

American Gothic

— Arnaud Gerspacher

A sweet little boy says, “Peanut butter, motherfucker.” The wholesome staple of Americana is quickly undercut by pure darkness. These are the first words of Harmony Korine’s film *Gummo* (1997), a filmic narrative that mixes fiction and documentary, archival imagery and non-actors in one of the more disturbing portrayals of the Midwest. The town is supposed to be Xenia, Ohio, but is really Nashville, Tennessee. In 1974, Xenia was devastated by a notorious tornado, more or less the same time that neoliberal economics began spreading their own devastation across the country (which continues largely unabated today). How does a filmmaker or artist convey the singular points of sadness and experience, the individual psychic manifestations and symptomatic disturbances coming out of this shared history, without recourse to statistics, sociology, and generalization? And who might care? What use frustration, domestic violence (both emotional and physical), malnourished bodies in dirty water, undiagnosed lumps that go untreated, the architectural nihilism of a strip mall that carves its emptiness inside you, and the kicking in of death drives when hope is lost: self-destructive intakes of various substances for stabilization, forgetting, or just getting on with the inevitable? Both human and nonhuman animals are known to reach points of existential resignation and hopelessness when waste, fumes, and confinement consume them – there is little worse than anonymous suffering that only registers and is meaningful for the one that does the suffering. Yet this is the everyday unseen.

One of the opening sequences of *Gummo* follows a beautiful boy who is naked save for a pair of thrift store swimming trunks, white dirty velcroed shoes, and dingy, pink rabbit ears. He is the unnamed bunny boy who never speaks in the film. Almeda Riddle’s “My Little Rooster” plays as a salt-of-the-earth soundtrack to his boredom on a cage-fenced highway overpass. He smokes with soiled, tattooed fingers, quivers in the cold, spits and urinates on passing cars below, and looks straight at you with a sunken sternum and delicate ribs.



Jacob Sewell (as Bunny Boy) in Harmony Korine’s *Gummo*, 1997.
Photograph: MGM/PhotoFest

Whatever opportunities for play and distraction there may be are short-lived, because it’s unspoken yet clear that nothing sticks in this state of immanent boredom. He simply exists without the immunitary supplements of the more well-off, both cultural and material. The sky is grey, all seems wet and heavy, and everything communicates the oppressive mood of this non-space so many know so well. All he has to offer is his body, breath, and fluids, and all the highway responds with below is endless departure and cruel exhaustion. *The heart of it all.*

Moments later another sequence. This time two boys riding bikes down a hill with BB guns across their shoulders scanning their neighborhood. Unlike the immanent boredom of the overpass, these two are in transcendent engagement. They are in the wind, ecstatically out-of-body, saturated with their own life. Doom metal provides the soundtrack – Sleep’s “Dragonaut” – the line of flight and sonic envelope for embodied delivery to an else(w)here. For a brief moment they more than exist – they ride with purpose.

These two sequences at the beginning of *Gummo* offer a difficult cognitive reconciliation: two different life worlds that nevertheless inhabit the same town, the heavy and bored with the unbearably light of being. How do we communicate the passing of a state of boredom and hopelessness to a state of engagement and joy, all in the meager confines of poverty? How to achieve this without the cultural tourism and classist ethnography that patronize the provincial, while not falling into the dead ends of political correctness that keeps us from finding value, joy, and beauty in the more unimaginable of places? Everything I write in the following will operate between these two poles.

*

Why do I start an essay on TR Ericsson's work with this film? Like any other industry the efficiencies of the art world become uneasy when you don't get to the point – either tell me where I can place this among other artists, or whether I should buy it, but please don't bring me down or send me too far afield. Above all, don't let me follow what the work demands all the way through. The perversity of my deferment stands to stall these all-too-efficient machines, but it is far from flippant. This film is important for the artist, and its look and feel provide entry points into his work. There is a cinematic realism that taps into his past – neighborhoods, characters, and situations that could seamlessly fit in the film. *Gummo* points to the personal resonance of the dark times that paved the way for how he sees the world and makes meaning of it as an artist:

Those *Gummo* kids feel like they inhabit a sort of *Lord of the Flies* lawless world without parental authority, there's also this sense of the characters being a subculture of an already peripheral subculture. But they're driven in their squalor, there's meaning there, outside of the world, or any perceived American culture, it's real American culture and that's certainly my hope for how I want *Crackle & Drag* [to be] perceived.¹

Above all, this opening move hopes to situate his practice away from the more telegraphed interpretations of a deeply personal oeuvre. I know very well that Ericsson's work has and will continue to be over-determined by facile biographism. The mother haunts his work and its interpretations; family and past are the keys to understanding. While valid, these are not sufficient, in two distinct ways: first, it will prevent a full understanding of what it means for biography to inform the work, especially work culling from such a personal archive; two, once this work is placed within a family history it will remain fixed outside its larger social history. This writing hopes to correct both these points.

There are also formal affinities and shared responsibilities between the film and Ericsson's work. They both open up a psychosomatic history of the Midwest and a post-sixties American gothic; one through fiction, the other through factual documentation, yet both somehow morphing into their opposite. As a historian not of facts but of affect and situatedness, Korine's fiction takes on a certain truthhood that might not otherwise be communicable to such a degree of potency. Ericsson's archival veracity takes on a narrative structure that is inevitably above and beyond the truths lost to the past. They are both re-tellings, and even the most rigorous representations of history take on a certain structure of fiction.

Much of Ericsson's work has a graphic sensibility coupled with deadpan photo-conceptualism and obdurate objecthood. There is a 'zine quality to his style, something Korine also shares. Consider another opening shot of *Gummo*: having handed out home video recorders for the local residents of "Xenia" to record themselves, he receives one of a shirtless boy flexing for the camera, framed by a front lawn in disarray. Again, it seems all this boy has to offer is his bare body, flesh muscle energy fed and mis-fed by his surroundings and discharged for its own sake. The title of the film appears hovering on his chest in the film's gothic font with a small upside-down cross below, just floating there in superimposition. It is a complete, perfect image, all the more strange in that its component parts are humble, quotidian, desolate, and melancholic. There is an economy of means that nevertheless reaches full emotional impact, and if I had to write only one sentence describing Ericsson's work it would be this one.

Archive

There is always a sense of trepidation, responsibility, and care when writing about someone's work – but when the work is the very archival and auratic residue of the artist's life, the stakes are even higher. This is the case not only with Ericsson's past work, but first and foremost with *Crackle & Drag* (2012-), a selection from his personal archive-become-work. What right do I have? Is it enough that I've known and followed Ericsson's work for sometime now? Have I earned the right of inspection after years of work and practice? Do I have an insider position on his practice, like a willing voyeur, something curators all-too happily wield in self-authorization and proprietariness, collecting artists like baseball cards?

¹ TR Ericsson, email to the author, 14 December 2013

Whatever entry points I provide can only be incomplete, partial, and constrained by my own intellectual and emotive limitations. This situation is all the more complicated in that even the artist does not have full reign of his own archive and history, any more than the memories of our own past have the full, transparent ability to communicate themselves to ourselves and each other. There is unaccounted for unconscious material; there is the parallax of an archive that continually changes meaning, deteriorates, and peels away from its own origins; and in all directions there are the socio-political and culture intersections that continually cross paths with each and every moment, object, image, feeling, and idea that overflow any archive. It is an endless and impossible task. Synchronically, the archive is never purely personal and uncontaminated by the public. Diachronically, the archive is never simply about the past – it continually opens onto the future, and its very reason for being is the future. “The archivist produces more archive, and that is why the archive is never closed.”² Jacques Derrida is here, but so is Roland Barthes and his conception of photography as anterior future, as a past continually haunting the present and future (two thinkers, among many, dear to the artist).

When Derrida speaks to the possibility of a spectral response in *Archive Fever* (and make no mistake, Ericsson has archive fever) he notes the technical possibility of an archive to mediate a call from beyond. In one sense, the phantom cannot respond, but in another it continues speaking and has the power of unilateral address:

In the first place or in a preliminary way, this means that without responding it disposes of a response, a bit like the answering machine whose voice outlives its moment of recording: you call, the other person is dead, now, whether you know it or not, and the voice responds to you, in a very precise fashion, sometimes cheerfully, it instructs you, it can even give you instructions, make declarations to you, address your requests, prayers, promises, injunctions... a spectral response (thus informed by a techné and inscribed in an archive) is always possible.³

Kept images, letters, or recordings of a loved one are all potential spectral forms of communication. Neither history, memorialization, mourning, nor melancholy are possible without them. *Crackle & Drag* is filled with this form, which only reflects a fraction of Ericsson’s archive. Certain materials have yet to find a place outside. For example, in what can only be an acutely painful coincidence or premonition, the artist recorded the telephone conversations between him and his mother just months before her death. This absent-present voice must be overwhelming. It is only recently, with a now ten-year remove, that the artist has addressed the personal materials associated with this pivotal event directly. Certainly, it has been present in one form or another, framing his practice, for some time now (as the artist recently expressed, this event almost ate him alive and nearly forced his giving up art making altogether). If Ericsson has archive fever, a certain temporal remove was necessary to inoculate his immune system in order to deal with these materials in their fullness. In this way, his work is not only a commemoration, but also a working through, an instance of mourning, and an autobiography forever entangled with a biography (possibly even a hagiography – see 145).

As I understand it, mourning should be impossible, or at least, it should be endlessly unrealizable. Otherwise, it becomes its own destruction – I must commemorate a loved one with a pain that should never subside, or I end up betraying them and their memory. My archive would mourn the mourning itself rather than the person mourned. Freud put it this way: mourning is the discharge of an internal identification and bond I have towards someone, which after a designated period of time demands to be replaced by healthy energies. If this does not happen, then I replace the pain with guilt or other psychic effects, turning my mourning into melancholia. The internalized loved one then becomes corrupted. Either way, the person is lost two times over – for reality and for me inside myself. In the same way, mourning should be impossible to communicate in its singularity. If one could prescribe universal steps for mourning, a formula for dealing, then the auratic particularity of the one I love is interpolated, conditioned, and transposed by a universal social function – as if at the end of the day we all have to relinquish what we hold dear into a pool of generalization. Yet more posthumous betrayal.

² Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans., Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 68.

³ *Ibid.*, 62.

Of course, mourning *is* possible, and there *are* shared ways of processing loss. The solipsism of pain would be unbearable otherwise. Nevertheless, the singularity of the person mourned will remain raw (in Lacanian terms, it is the real that resists both imaginary and symbolic subsumption). Crucially, the archive straddles these two mournings: it shows shared forms of commemorations, of remembering, of ordering, of poses, of life's events – school portraits, wedding pictures, Mother's Day greeting cards, and so on (what Barthes called the *studium* in photography, or its socio-political codes); at the same time, for the mourner it keeps alive all the singular points of joy, love, sadness, memory, tonality, and individuality that can only fail to be communicated or translated with full transparency to others (what Barthes called the *punctum* in photography, the singular emotion that pierces the viewer alone). We will not do justice to a work that incorporates a personal archive, as *Crackle & Drag* does, without recognizing both the possibility of shared communication and the impossibility of understanding the singular points of meaning felt in solitude. A work like Bas Jan Ader's *I'm Too Sad to Tell* (1971), a film of the artist crying, solicits empathy and emotions of our own, yet we will never completely enter into his affect. Like Ericsson's equally confessional work, Ader opens us to pure emotion only to bring us face-to-face with the very limits of intersubjective transference and communication.

This leads back to the fascinating phrase of Barthes: "*the impossible science of the unique being*."⁴ It is the existential leftovers that resist categorization, testing, comparison, control groups, and all the rest. How is one even sure they love or mourn correctly? How does one begin to quantify such a singular thing? Kierkegaard, the consummate thinker of the individual, already made this clear almost two centuries ago: "If it were true – as conceited shrewdness, proud of not being deceived, thinks – that one should believe nothing which cannot see by means of his physical eyes, then first and foremost one ought to give up believing in love."⁵ In this way *Crackle and Drag* tries the impossible – to show by means of physical eyes love and loss.

Crackle & Drag

The title of this archive is taken from Sylvia Plath's final poem, "Edge" (1963). One could write an essay alone on why Ericsson chose these lines (it is often believed that these lines were a surreptitious suicide note). The poem begins with a dead woman who is described as *perfected*. Did she die of perfection, or is she perfect because she's dead? In a seemingly minor detail, Ericsson's archive includes a button saying "I want your body" [187], a fixation that can be at once sexual and morbid. *The only good woman is a dead woman* (or at least a pliant one who produces without talking back, a retrograde sentiment that haunts this archive and so many others in descending behaviors and affects that are difficult to interrupt).

There are so many ways a body can be had. If one were to approach *Crackle & Drag* with no biographical knowledge, a plausible way of making sense of the material would be seeing it as a crime scene – either as evidence and exhibits, or as props for a Hitchcockian narrative of a young, ambitious, beautiful ingénue taking some wrong steps in life. There is a knife [4], a worn shoe [51], a bullet [53], a gun [76], a hammer [80], an axe [136], a stoker [205], a discarded locket [234], and any number of singled out objects with forensic possibilities. There are photographs where women or children seem infested by some ominous force exterior to the image [67, 270], along with legal documents and certificates, personal writings, medical prescriptions, references to adult materials (with a newspaper clipping telling of a father coming to the defense of his daughter's moral fortitude and reputation [189]), and a whole aesthetics of administration telling some foreboding, mysterious, and incomplete story.

Continuing, the poem makes it clear that this woman reached motherhood. Blood seems to be streaking down her body, and at her feet lay her dead children coiled like white snakes. There is a pitcher of milk, now empty. Do their white bodies hint at poisoning? If so, were they forced to follow, or did they go willingly? Whatever the case may be, she has folded them back into her body as petals, completing some sort of transference circuit of an impossible return or repetition (again, the death drive is operative here).

⁴ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida Reflections on Photography*, trans., Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010), 71.

⁵ Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, trans., Howard and Edna Hong (New York: HarperPerennial, 2009), 23.

From this organic, humid, and primordial scene of loss, decomposition and recomposition, the dry moon enters the picture as a timeless, lifeless witness:

*The moon has nothing to be sad about,
Staring from her hood of bone.*

*She is used to this sort of thing.
Her blacks crackle and drag.⁶*

The moon is not the mother. She may be indifferent, having seen this sort of violence from her bird's-eye-view on a daily basis from time immemorial – or at least, the poem tells us, she *should* be indifferent at this point. It is possible that the moon has her own archive, or represents the archive itself. The moon may also be the artist – forever circling and gravitating towards the world that gave it weight; she has no choice but to follow through its parabolic movement, even if what she circumscribes becomes uninhabitable.

In fact, the title came from the artist's chance encounter of a Paul Westerberg song – an aural misrecognition of “crackle and drag” when hearing lyrics indecipherable enough to fill in their edges. As if cracking off the end of Plath's poem, the missing bit was returned to its rightful place. Like forgotten breadcrumbs, three words lead him back to suicide, motherhood, and loss. This is one of any number of unsettling examples of coincidence in Ericsson's life and work, as if he has the ability to channel an art of coincidence (which should be impossible). It is not that he finds meaning in chance operations and coincidence, but that coincidences become meaningful and necessary after the fact, thereby losing their aura of chance. Coincidence as misrecognition: we are not far from André Breton's concept of “the marvelous” or “objective chance,” of the world meeting you halfway in initially arbitrary connections that only eventually attain truth-value and necessity.

The title also sends us off to other aspects of Ericsson's work: the crackle and drag of a grandfather's black sooted fireplace mantle and the compulsion of a mother's smoking habit (two filial death

drives coiled into one another, saturating some of the very objects in *Crackle & Drag* with their residue); the crackle and drag of a dead body through the woods (alluding not only to the mysterious crime scene but to Ericsson's recent body of work *Étants donnés* (2009-11), which I would need much more space to do justice to in writing). And more simply, as the artist has it, “drag” as conative of exasperation and being run-down by a world that always seems it could be a little bit better than it is. Like a Raymond Carver short story, however, the drag of existing finds glimmering shards of hope and redemption in the most seemingly mundane objects and meaningless gestures. This is the other side of the emotional spill of *Crackle & Drag*, which could so easily be run aground in silver-lined platitudes: finding moments of grace in a world that constantly makes you question whether they can exist at all.

Books

The book is one such moment of grace. Ericsson is a voracious reader who still believes in a classic form of subject formation through culture and the meeting of other minds and sensibilities. This is opposed to our prevalent contemporary subject formation of lifestyles and self-help, as if we are not beings to build off from but walking lacks simply in need of well-calibrated completion (as the safe teleologies of Capital would make us believe). In this sense, the artist is an untimely meditation and romantic. *Crackle & Drag* contains a number of youthful, outward appearances of this sensibility [123], which he has now internalized behind a mask of normality and contemporaneity.

The World of Books, his grandfather's bookshop in Cleveland, was an important place for the artist. Reading was a line of flight out of familial and communal enclosures, a liberating yet painful necessity for any artist or thinker. Ericsson pays homage to this shop in his archive: a write-up of his grandfather's shop [62], the store's signage [50], the sweet yet lonely proverb “A Good Book is the Best of Friends” [13], an optimistic yet disingenuous quote from Montesquieu [146], “I've never known any distress that an hour's reading didn't relieve,” and, quite naturally, a number of the books themselves. These are deeply personal artifacts and spaces, yet they tap into a collective experience: the bookshop and city as metonyms of the socio-economic developments of the last thirty years – the corporate squeezing, globalization, financialization, and capillarization of industrial cities left to die.

⁶ Sylvia Plath, “Edge,” <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/178970>.

Platitudes

Crackle & Drag is also filled with proverbs and saying that have sedimented into platitude and cliché: *May you be in heaven a half hour before the Devil knows your dead* [41], *If at first you don't succeed, to heck with it!* [54], *Count your life by smiles, not tears; count your age by friends, not years* [174], *A man comes into this world without his consent and leaves without his will* [207], *A crust that's shared is finer food than a banquet served in solitude* [230]. There is a politics of cliché at work, which is deeply historical and psycho-social. To say that life is a gift, or that I love you more than words can say, or that time mends all wounds is to situate oneself at the crossroads of proverbial enervation, cynical reflexes that protect you for being taken as a sucker, and a paranoid inability to simply say what you mean. All these tired words hold a terrible secret: that we have historically dealt ourselves out of being able to inhabit discursive spaces turned squeamish, which do not mean that the impulses, emotions, and needs behind these words are any less real and of value – they have simply lost their mobility in expression. We now have to say these platitudes with a nod to knowingness, to irony, and yet do so in secret faithlessness to this knowingness and irony for catharsis. These are the guilty pleasures of an unhappy enlightened consciousness. Those who do not know enough to pay service to this social etiquette are irremediably provincial and naïve. It is a terrible secret that infiltrates the larger social complex and our most inner relations.

This is not without its implications for mourning and for love – how dare I express their singularity through hackneyed expressions? The question nevertheless remains: can platitudes be rehabilitated? In *Crackle & Drag* they take on secondary meanings, often darker ones in this archival context, which to a certain degree allows us to take them at face value again – to re-read them with fresh eyes. To lay bare the cliché is to undercut its latent efficiency, as if platitudes are that part of language's unconscious that coerces and flares up in symptoms that we can only address once we come to terms with their source. Here it is less about the individual and more about the courage and ability to share – to have a language of the commons. It is no coincidence that radical politics and revolutionary discourses have their own public relations trouble with the enervation of clichés – togetherness, solidarity, peace, and equality as so-much unrealistic

drivel. To think that the failures of these politics in the twentieth century may have lead to the economic and social distress attested to by this archive and so many others is to say it all and not enough.

Eternal

If we are always in danger of falling into clichés and platitudes, we resign ourselves to safer, smaller victories and sure wins. It does not take too much effort to see – both in the art world and beyond – that people are often too easy on themselves. Like the politics of cliché, we are coerced away from dealing with large concepts and pathos. Why run the risk of seriousness in the face of big questions when their occlusion comes with more immediate rewards? For so many, Pascal's Wager has been reversed: we bet on posthumous non-existence so as to resign ourselves to the meaninglessness of our pleasures (and the meaninglessness of the violence committed on behalf of our pleasures), which we then greet with a *well why not?*

Ericsson is not ready to give up on large-stakes concepts and seriousness. In this sense, the influence of David Foster Wallace's efforts at literary post-irony resonate. On a recent visit to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the artist was overtaken by the seriousness and steadfast necessity of Flemish Renaissance painting (it should be noted that he began his schooling at the Art Student's League in New York, working in traditional portraiture). Reflecting on this revisiting of old masters, the artist describes his path as having set out to assume similar seriousness and necessity in his work, through more contemporary conventions of the readymade, conceptualism, photography, and the archival. He may not have chosen his time, but he works hard to choose how to inhabit it.

One of the larger concepts that frames *Crackle & Drag* is the eternal. In a recent interview, the artist described his archive in ephemeral terms and as a possible last stand of materiality in a pre-digital world.⁷ In one hundred years, such an archive may no longer be possible: the fraying of analog documents, the black, white, and bland officiousness of the seemingly brandless clothing and postures of the immediate post-war period, the de-saturation of color in a seedy haze that may or

⁷ TR Ericsson, interview with the author, New York, 19 December 2013.

may not be the visual truth of the late seventies and early eighties in the US, and all the handwritings and auratic wear and tear of irreplaceable, irreproducible marks in time.

What at first seems fleeting and betraying an endpoint, however, nevertheless opens onto the eternal. Eternity is the having been that can never be undone, even by a time before, even by your own death, and even by the solar death we know to be a certain eventuality of our galaxy and the end of all witnessing and archives. It is enough that you held up your life in singular irreversibility — the finite forever framed in all directions by the infinite. Even if *Crackle & Drag* were destroyed tomorrow, this could never undo the fact that the existence it chronicles happened and will never unhappen (barring a radical rethinking of time itself, which would also mean a radical rethinking of thought, memory, and death). This is a strange thought indeed: that our concept of eternity has never come from the future and the infinite, but instead from the ontological security of a finite past that was: “In this way the life of love is hidden, but its hidden life is itself in motion and has the eternal in itself.”⁸ Since this conception of the eternal is so de-humanized, even de-extentialized, it is little consolation. There is always the chance it is pure sophistry — as if language could go there and think beyond the point where thinking stops. But then this may be the bittersweet necessity behind *Crackle & Drag*, behind all our archives, which are right there in front of our eyes, neuronally ingrained in our reflexes and self-conceptions, yet also somehow relentlessly beyond us.

Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida Reflections on Photography*.
Translated by Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 2010.

Derrida, Jacques *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*.
Translated by Eric Prenowitz. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

Kierkegaard, Søren *Works of Love*.
Translated by Howard and Edna Hong. New York: HarperPerennial, 2009.

⁸ Kierkegaard, 27.