

Jim Hosking on the uncomfortable intimacy of filmmaking



October 28, 2016 - British filmmaker Jim Hosking got his start directing promos for MTV before eventually making a name for himself directing beautifully hallucinogenic commercials for the likes of Cadbury, Travelocity, and XBox. In his short films, *Little Clumps of Hair*, *Renegades*, and *Crabs*, Hosking honed a knack for mixing the mundane and the fantastical, resulting in films that are often as poignant as they are willfully strange. His first feature film, 2016's *The Greasy Strangler*, manages to somehow be both a sweet and sad treatise on father/son relationships and a cult-classic in the making about a grease-encrusted maniac who murders the innocent. It also features lots of cartoony gore and a prominently displayed prosthetic penis.

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 3350 words.

Tags: [Film](#), [Inspiration](#), [First attempts](#), [Adversity](#).

What films did you love as a kid? What were the first things you remember watching?

I loved *Bugsy Malone* by Alan Parker, *Gregory's Girl* by Bill Forsyth, *Brazil* by Terry Gilliam, and then when I was 13 my mum rented *Easy Rider* and *The Warriors* for me and my friends and we watched them late into a Friday night. I loved to be transported by films like I was with music. Music was always my main love as a child. I would listen to "Toto" by Africa and run round in circles in my bedroom screaming the chorus as if I really did love the rains down in Africa. I also loved those old Agatha Christie films like *Death On The Nile* and *Murder on the Orient Express*. I loved *Murder By Death* with Peter Sellers.

I loved stuff that I couldn't understand. I didn't really like kids films. My mum used to take me to the cinema to see "world cinema," I suppose you would call it. So when I was about 10 I would go to see Eric Rohmer, Truffaut, and Kurosawa. I was very scornful of mainstream films in my teens and twenties. But now I love *Dumb and Dumber* and *Wallace and Gromit* and I can cry easily watching romantic comedies. I've got children now so I cry at almost anything. I think I cried when the Williams sisters played at Wimbledon and hugged each other at the end of the match. However I am also very cold hearted and mean. Not really.

Did you always want to make films? What were some of your earliest attempts?

I didn't always want to make films. I thought that was something that other magical people did. In the U.K. we are forbidden from dreaming. Or at least my generation was. But then it started happening when I was working at MTV. I was writing little promos for MTV. I asked if I could direct some. The first one I directed, and I would love to see it now, was for a show called *Web Riot*. I got this guy called Mitch Upseh and took him to Central Park and filmed him with a dog. I also put a camera on the dog's head. I had Mitch get so excited about *Web Riot* and the internet that basically he wanted to see if it was possible to make a dog talk. He was convinced he could do it. I think if we all watched my *Web Riot* MTV film now we would all see that it was unfairly dismissed at the time.

You have such distinctive style as a filmmaker—a kind of gloriously messy weirdness that often pairs these beautifully composed and styled shots with images or subject matter that could often be considered off-putting or just abjectly strange. Where do you think your visual aesthetic comes from?

I try not to question myself too much or my instincts, but I think that the fact that I went to a strict school where we weren't allowed to express ourselves, and I was boarding at the age of eight, and I had (and still have) a wildly eccentric mother who was very messy and still is—all these elements contributed to me wanting to rebel, while also feeling like I couldn't. Feeling like I wanted to make stuff with misfits and underdogs and weirdness, while also wanting to keep it quite composed and structured.

I'm a contrary person who likes things that don't quite fit. But at the same time I am also very sentimental and loving and sensitive and I love real people and real individuals and I love to cast people that I feel a connection with and I feel their humanity. I am drawn to eccentrics. I am also drawn to the sad and tragic in life. I was a huge Smiths fan for example. I listen to a lot of sad music. And so I am drawn to people who seem to be as odd as I feel inside.

I first became aware of your work because of *ABCs of Death 2* and "G is for Grandad," which presents a very funny take on horror. How did that come to be? I saw an interview where you mentioned that you weren't particularly a fan of horror films. What do you find scary?

My producer Andy Starke asked me if I wanted to make a short for the *ABCs of Death 2*. I was given the letter G. I quickly thought

of Grandad and then thought of the imagery in the film. I would say I'm not into grisly or clichéd horror genre films. But I do like horror films that pack an emotional punch. I think the scariest films just have an atmosphere about them that is upsetting. *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* is upsetting not because of the subject matter so much as the truly backwater feel to it, the length of the shots, the bumbling humanity, and the lawlessness. It's still a shocking film.

You've done a lot of interesting commercial work and it's great to see so much of that work on your website. It's fascinating to see your aesthetic translated into that kind of commercial milieu. How was that experience for you as a filmmaker? Was it a particular challenge to make something that satisfied you creatively while also serving the needs of the client?

I think that my work would be very different if I hadn't ever done commercials. I think the way that you are forced to express certain things in commercials means that the need for compensating self-expression is even stronger. What I mean is that I push casting and styling and character further, probably because the ideas are not mine originally. Actually I'm really keen to make work that isn't so pushed visually, I want to make some much more realistic and heartfelt work at some stage, but I definitely felt a desire to push the aesthetics within commercials.

Part of the guilt of peddling stuff to the public meant trying to make it as fun as possible. There's an honesty in having fun. It's different to try to be cool, and I have never made a commercial where I was trying to make a product cool. I just wanted to make it fun. So, I would say my commercials have forced me into a slightly warped and heightened version of myself that I may never fully come back from!

Taken as a whole, your body of work presents a kind of parallel universe in which the mundane and non-traditionally beautiful people and things are made to look extraordinary. What can you say about the environments created in your work? And what draws you to the kinds of actors you typically work with?

Most of the time we are presented with people that we don't relate to or recognize in film and in photography. I find those unforgettable characters in real life to be really beautiful and heartwarming. We all have people we love in life, and that's because we know them well. But you can't get to know anyone well in a film if they are totally bland. But if they are special and unique characters then you can care about them and get to know them and love them. This is true, I think, in short films and commercials. In feature films you can cast more traditionally, perhaps, and you don't want to be gimmicky.

I am just drawn to people who move my heart. It's as simple as that. I feel comfortable around them, and I hope there is always strong humanity in the work that I do. In *The Greasy Strangler* I think most of the actors had a fantastic time and that they are proud of their work. They gave everything and I am very proud of them and thankful. And that makes me really happy.

The Greasy Strangler was written with Toby Harvard. How did that process work? And I'm curious, would you ever be interested in directing someone else's material?

Generally, we have an idea, we then talk about it for a little while and work it into a state where we feel there is some kind of story to be told, but we may not have all the elements. We write down an outline of sorts. And when we feel it's worth writing we write a quick draft, and then we hammer at it and hammer at it until we don't want to change anything any more. We both believe in imperfection and freshness. We do work at scripts, but we don't want to beat the life out of them.

I would direct other people's material, yes. I would enjoy the objectivity I'd have on the material. It's a challenge. I just want to be challenged. I used to want to be an auteur, now I don't care any more. I just want to be alive in the process of making stuff that I am challenged and consumed by. I would, however, like to make some films that are truly out there and experimental. But amongst more accessible work.

Filmmaking is difficult because you are often dependent on a large team of people to help realize your vision. Filmmaking also requires a fairly large amount of money to do pretty much anything. When watching *The Greasy Strangler* I kept thinking about how hard it must have been to get a film like this made... or was it? How do you go about pitching a movie like this and getting other people to come on board with what is ostensibly a crazy concept?

Luckily, I didn't have to pitch the film. My producer Andy Starke did that himself. He has true vision and taste and is very inspiring and very smart. So, thank goodness! But yes it is hard to get a film made, especially this kind of film. However, I think that if you write something truly singular, there is more of a chance that some people might feel they have to jump on board. SpectreVision, Elijah Wood, Daniel Noah and Josh Waller, all said that they came onboard because they felt that without all these specific producers' help this film would never get made. So, there needs to be a strong desire to make the material, so the more distinctive and crazy, sometimes, the better. I think that some of the crew wanted to work on the film because they have worked with me before. I think I have quite a strong aesthetic and they just wanted to be a part of that, thankfully. Though they contribute so much, everything. A good director is really a great exploiter of available resources!

Were there ideas considered for *Strangler* that were ultimately deemed too much? Too crazy? Was there a line that couldn't be crossed?

I don't think we censored ourselves when writing the script. Obviously there are lines we don't want to cross. But it's a feeling rather than an intellectual or ethical line. There are lines of dialogue in the script that I feel totally embarrassed about or ashamed of, but I'm not the one saying them. The characters say them. You become the characters when you write the script. You submit to that. And the characters are un-evolved, and at times reprehensible. And their behavior and dialogue have to show this.

A few things that inspire me. These aren't necessarily formative influences, though some are. A couple are more recent. But I'm just thinking of things that still motivate me...

Mark Kozelek. He gets better and better. I first saw the Red House Painters in about 1994. I've seen him so many times in so many places. He really doesn't care what people think, he is honest, poetic, raw, he is a fantastic musician, he writes the most affecting music I have ever heard. His last Sun Kil Moon album has some of my favorite ever songs on it. "The Possum," "Birds of Flims," "This Is My First Day and I'm Indian and I Work at a Gas Station." People bitch about him, I understand why. But we don't set out to be artists and role models. We should create what makes sense to us.

Theo Angelopoulos. I first saw *The Beekeeper*, then *Landscape in the Mist*. His films are so beautiful and inspiring. A true pure artist. Pure artistry is always inspiring.

Rainer Werner Fassbinder. Again, an uncompromising visionary artist. Interviews with him are very inspiring too. His casting and aesthetic resonate deeply with me.

Ingmar Bergman. *Scenes From A Marriage* and *Autumn Sonata* by Ingmar Bergman. Beautiful films, tidal waves of bold, raw emotion.

Julien Baker. A young songwriter from Memphis. She is 20 I think, her music is very honest and from the heart. I am always inspired by people who are unafraid of public self-expression. I wish I had more confidence to be like that. I love her album *Sprained Ankle*. Again it's probably not what anyone would expect from me! I gravitate towards more personal emotional work in my real life. And then I seek refuge in my work by having spasms of madness to alleviate the angst! There's so much crazy shit out there on the Internet that I think you can get desensitized to it. It's much harder to find something that emotionally resonates.

Beyond that I am getting into daily Nei Kung sessions with CK Chu's video, I love to go running, I drink too much coffee, and I would like to go to Japan and South Korea.

And, a few others:

Hong Sang-soo. Amazing Korean Director. Beautiful funny touching conversational films.

Lee Chang-dong. Amazing Korean Director. Labyrinthine powerful epic emotional films.

The Field. Swedish guy called Axel Willner. This is often what I listen to when I write.

Leonard Rossiter. The funniest British comic actor. He is in *Billy Liar*. He is also in some Kubrick. He is also in the amazing sitcoms *Rising Damp* and *The Fall and Rise of Reginald Perrin*.

Mike Leigh's A Sense Of History. It's online. Starring Jim Broadbent. He's brilliant in it.

Miles Davis. The Complete on the Corner Sessions. I also like to write to this. It's amazing churning repetitive beautiful chaos.

Full Moon In Paris by Eric Rohmer. I loved this when I saw it in the cinema as a kid. I still do. It is involved and self-important and indulgent and very Parisian.

Black Moon by Louis Malle. Dreamlike filmmaking. Very inspiring to see a film this liberated from a famous filmmaker.

Where's Poppa with George Segal and Ruth Gordon. Anything with Ruth Gordon.

Chinese Roulette by Rainer Werner Fassbinder. It's another Fassbinder classic smashed out by him in a few days and is a beguiling twisted fairytale.

Sriracha Hot Sauce.

Wallace and Gromit.

Parallel Lines by Blondie.

Heathrow Airport on a grey day (Flying out of the UK).

So many of the reviews of *The Greasy Strangler* fixated on the grease and the sex and the murder, making it sound more like a horror movie than the comedy I found it to be. I also thought that underneath all of the depravity there was a funny sweetness to the movie—particularly in how it addresses the father/son relationship. Am I insane for thinking that? And were you surprised by the various ways in which the movie was received?

I totally agree with you. I thought I was making a touching, perverted comedy. I didn't think the grease or the murders were significant. I am surprised, in fact I would say shocked, that anybody is outraged or disgusted by this film. I wonder what kind of

sheltered lives they lead. I am absolutely baffled. I'm baffled and I'm shocked!

After making a movie like *The Greasy Strangler*, where does one go next?

I'm making another film in January in freezing Upstate New York. It will feel like a Jim film, but it's also very different. Another touching comedy with a little less perversion! I'm working with more recognizable names, but I still want to create a distinctive, indelible film. I have some great collaborators and couldn't be more excited. It's going to be freezing though-January up near Canada! Spot the wimp.

Do you have a dream project?

I don't know that I have a dream project so much as I have a dream of a tone that I want to capture. I'm a very sentimental person. I'm drawn to sad reflective films. I love Eric Rohmer, for example, which might be a surprise. I have watched all his films many many times. I love Hong Sang Soo, he is one of my absolute favorites. Also Lee Chang Dong, and Apichatpong Weerasethakul. Meditative filmmaking. But I'd always have some form of comedy in it, maybe it would be sad comedy.

I imagine films with much less dialogue, and bonds forged between unlikely people. People who have always been alone suddenly finding that they are not as alone as they thought they would be. Very slow films, few shots, and awkward extended hugs, maybe with awkward extended sex scenes. I don't know why I'm so excited by uncomfortable intimacy! But that's the life I know...

What advice, if any, do you have for aspiring filmmakers?

Define your own genre and don't worry what anyone else is doing. I feel inspired, jealous, and madly impressed when I see work that surprises me. I remember John Peel—the British DJ—saying that he loved The Smiths so much when he first heard them because he couldn't tell what was in their record collection. I think that's a great and true observation.

Based on your body of work, do you find that people have crazy preconceptions about you as a person and as a filmmaker?

I do, yes. I feel constantly disappointing! I'm very thoughtful, often serious, and pensive but, of course, I can be excitable and sometimes I let myself down in public by being rather silly and rather immature. But I have had many people say that I'm not what they expected. But I don't know what they're expecting. I wasn't trying to shock or be weird. I did what I found funny and what made me laugh, and it came from the gut.

What does filmmaking allow you to do that other forms of creative expression don't? And what do you think you'd be doing if you weren't making films?

I think filmmaking is about telling stories. It's easier than writing books, because you can con people into being interested with imagery and sound. I'd like to write songs. That's always been my dream. I don't know why I haven't. But I still hope to. I'd love to learn basic piano or guitar and sing songs and record them. But then again, if I really really wanted to then I guess I would have done it by now.

Name

Jim Hosking

Vocation

Filmmaker

Fact

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