

Joel Potrykus: The Comedy of Terrors

"[...] I do seem to be attracted to trash [...] the serious made funny, the funny sad, the horrific exactly that: utterly horrific as it is the touchstone of what is real: horror is real because it can injure. [...] Anyone with my attitude might just stumble onto, by sheer chance & luck [...] the authentic camouflaged God [...] Too dumb to know you don't look for God in the trash of the gutter instead of Heaven."

--Philip K. Dick, 1978 EXEGESIS entry, as quoted in DIVINE INVASIONS: A LIFE OF PHILIP K. DICK (1989) by Lawrence Sutin

"A man obsessed / is a man possessed / by a demon"

--opening epigraph of Hubert Selby Jr.'s THE DEMON (1976)

"I keep myself supplied with my own angels and demons."

--Ingmar Bergman, in conversation with Jonas Sima & Stig Bjorkman, February 10, 1969, BERGMAN ON BERGMAN

"Call me animal / that's my name"

--MC5 (1970)

Leave it to me that in the Kentucky issue of SKREE, I pitch to Corey to hand me the microphone not to expound further on the subject of the Bluegrass state of being but instead to focus on an artist whose narrative films have all been set firmly within the landscape of mighty Michigan. The Great Lake State --the word Michigan a corrupted form of the original Ojibwe word meaning something like "large water"--is not so far away from Kentucky (which I believe to be an old Shawnee word that translates roughly into English as: "Fuck You Colonizing Pricks We Got Stone Art Here Older than Your So-Called Culture"). I seem to remember you just drive north through Ohio, maybe make a right turn. If you make it to one of the Great Lakes, you've gone far enough, but if you're in Cleveland not Detroit, you should have taken that left turn at Toledo. But, besides my advice to you, Dear Reader, not to trust me on driving directions: I get ahead of myself.

The debut feature-length motion picture directed by Joel Potrykus, APE, may have crawled out of the jungle in 2012, but it would be a decade and three more movies later directed by the guy that I

would stumble like another hayseed on the Lost Highway not to auto factory work up north but across this director's corpus. Not only was I late to the party making contact, I can't claim to be Mr. Hip in this stumbling/discovery, going out into the said jungle and coming back with all the good stuff and knowing how to find it (which is essentially my definition of the word "hip," in its most positive iteration). With access to Criterion Channel, the streaming service put up a spotlight on the director, the four features--the aforementioned APE, plus BUZZARD (2014), THE ALCHEMIST COOKBOOK (2016), and RELAXER (2018).

I dabbled with the newest first, checking out the 2022 short, THING FROM THE FACTORY BY THE FIELD, with its exclusive, streaming deal on Criterion. I enjoyed Potrykus's quickie, but to some degree it went in one eye and out the other. The short struck me as an interesting combination of elements, making me reflect that it hit me like STRANGER THINGS if I was the intended audience for it. Which is to say: in contrast to the sprawling, multi-seasonal Netflix series with its post-80s-Spielbergian cast of kids and nostalgia presented in a slick, processed, creation-by-committee can, Potrykus's short instead revealed itself to me as more mysterious and willfully ambiguous, with its setting in some vague 80s/90s past more authentically clunky and atmospheric, a conjuring of time and place rather than a pose of superficial pop-period signifiers. Nobody actually in the past realizes she/he/they're in the past, as people tend to believe they're living in the present, and Potrykus deals in that past-present (bonus one doesn't have to deal in the modern reality of rampant smartphone/screen addiction). And it echoed not so much the films of Spielberg or novels of Stephen King adapted to moving pictures in the 1980s, but more the work of a young Sam Raimi (speaking of Michigan), if Sam Raimi had been more influenced by Jim Jarmusch than the Three Stooges (not that I mind an influence by either, or both, for that matter). I thought THING intriguing, and then stuck the notion in one of the back pockets of my mind to check out the rest of his works.

Speaking of only having seen the short first/once, when sitting down to write this, I considered going back over Potrykus's films and watching them all again, making serious notes along the way, but then, realizing I was not required (nor the space in SKREE to print) to write a lengthy treatise or mongrel monograph, I decided to think of myself like James Agee or, later, Barry Gifford writing reviews of films either seen once in the theater, or, as with Gifford, watched mostly late at night on television, and then collecting blurry morning responses to the also-blurry experience of the night before as a flickering, transitory thing before the age of home video, much less streaming movies (or *content* as what passes for industry likes to call the disposable art/entertainment provided). In that spirit, I'm covering the Potrykus-directed movies in the order I watched them (rather than following the order of the chronological release date from oldest to newest), relying on the memory of the experience and not returning to repeat viewings and/or further research to flesh-out my response to the call of the films.

So if I found the newest and briefest Potrykus movie on Criterion interesting (he's been making short films since 1999, but the service did not provide anything made before 2012), it was when I next got to BUZZARD that I went from intrigued to gob-smacked. It didn't hurt nothing that in the year prior, October of 2021, I ended up revisiting all the NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET movies in chronological order, a seasonal Halloween entertainment/mental exercise (exorcism?) of past memory versus a contemporary response/s to the franchise in total. And the figure of Freddy exists as a motif in the

movie, something like its hellish saint around and through whom meditation may be focused. The plot of BUZZARD I'm not going to regurgitate, as the internet has plenty of basic plot pointers to get yourself summarized (and spoilerized). With Agee/Gifford nailed to my totem pole of influence out back of the barn, I'm also influenced by the format of typical reviews of movies. As in: an influence against which to react. I'm at a point when I read most reviews (especially if I don't "trust" the writer), I'll read the first couple of paragraphs that set up the review, skip the inevitable repeat of the plot, and read the last couple of paragraphs that attempt some analysis of the movie in question. I'm not a mama-bird flying into the nest to puke up plot into your gaping baby-bird mouth. I trust you young (or young at heart) clucks to fly on your own sturdy wings to the webs of the wide world if the unvarnished protein of plot points is what makes you grow big and strong.

I continue: what snatched the imagination of my aforementioned gob was the combination of elements, humor and horror, without being either a comedy or a horror film (much less a "horror comedy"), and how Potrykus seemed to have fully digested the Freddy Krueger character, that odd combo of a monster coming in through the window of dreams to kill kids who also behaves--and serves the franchise, after Wes Craven's initial/singular/visionary shot across the bay--as a one-liner spouting comedian/killer-hero. Joshua Burge (starring in all but one of Potrykus features, thus far his primary symbiotic actor/director collaborator (as Kyle MacLachlan to David Lynch, or Bergman to Max von Sydow, or Jimmy Stewart to Hitchcock (or Stewart to Anthony Mann, for that matter)) is BUZZARD's Freddy. Craven's original presents an odd dynamic, the human monster of Freddy as parasite feeding on the most vulnerable of the community. However, the vigilante gang of the fictional Springwood, Ohio having acted as judge-jury-executioner of Freddy, veered beyond the checks and balances of the system, even a flawed system. I pause to consider Lang's M (1931) or for that matter even THE OX-BOW INCIDENT (1947). So when the metaphysical Freddy returns, he's reaching with his blades into reality taking revenge on the parents by killing the kids in the realm of dream/nightmare. Is the metaphysical Freddy so wrong? He serves as provacteur, the transgressor who victimizes making the transgressors who victimized him pay for their own transgressions. And, the main character of BUZZARD does much the same. He's living in a flawed and mind-numbing, office cubicle world working as a temp, but with the vulture-like (see: title of movie) way he picks at it and exploits it all, he becomes more inept villain/parasite himself than hero (sort of Potrykus's take on the moral ambiguities of an "anti-hero"). As the Presocratic philosopher who roamed the world some 2500 years before Freddy started roaming through nightmares is attributed to have said: "Character is fate."

Plus, I've read enough to know before writing this that Potrykus based the grift at the center he portrays on an actual short-con he was doing himself when working the same type of temp job as his character. If (also file under the director's autobiography) his initial career aspirations were to become a stand-up comedian in NYC before returning to MI and teaching screenwriting while making his own, low-budget/personal films, I detect something of a comedian's sense of pushing reality to an absurd, hyperbolic fever-pitch to make a joke/point, but swap the joke form for the form/s of his fever-pitch drama within narrative film. I think about this because I know as a cartoonist, the way my imagination works, whether drawing or not, I push images/scenarios to an extreme to get at the heart of what I'm attempting to do, whether that's horror/anxiety/humor, etc...it's that "genetic" tendency to push

things--to quote the Cramps: to see how far too far can go--with the root of comics in caricature (see: Hogarth, Daumier, Nast, all the PUNCH artists in England of the 19th century, etc. etc. etc.). A joke works like a metaphor, uncovering the place that pushes the human response to laugh instead of weeping or raging (although depending on the comedian/audience, a joke can invoke those, too, if inadvertently (advertently, one could say, if the comedian is operating in the realm of an Andy Kaufman)). A monster works like a metaphor-mask to uncover the human response to fear, to emphasize if not empathize with the reality of what's under the mask, the situation/s that create the monster. Potrykus's movies walk the thin line between jokes and monsters, if not gods and monsters.

What the director managed to do for me was to ask questions of myself. What makes a hero and what makes a monster? When does the line between a rebel/hero get blurred and the hero become the actual monster? Or alternate question: what happens (can a question be a plot spoiler?) if an instrument of distraction/mollification such as a Nintendo Power Glove malfunctions and the troubled/unstable but pacified player/wearer out of boredom alters the toy into a weapon, in the style of Freddy's glove (which is itself I think also something of an allusion to the use of that same Nintendo product in FREDDY'S DEAD THE FINAL NIGHTMARE (1991)). I imagine Potrykus realizes that he could, in the most extreme version of himself, be any of the main characters in one of his movies (he himself acts in this one as a kind of counterpoint character to Burge in BUZZARD) if it not for the fact that he has the vector of story-telling in cinematic language to exorcise his demons and transmutate them into, let's get real fancy: art.

The next film I watched was THE ALCHEMIST COOKBOOK. Besides the obvious reference--if one is old enough/informed enough to be aware of it--to THE ANARCHIST COOKBOOK (1971), that famous subversive how-to manual, a latently dangerous/deadly handbook for aspiriting or day-dreaming saboteurs. Ya know, for when peaceful/non-violent protest is not enough, and one goes all the way from general fuckery into blowing shit up fuckery. With Potrykus's choice not to cast his usual stand-in Burge, the lead is played by Ty Hickson. It adds another layer to the texture of the narrative that Hickson is a Black man. I think it's smart that the director chose not to address the race of the protagonist/central (and almost only human) character on screen, as part of the narrative/story. We all live with racism and the perverse fixation/obsession on racial identity. As Americans, we classify individuals by race. Hey, it's not our fault: we live in a country in which only relatively recently have we even begun to climb out of and away from the fact that being classified as Black or even non-white (besides any gender that happens not to be hetero-male) served as a guarantee of less rights as citizen (and some might pause to ask: have we even really started to climb our way out of that). The film allows for the viewer to come to conclusions on one's own, so it lands with me that Potrykus allows (we could even say: trusts) the viewer to deal with the race (of the central and almost only) character--and the meaning/absence of meaning of his identity as a Black man--on one's own terms. So in many ways Potrykus nails it: the movie is not about race, but like anything involving anybody/any character who is not white in America: it's always about race, even when it's not. He does not directly define what "about race" means for the movie (or for its audience) any more than he defines whether the main character is nuts or an actual magician/chemist.

As an exercise in genre, Potrykus delivers on that. This IS an out-in-the-woods horror movie

about an (almost totally) isolated man conjuring a demon. Or it's a movie about a man losing his mind and imagining he conjures a demon. I might even ask: is it about both? But I think what Potrykus understands is that nobody who ever conjured a demon who didn't already have the demonic inside. And like with BUZZARD, the concept/prospect of a monster, the movie leaves us questioning whether magic/conjuring/the demon/devil is something that comes from outside ourselves or inside ourselves. I can't help but think of Marlowe's DOCTOR FAUSTUS (circa 1592). The titular good doctor goes out to find Lucifer and ultimately can't beat the forces he's summoned to his life. Is it a comedy or a tragedy? He approaches alchemy/magic with the expectation that he'll find the devil. And he does, the one both within and outside himself (spoiler alert: it doesn't work out too well for the doctor). Just in this moment--writing my way into an idea rather than having ideas I'm trying to write down-- I just realized COOKBOOK might be considered a 21st update of Marlowe's Elizabethan play. However, without looking it up to fact-check, I do recall reading that Potrykus cites as a favorite Murnau's more Teutonic folktale/Goethe-influenced FAUST (1926), so it all connects.

One might make the case that COOKBOOK serves as an American/Afrofuturist update of FAUST for the 21st century (there's a reason I don't work in marketing promotion...imagine *that* as a tag-line for a movie). This may be a stretch. Just don't look at my ass when I bend over. My ass to the side, this movie has a couple of scenes in it that worked on me as nerve-frazzling as anything else I've seen in any other horror film. Certainly, by the time I finished this movie, if I had any doubts: I began seeing Potrykus as a major director. At least in my neck of the woods. And, full disclosure/self-revelation: it's at this point in MY story that I, in fact, having only seen two of his four feature-length movies I stalked the director at a distance and wrote him a "fan letter," on paper and in ink no less, but that, like at the end of CONAN THE BARBARIAN (1982), is another story.

APE was where I landed next. In some ways, my ramblings on BUZZARD apply to APE as well. Burge in his second film and first feature with Potrykus (the prior being the short COYOTE (2010), which I have not seen, first in the "animal trilogy" (paired along with BUZZARD), playing a failing/flailing stand up at an obscure comedy club somewhere in obscure Michigan. When not telling jokes that don't land, the character enjoys playing with fire. Or maybe he's playing with fire on stage and the humor/flames simply isn't/aren't scorching the audience and the pyromania off-stage is just bored frustration with the absence of heat in his primary art-form. An encounter with a devil changes things. This time, in contrast to ALCHEMIST, it's obvious that the devil is: The Devil.

Well, not that obvious. Satan appears in a ridiculous, off-the-rack Halloween costume, making yard-sale deals in a strip mall parking lot, trading souls on the cheap. I have no idea if Potrykus has ever read the essays of the one and only founder of an official Church of Satan, Mr. Anton Szandor LaVey, who also happens to be, in his essays: a very funny writer (think 20th century west coast weirdo version of Mark Twain). LaVey extolled the idea of being that which one's detractors expect. In other words, if anti-Christ deniers regard Satanism as a bad joke, then when a Satanist greets such people, then the Satanist should go full cheese, as if living on a low budget, poverty row horror movie set style, with the audience unaware that the joke-devil is playing an actual joke. LaVey also propagated the notion of providing the inept who approached him seeking favors from the devil with exactly what they wanted, knowing that there's nothing to give those who do not already have gifts, talent, and the

patience/diligence to develop craft. So Potrykus's joke-devil strikes me as authentic-devil, especially in the LaVey tradition/cosmology. But it's also perhaps impossible for anyone but a skilled wizard/chemist (whoever or whatever that is or could be) to see clearly whether or not one is really the organ grinder or just another monkey (no offense to the ape community). Either way, Potrykus portrays Burge's character playing with fire in more ways than one and all ways lead to implosion, burning down the dry bamboo shack of unstable Self. And perhaps the worst fate for any given joker is to find out that he is neither joker nor organ grinder but in fact: the lamentable fool-monkey.

From the first feature to the most recent, I landed, finally, with RELAXER. Burge again plays the main character, whom we stick with--and get sticky with--as audience for the duration. One might think that Potrykus would expand the territory of his movies, like Sergio Leone going from the stripped down, mean and lean FISTFUL OF DOLLARS (1964) to the later operatic, David (not mean) Lean-style grand expanse of subsequent films, but I'll be damned if like one of Potrykus's characters is damned that the director seems to have most recently grown even more stationary/interior. One of the biggest shifts here for Potrykus is not expanding the parameters but actually for the first time among the features to set the action in a clear, calendar-dated specific period, at the turn of the 21st century in 1999 when Y2K mania pervaded imaginations of the times. Michigan may be where the director set/makes his movies, but in this example the set is one room and a couch in the Great Lake State in late 1999. While the surface of this narrative gets messy/gross quickly, without summarizing it's what reverberates underneath that surface rather than the obvious details/action that captures my own imagination.

There's been some references in what I've read about the movie that Potrykus was invoking Luis Bunuel's THE EXTERMINATING ANGEL (1962), but, speaking of great twentieth century modernists, I kept thinking of the DNA of Samuel Beckett moving through the genetics of RELAXER. Beckett represents a kind of poet laureate of disembodied or just barely embodied voices, irrational/contradictory obsessive-compulsive commentary and perspectives operating out of spare space-place. Hell, Beckett even made one motion picture himself, directing FILM (1965), which, with a little action on the street, mostly takes place in a single room focused on a single character played by Buster Keaton (of whom Burge resembles: once you see that in Burge, it's hard not to see Keaton in him). All that to the side, I'm certainly not making a case that Potrykus was literally influenced by Beckett or FILM (or was attracted to Burge because he could play Buster Keaton, for that matter), but placing a character in one spot in an absurdist situation like a latter-day Beckett does strike me as further evidence of Potrykus's tendencies to focus and then press on the narrative as far as the narrative can go (if Beckett hadn't been a writer/dramatist, maybe he coulda wrote good comic books).

And in this movie I find myself responding mostly in two ways. The "challenge" put forward by the brother of the Burge character that sets the action--or lack of action--in its motions seems domineering and sadistic, but then in his Fear (the band) shirt, he also seems the type to turn personal fear into a brash brow-beating/domination of others. The seeming passivity (but manic dedication) of the brother played by Burge taking on the brother's terms presents two sides of two brothers raised in the same circumstances. Indeed, the latent structure of the obvious structure of this piece (one pauses to reflect on the assertion of Heraclitus (again) that latent structure is master of obvious

structure) seems to be the inference of the references to the father of the two brothers. From there, I couldn't help but ponder the nature of games, of rituals, of beliefs and assumptions made from bad information or personal blinders/bias. This is the soil that abuse and secrets create, repeating cycles of negative, self-defeating action (or inaction).

Moving from that response, what's odd to me is that the movie was not made in reaction to the Covid pandemic and its subsequent shut down of social action but predates that recent reality, with its own isolation and paranoia and the misinformation and disinformation of social media in the real Ronald T. Dump era. RELAXER seems to be as custom-made for 2020 as it does for 2018 or made for the clock turning 2000. I happen to have been reading a 1982 interview with writer Ishmael Reed in which he states, "I think writing can be prescient: you write these events and then they happen in the real world." Something about Potrykus seeing the created world of 1999 in his RELAXER-magic mirror manages to insenuate situations soon to come in the world, from recent future before the movie to the recent past of this writing. Maybe a belief only exists as and a through a rumor or myth. If living one's life as if a bullshit is an actuality, one's life fits to reorganize itself around that fake reality, regardless of fact.

My take on this can start to sound convoluted, I suspect, which might make the reader think the director constructs convoluted films. But that is not the case. Instead, I'd suggest that the comedic terrors of Potrykus--his metaphors/jokes/masks/monsters--are all concrete, simple on the surface. That surface is so tightly constructed, the possible meanings of the surfaces, as with the techniques of the historical art movement of Surrealism (Breton, et al.) bend towards image/narrative as enigma-puzzles that remain open to multiple interpretations/contemplations. To quote Bunuel instead of Beckett: "Mystery is the essential element of every work of art." I am reminded of how Dennis Hopper liked to refer to David Lynch as "an American Surrealist" (and Hopper as director was not too shabby of an American Surrealist himself as a director, at least when it comes to his unjustly maligned THE LAST MOVIE (1971)). In the same way that Lynch creates situations/images that are so infused with specificity--yet slippery when it comes to simple meanings--allowing the viewer to interpret (Lynch famously resists explaining his own intended "meaning" of any given scene/movie), I might push for calling Potrykus a "Michigan Surrealist."

I don't know where the man is headed next (maybe more Adina Howard, with her noteworthy appearance in RELAXER: I'd pay good money to see her in a lead role/see how the director might handle a female lead (instead of what seems more like male to male ratios of partial self-portraits/self-exorcisms that boy wonder Potrykus has concocted to this date, as even if women play smaller roles in his movies, those roles are all memorable)), but wherever he goes, I'm certain to follow and check it out. Potrykus's four features thus far constitute a voice in cinema as startling and as unique as any other major director I admire. It was a bizarre jolt to the nervous system to discover them all at once, in the same year. At least, for example, as a kid when I found Dario Argento's SUSPIRIA (1977), and it knocked my socks off, it then following took several years further to slowly track down the rest of his mad Italian visions and become fluent in the Argento-corpus, not the Potrykus experience of all in a few months or weeks in a single year if not one, RELAXER-style couch-sitting. I've noticed there's a cut-and-paste stock line to describe Potrykus as making "slacker" (alternately "metal slacker") comedy/horror movies. I'm not sure I even know what "slacker" means as a genre (I get that/don't get that), and while I appreciate

the music he employs in his movies and how it relates to character, that's a subject/s I didn't/won't get around to until now, and just a brief mention, as another facet of his films. I can see why people write "slacker," but it seems short-handed, inexact.

I think of Richard Linklater's SLACKER (1990). More what I get out of Potrykus is his version/vision of Michigan like in many of his movies I get a sense of Linklater's vision/version of Texas. Or how in a way, even though I've been there/socialized there several times and my father grew up there, the version of Memphis, TN that exists in my mind's eye remains Jarmusch's conjuring of Memphis in MYSTERY TRAIN (1989). Or, speaking of what territory festers below Michigan and/or the Ohio river, the rough south of Jeff Nichols (SHOTGUN STORIES (2007), TAKE SHELTER (2011 (okay, set in Ohio, but close enough)), MUD (2012), and MIDNIGHT SPECIAL/LOVING (both 2016). Or even the way that all of David Cronenberg's films seem to always take place in Toronto/Canada. Even when Cronenberg conjured Tangier/Morocco in NAKED LUNCH (1991), somehow it still seems like a Canadian "Interzone" version/vision: "Toronto-Tangier." Perhaps even a more apt parallel, I get from Potrykus-Michigan the same way I get the Baltimore that exists in the films of John Waters; I know it's the Baltimore of Waters's mind's eye. If Sun Ra claimed and even made a movie by the title SPACE IS THE PLACE (circa 1972-74), I don't see why a mirror-reverse scrying (speaking of alchemy) might reveal that with Potrykus's cinema: place is the space. There's nothing provincial about the movies of Joel Potrykus: Michigan exists as a set (like Burroughs's own "Interzone" served that scribe as a mobile set, so adaptable, Cronenberg (and I'm certain he understood this, as he's said as much) could even move it to Canada for his purposes) that serves as a portal to anywhere/everywhere and to/for any if not all of us in his audience. If in the movies of Potrykus doppelgangers seem to have other doppelgangers, a kind of endless reflection within reflections of a mirror within a mirror reality principle, then what I saw/see refracting in them was my own double-faced Janus head within ever more doubles, in among the director's multi-faced doppelgangers, a fun-house mirror reverse version/s of my own self/selves. The ape suit you wear might be your truest self, and the fake devil may be most real figure you might encounter. That is terrifying. But it's funny, too. When it comes to Joel Potrykus's Michigan, for better or worse: I'm pretty sure I already live there.

--JT Dockery, or: "The Manny Farber of Sand Gap," as he's known in some obscure regions.