Clint Eastwood is pretty radical. His movies are very dark, I think, subversive.

Aside from the people around you, the most feedback you will bear from your films will be the critics. Do bad reviews bother you?

No. With me it's always been mixed. If someone can't stand the movie, there's someone else who loves it with equal passion. It's never that important to me. It's always better, obviously, if someone enjoys the movie. But as long as you can keep making your movies and keep working, I can't really waste my time thinking about it.

Some press are calling you and Chloe Sevigny the new Bonnie and Clyde.

Really? Bonnie and Clyde, those two murdered people. That's a weird analogy. It's good though. They died young and lived a glamorous life (laughs). I don't know.

Maybe it was about your attitude. Or your approach to making something original or unique, away from the mainstream.

Or very American (laughs). Sure, I'll take whatever. I hear lots of that stuff. I always hear about different couples. They're the next so-and-so. I don't know. We're just Harmony and Chloe.

I see a lot of interviews with you in the press. Do you feel comfortable talking to press people? Usually the mass media jump on you when you're hot. Maybe now you feel they're jumping onto you. How do you feel about this situation?

They'll probably cool down soon (laughs). It's never anything I'm excited about. I'm not concerned. But it's hard when you make a movie and you don't use like really big actors. Because if you want the movie to be seen and you don't use these actors, it's important to do promotion yourself. But I hate promoting the movies. If I never had to do it, it would be fine. I'd much rather let someone else talk about it.

Somewhere you mentioned that by God's will you are making films. It's like your fate. Maybe that's why you don't care what people are saying?

Well, it's not that you don't care, it's just that you can't really focus on either the good or the bad. For me at least I find it defeating. It's nice that people enjoy it, but for me to start to think about that and take that seriously, it's like, you can tell if what you did is what you set out to create. If that's what you want to do. So everything else is kind of secondary.

Fassbinder said that his films are made of blood and tears and sperm. Do you think that applies to your films as well?

I know what I think, but that kind of thing, to say that of myself would be very egotistical. It's more something that someone else would notice about someone, instead of needing to point that out.

Because it would limit the perception of the audience?

No, it's not that. It's just that for me, the more I start to think about myself or objectify myself in relation to other filmmakers and what I do, it's just not beneficial to me so much to analyze myself in either a negative or positive way.

What about the two upcoming projects? There's one film you're working on with Gus van Sant.

That one's already halfway finished, but I don't know what's going to happen with that. I'm kind of disappointed with it. So I don't know what's going to happen with it. It was an idea, but I'm not sure if it'll necessarily work. But we'll see. It could work and it could be off soon. And the other project was Fight, the movie where I get into fights. With that one I was arrested three times and got bones broken. Because it's just me getting into fights with people, or starting fights. So I was hospitalised, both psychiatric and physical.

Recently?

Over the past year, yeah. It was a really hard thing, because it was really extreme, this whole getting into fights with people. Also I was put in jail a bit of time, because when you're arrested three times, you have to serve a prison sentence. I had to pay lots and lots of money in court fines. So I don't know if I'll be able to finish that movie.

Because I wanted to make a ninety minute feature which just consisted of me in the most brutal interactions possible. Fighting every demographic of person. And I got to six or seven, but I was injured in lots of different ways. So I had to be hospitalised. So I don't know how it's going to work out. Maybe in a few years I'll show it in a museum, after I put it together. I don't think I'll be able to make it into a feature if I want to survive.

How many days did you stay in prison?

Two and a half months.

Was it as bad as you see on tv?

I wasn't raped or anything, no (laughs). It's not like that, at least not what I saw. It's not fun though, it's not a good thing. The worst thing is being confined. But I actually liked being institutionalised, it was really fun. Well, not fun, but there are certain things about prison I did like. I liked the regiment, making you wake up at a certain time, having to eat at a certain time, sleep

at a certain time. There's lots of horrible things, and a lot of boredom.

It's not better for concentrating on your work?

In prison? No.

Did you get to be friends with some people?

Oh yeah, sure, definitely. There were some really good people. There were some people I knew, that were there when I got there. Yes, I recommend it for everyone.

What do your two tattoos mean?

I don't know. It just felt like that one belonged there. The other one I got when I was really young, like eleven years old. I was just hanging out with a bunch of friends.

Would you like to get more?

No. I had a dream the other night that I was pouring liquid acid on my tattoos, that I was pouring them off my skin.

Sometimes what you see in dreams inspires your films?

No. Never. I really hate it when people talk about their dreams. I just can't stand dreams, or books that were written about dreams, or films based on dreams or dream sequences. Anything with a dream in it, I go to sleep as soon as someone starts telling me. I'm really anti-dream. Anything the opposite of dream I like. Daydreaming is good, because that's a conscious kind of dream or thought. Night dreaming is just shit.

Don't you have good night dreams?

No. Never. I never have good nights.

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<http://www.projecta.net/harmony.html>

Photo: Ursula Coyote/Starz Entertainment, LLC. The second season of *The Girlfriend Experience*, Amy Seimet and Lodge Kerrigan's Starz adaptation of a 2009 Steven Soderbergh film, is taking an approach unusual even in this most saturated moment of TV history. Rather than continuing the narrative of season one, which starred Riley Keough as a law student entering the world of high-end escorts, season two breaks the series in half with two entirely new narratives. (One is written and directed by Seimet, the other by Lodge.). As a result, *The Girlfriend Experience* has become something of a cinematic universe, encompassing a disparate group of women all dealing with some element of the titular profession. © Harmony Korine. Courtesy the artist and Gagosian Gallery. Photograph: Robert McKeever. At a BFI retrospective the following night, even Korine's fans seem to find it difficult to know how to relate to him: one young student wants to show him her films, another resentfully accuses him of being a blagger, a third stands up and opens with: "Harmony, I have wanked to all your films" Korine is unfazed. Harmony Korine is the first track on Steven Wilson's first solo album, *Insurgentes*. It is named after the American film-maker Harmony Korine, who is known primarily for his abstract approach to film-making. The video for Harmony Korine is directed by long-time collaborator Lasse Hoile and features allusions to absurdist films like *Un Chien Andalou*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BCIzBQmZZBc>. "Harmony Korine" Track Info. Written By Steven Wilson. Release Date August 6, 2008. *Insurgentes* Steven Wilson. 1. Harmony Korine.