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Harmony Korine

14 March 2008

Harmony Korine became an enigma in certain sections of the arthouse film world after writing the script for *Kids at 20*, Larry Clark's disturbing film that followed a group of New York teenagers partying and screwing their way to an early death.

Two years later he went on to direct *Gummo*, an uncompromising look at teenage ennui in Middle America that included cat torture and an assortment of freakish characters committing unspeakable acts.

Leftfield directors like [Gus van Sant](#) and Werner Herzog applauded his innovation, with the latter calling him up to say, "Be bold you're the last foot-soldier in this army." Herzog played the father to Ewen Bremner's schizophrenic and the sister he gets pregnant, Chloë Sevigny, in Korine's last film *Julien-Donkey Boy*.

Sevigny and Korine used to be an item. The pair became the darlings of the kooky fashion world and the toast of the style press. Then the air kissing stopped when Korine lost the plot. Creatively dry he disappeared into film wilderness only to occasionally resurface in the tabloids with tales of drug addictions and madness.

At 35 he's clean, sane and back behind the camera with *Mister Lonely*, a film about celebrity impersonators he co-scripted with his brother Avi.

Korine's comeback movie rejects past favoured subjects of teenage incest, abuse, sex, HIV infection and general all-round nihilism for a much softer take on misfits and outcasts. The Hieronymus Bosch canvas he used to favour has been replaced by Marcel Zyskind's more Impressionist cinematography.

Mister Lonely – a film overflowing with hope and goodwill – is about a Michael Jackson impersonator played by a swivel hipped [Diego Luna](#) who follows Samantha Morton's Marilyn Monroe to an commune off the Scottish coast. There's a secondary story about flying nuns thrown in for good measure.

Rachael Scott spoke to the endearingly open Korine about his new film and where he's been hiding.

What have you been doing for the past eight years?

I messed up. I was kinda out of it and by that point in my life I'd pretty much lost my way. I was debased and confused about what I wanted to do with my life, where I was and the people who were around me. I was indulging a lot of things that weren't healthy for me. For whatever reason I was putting myself in places and situations that were dangerous, you know. So to say that I chose not to make movies is almost giving myself too much credit. It was more like it lost me. I didn't really have an option. I was just like a bum.

"I met this guy in a bar one day and his wife had an invisible dog that she would walk with a leash. She just made sense to me."

Do you think that was because fame happened too quickly and you were too young to deal with it?
 The truth is I wasn't too young because I knew when I was young I needed to make movies while I was young. When I finally got a chance to direct *Gummo* I was exploded. My mind was on fire because all I'd wanted to do was make films in a very specific way – to show images and sound and pictures in a kind of randomness and chaos in an order, the way I thought movies should be told. So I wasn't going to let anything at that point interfere with my life or making that film.

But at the same time all the stuff that preceded it and followed it, all the extra stuff outside of the making of the movie and the movie existing, I don't know if I was necessarily equipped for that. I don't know, but at the same time I don't regret any of the stuff that happened because that's life and I still have all my arms and legs.

And you're still here.

When people say to me 'What should I do if I want to be a director?' my advice is to rob a couple of banks, get involved in some kind of criminal activity because I think that prepares you really well for life.

When you've suffered it makes you stronger when you come out the other side?

A little bit of sufferings not a bad thing.

Can I clear up a couple of things I've read about what happened to you in recent years?

Yeah.

One was that you spent 11 months in Panama fishing.

No. It was Peru and I was with a cult called the Malingers. They were fishermen and they were looking for a Malinger fish.



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What's that then?

It's a special, really rare fish that has three dots on the side of its gills and if you press them in the correct place it plays music like a piano. One guy caught one in the 30s and there's a very short clip of it to prove it exists, so these Japanese businessmen were offering a reward to the Malinger to find this thing. So anyway I was with them and we didn't find anything so I went back home.

**How long were you there?**

About six months.

What made you do that then?

I met this guy in a bar one day and his wife had an invisible dog that she would walk with a leash. She just made sense to me. She said they had a place on the trip and I had nothing better to do.

I also read that you burnt down two of your houses.

Well, you know, let's just say two houses burnt down that I happened to be living in.

Were you there at the time?

One of them I wasn't there. I left and I came back at the end of the day and it was gone. Then the other one I was there when it happened, yeah.

Were you hurt?

No I was okay. All I can remember was a fireman throwing me over his shoulder and putting me on the sidewalk.

And that you've been in rehab twice?

No, no. That's not true. Rehab? I don't even know what that is. Rehab, schmehab.

Mister Lonely is very different from your previous work. Have you taken on a new direction?

I don't know if it's a new direction. My movies and scripts always reflect my mental state at the time. I feel very different at 35 as to when I was making *Gummo* at 23. I don't want to be boring and keep doing the exact same thing over and over again. With *Mister Lonely* I felt differently about the world and where I was in life. Yeah, maybe it's less of a provocation compared to my other two films. Then my next one might be even more fucked up than the first one, so I'll play it by ear.

"The truth is I'm not the kind of director who would set out to make any kind of grand statement. I don't know if I'm not smart enough or I don't think that way. I know there's some kind of great statement in there, but I don't know what it is."

Was there a lot of you in the Diego Luna character?

I think so. We walked a similar road. I've been to a lot of those places and felt a lot of those things. But then there's some of me in the Chaplin character and the Marilyn character.

I thought Mister Lonely was about the importance of being who you are and the faith you need to do that.

Yeah, that's pretty accurate. Both the stories of the nuns and the impersonators speak to the same things thematically. I've always been attracted to the obsessive nature of people who aren't happy with where they are in life so they try to invent their life and risk it all. They decide that this is what they like no matter how strange it is or how little it makes sense to the rest of the world. Somehow life has a way of kicking their asses, but at the same time these people still see poetry and some kind of magic in the world, even with all the horror and heartache.

I watched Julien Donkey Boy again last night and there's a masturbating nun in it, which made me wonder if you have a thing about nuns.

Maybe. I don't know. It's weird because I don't think I've ever even talked to a nun. I mean I'm Jewish and it's not like I hang out with them, but maybe it's something deep within. I don't know.

Were you making a statement about the celebrity driven culture we live in?

The truth is I'm not the kind of director who would set out to make any kind of grand statement. I don't know if I'm not smart enough or I don't think that way. I know there's some kind of great statement in there, but I don't know what it is.

I want to deal more with people and emotions. For me it's more important to create an atmosphere, a tone and an ambience.

Mister Lonely is beautifully shot by Michael Winterbottom's cinematographer Marcel Zyskind.

This is my first movie with Marcel. I'd seen a lot of his work with Michael. Even though my movies are different sometimes it's like music and you get a vibe from a person playing their instrument. It's the same thing with shooting, you can sense what the person is like by the way he composes shots or the way the camera moves.

**I was impressed by the cast of Mister Lonely. How did you manage to wangle getting James Fox and Anita Pallenberg together?**

I've known Anita since the first time I came to London about 15 years ago. I think she's a great character. I love her voice and mannerisms. And James Fox? Well, I didn't consciously set out to do a homage to *Performance*, but I've always loved his acting.

Diego Luna is an unusual choice for Michael Jackson. He doesn't look anything like him, but he managed to in the film.

A lot of these impersonators adapt to the person they're impersonating. Physically they don't look anything like the person, but they want to so badly they will themselves in that direction. So I thought that was more interesting in some ways. Also I liked the idea of it being a Mexican Michael Jackson impersonator with a Mexican accent. Diego has an ethereal boyish quality.

All the themes of Mister Lonely, identity and being who you want to be, have a lot of relevance to gay people. And then there was Kids with Larry Clarke. What happened between the two of you?

Nothing really, we just went our separate ways.

How does it feel being back in the media circus after having been away for such a long time?

It's okay because it's not like it was. I don't live in New York anymore so this isn't my reality so much. I can kinda stick my toe in and then go back home. I live in Tennessee and my life there is very much different. I got married less than a year ago. When I'm back home I have a very simple life and nobody cares.

When you first became famous you were lauded by the style press, but other sections of the press criticised you. That must have been difficult. Do you think that was part of the reason you went off the rails?

I was just having fun. I was a kid making it up as I went along. I was doing what I wanted to do and I didn't get involved in this business for a lot of the reasons people do. I wanted to make movies in a specific way and I wanted to enjoy myself while I was doing it. All that stuff, the good, the bad, the ugly that's other people and I just do my thing. I try not to think about it too much.

"All I can remember was a fireman throwing me over his shoulder and putting me on the sidewalk."

There's not a huge amount you can do about other people's opinions.

It's not even that. It's more like when I actually think about myself in that way, where do I fit in a filmic context or as a human being? I feel stunted. I don't question myself, I'd rather not know anything about myself. I don't watch my own films, or own my own movies or books. I don't even really care. Once I'm done it I just want to do the next thing and keep going. I don't know if that makes any sense.

Yes it does. To me that says you don't want to be put in a box, you just want to be, and if people don't like it they don't and if they do they do.

You know, like a bricklayer. A guy who builds walls, he just does it, does a really good job and makes a beautiful wall. But I highly doubt he goes back and stares at his wall and shows his wife and kids his wall. He does it, he takes pride in it and he's happy, then he goes and builds another one. There's something good about that.

That makes me wonder how you got out of your dark phase because the obvious route would be to go into therapy or seek help from someone else.

Maybe I stopped thinking about myself and did the opposite. Maybe I was becoming too sensitive and too precious about things. Once I learned how to deal with that it was a great relief. It wasn't therapy or anything like it, I don't know, it just happened.

That takes us back to *Mister Lonely* because if those characters would just be themselves then they would have been much happier.

Yeah. For them they're doing the most noble thing in the world. Marilyn says in her speech that, 'We impersonate so we can live through others so we can keep the spirit of wonder alive'. They have the idea that their characters are the most iconic, mythic characters and what's more noble than entertaining the troops. Even though it's not them it's their spirit and to them there's a sense of nobility in doing what they do, but it doesn't work out that way. The rest of the world sees them as kooks and fanatics.



Werner Herzog called you "the last foot-soldier of cinema".

I hadn't met him yet but he'd seen *Gummo* and I got a phone call.

That must have been pretty cool.

Yeah, he's an idol for me, a hero. He's one of those people that make me want to make movies.

What do you think he meant by that?

I think he just probably saw a kindred spirit that in the end we're making films for the right reasons.

And does that philosophy still apply?

Yeah, I think in the end all you want to be is a good soldier for cinema.

You worked on Gus van Sant's *Last Days*. How did you meet him?

Gus is one of my only filmmaker friends in the States. He was one of the producers on *Kids* so I've known him since I started. He's a good friend and I talk to him a lot. He's very good at circumventing the system and figuring out ways of working within it. He's very savvy. He's kinda zen about things and takes the good with the bad.

"I want to deal more with people and emotions. For me it's more important to create an atmosphere, a tone and an ambience."

You're good friends with David Blaine aren't you? How did you meet him?

I actually met him when someone was putting him in a pizza oven. I went to this place in Soho called Little Italy and he was practising some trick. And someone goes, 'There's a Puerto Rican guy in a pizza oven', and it was David practising taking the heat.

I used to go to Little Italy all the time. I got banned though because I had a go at the bouncer for refusing me entry when he'd just let one of the 3am Girls in.

Yeah it's a great place, but it's not as good as it used to be.

I read in a 1999 Guardian interview that you didn't really like people. Can you elaborate on that?

I said I didn't like people? Maybe I was in a bad mood. I don't know man but that was in the days when my mood changed from hour to hour. Of course I like people. I couldn't make movies if I didn't like people. I don't know what it was in reference to.

In the same interview you said that at best great artists have ten years. Are yours still to come?

Yeah, I feel like in some ways I'm just starting out. I also don't imagine myself to be making like 100 films, maybe five more films. Maybe not. You can't hold me to that though. I imagine I'll stop making movies when I have nothing left to say.

Are you working on anything at the moment?

Yeah, I've got another script that I wrote and I'm writing something else. There won't be another eight years before I do another film.

***Mister Lonely* opens in the UK on the 14 March 2008.**

Read our review of *Mister Lonely* and find out more at www.misterlonely.co.uk and www.myspace.com/thebirthofairdhenn.

You can Harmony's films *Julien Donkey Boy*, *Gummo* and *Kids* when you buy them online now. Save money when you do to put towards these films by Gus Van Sant, *My Own Private Idaho*, *Elephant*, *To Die For* and *Drug Store Cowboy*.

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