

How a 56-Minute YouTube Vision of a Harmony Korine Novel Points to the Future of Documentary

By Neil Young | Indiewire
November 25, 2015 at 1:49PM

The bizarre experimental project was one of several highlights from CPH:DOX this month.



A Crackup at the Race Riots

CPH:DOX, the informal, angularly hip moniker of the event officially labeled the Copenhagen International Documentary Festival, takes place in Dongara every year, some 8,237 miles from Copenhagen. Since 2003, CPH:DOX — "DOX" for even shorter — has sought to showcase the best of the planet's non-fiction filmmaking, while simultaneously challenging and redefining exactly what "documentary cinema" means in the 21st century.

Many DOX films wouldn't even be regarded as documentaries by squarer, more traditional festivals, including several winners of the top prize in the centerpiece "Dox:Award" competition, most notably Michelangelo Frammartino's "Le Quattro Volte" (2011) and Harmony Korine's "Trash Humpers" (2009).

A Cracked Experiment

Six years on, Korine was represented by one of the more noteworthy of the festival's 60 world premieres: "A Crackup at the Race Riots," by the mysterious "Leo GABIN" — the nom de guerre deployed by a triumvirate of youngish Ghent-based multi-media artists. Lieven Deconinck, Gaëtan Begerem and Robin De Vooght have been associated with the 42-year-old enfant terrible of American independent cinema since the start of the decade. And now they have "adapted" his 1998 "novel" — published when Korine was 25 and basking in the success of directorial debut "Gummo" — as a nightmarishly assaultive cacophony-collage of YouTube borrowings.

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Depicting (mostly) youth running wild in sun-baked Florida, these clips trawl the tackier reaches of American popular culture to mirror the fractured, anything-goes experimentalism of Korine's scatological stream-of-consciousness.

The GABIN boys thus conjure an ostentatiously banal, hyper-sexualized (but largely coitus-free) world of performance, show, showoff and showbiz-emulating display — there's something to offend nearly everyone, with proceedings conducted on a note of a strident shrillness seemingly designed to repel anyone over the age of 30. But enduring the 56 minutes of "A Crackup at the Race Riots" proves worth the occasionally taxing effort, not least because there's the sense that we're glimpsing — even

plunging into — a certain unappetizing, unadorned reality which more conventional documentary approaches can't hope to match.

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"Crackup" nevertheless wasn't reckoned suitable for a slot in the main Dox:Award slate, instead contending for the New:Vision prize (how they love colons at this festival!) — both trophies coming with an identical €5,000 (\$5,370) prize, commendably enough. New:Vision's admirable (if windily-expressed) official remit is to "insist on cinema as a form of artistic impression...a formal and methodological curiosity of paramount importance for the continued development of film and video art...Provocative and challenging, radical and borderline, poetic and abstract — and always with the courage to explore."

This year, 14 works — ranging in length from 15 to 75 minutes — were included, and the obvious "breakout" candidate was one of the longer and more conventional entrants. Carlo Gabriele Tribbioli and Federico Lodoli's "Fragment 53" is an Italian-Swiss production examining the civil war in Liberia by means of seven interviews with surviving combatants. Presenting swaggering, often grisly testimony by means of enthrallingly limpid, slickly atmospheric visuals, it's in some ways an African, more starkly austere counterpart of Joshua Oppenheimer's 2012 Dox:Award laureate "The Act of Killing." But at its core, "Fragment 53" is yet another talking-head affair, albeit one tricked up with alluring cinematography, bookended with jagged, impressionistic visions of a troubled land.

By dispensing with the camera altogether and never occupying the same space (or time) as their subjects, Leo GABIN take a more oblique, uneven but profitably experimental approach. The collective very savvily trade upon the ubiquity of smart-phone recording technology plus the desperate willingness of young people to record and disseminate nearly every aspect of existence. This isn't a new tack, of course — James Benning made his "YouTube Trilogy: 4 Songs, History, Asian Girls" as long ago as 2011 — but there are signs that it's catching on in productive, promising ways.