

GOTHIC NATURE



GOTHIC NATURE II

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COVER CREDIT:

Model IV, 2017

Artist: D Rosen

Cast Aluminum (Original Objects: Buck Antler and Stomach (Decorative Model), Camel Mask

(Theatrical Model), Whip (Didactic Model), Stiletto (Decoy Model), Goose Neck (Decoy Model),

Nylons, Bra Underwire, Calvin Klein Dress, Facial Mask, Necklace, Wax

21 x 25 x 12 in.

Photo credit: Jordan K. Fuller

Fabrication: Chicago Crucible

WEB DESIGNER:

Michael Belcher

TV AND FILM REVIEWS

Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert, *Swiss Army Man*

(San Pedro, California: Tadmor, 2016)

Ashley Kniss

The first time I saw Dan Kwan and Daniel Scheinert's (2016) *Swiss Army Man*, it was hard to tell what I was watching. It is a film about a farting corpse, which makes it hilarious, but it is also about human connection, loneliness, and the shame associated with having a body. Even more fascinating to me, the film seems unintentionally to include narrative features commonly associated with ecohorror, features that highlight the materiality of the body. The film ultimately vitalises the connection between human bodies and the more-than-human. Linking the body to other forms of material waste—from trash to poop to corpses—the film emphasises that human waste in all its forms both defines material existence and highlights our resistance and disgust towards our own materiality, which, ironically, also defines what it means to be human.

The initial scene puts one toe firmly in the genre of ecohorror by featuring a lone man stranded on a beach in what would be a seemingly pristine wilderness but for the abundance of trash that seems to infiltrate every shot. Add to this a decomposing and increasingly animate corpse, and the film, at first glance, appears to function entirely within the realm of ecohorror. The first wide shot of the sea with trash floating across its surface sets the stage for when the camera shifts to Hank (Paul Dano), a man stranded on a desolate beach somewhere in the Pacific and preparing to commit suicide. Hank is also surrounded by trash, which has somehow made its way to the beach, seemingly beyond the reach of human communities. Just as Hank is about to step off a discarded lunch cooler and hang himself, a corpse (Daniel Radcliffe) washes ashore, not unlike the pieces of trash that already litter the beach. In a scene that is equal parts ridiculous, hilarious, and gross, Hank postpones his suicide to check on the corpse, whose name we later find out is Manny, and the farting begins. At first this is legitimately horrifying as Hank puts an ear to Manny's stomach and listens to what can only be active decomposition taking place in the corpse's gut, but it is also funny and weird.

While the humour and outright joy featured throughout the film make clear that *Swiss Army Man* is not fully ecohorror, it nevertheless co-opts conventions of the genre. In addition to common ecohorror tropes, such as being stranded in the desolate wilderness, wild animal attacks, and human/nature blending, disgust is perhaps the most conspicuous facet of ecohorror throughout the film. From the mid-fart, bare-butt shots of Manny being ridden like a jet ski to fresh water pouring out of Manny's mouth like a torrent of puke to his phallic compass, he truly is a Swiss Army Man, with a solution for every problem, each one more revolting than the last. In a Q&A with Filmmakers included on the Blue Ray release of the film, Kwan and Scheinert address how they intentionally apply the concept of semantic satiation—when a word loses all meaning as a result of repetition—to farts, making them a matter of fact, something the body does that is not attached to humour or disgust. This attempt to neutralise disgust draws attention to the ways that the human body and other forms of waste are entangled in the more-than-human world. We react to evidence of our materiality—farting—in the same way we react to so many facets of the more-than-human as evidenced by our aversion to mold, slime, carrion animals, creepy crawlers of all kinds, and other shudder-inducing eco-others. Disgust is ultimately one of the many ways we distance ourselves from the more-than-human and deny this entanglement.

The film's hyper-saturation with trash, body emissions, and a corpse generates a space where we can reconsider our hard-wired reaction to these objects. Furthermore, the film's emphasis on disgust highlights the correlation between the disgust we feel toward bodies and the disgust we feel toward the more-than-human, a reaction that separates the self from the body and thus from the biotic communities in which the body is intermeshed. At one point, Manny, newly conscious, asks 'what is trash?' and Hank responds, it is 'everything people don't want so we hide it.' This exchange is followed by a series of further questions about material existence:

Manny: Why don't people want [trash] anymore?

Hank: Well, that's broken. That's empty. This is useless. Smelly. Old. . . .

Manny: What is life? . . .

Hank: This is you. This is your body, and . . . and that's where your brain is, and that's where you're going to remember something . . .

Manny: What's that?

Hank: That's poop. Poop is when your body takes everything it doesn't want and squeezes it out of your butt. Everything poops...People poop every day. Or extra when they're scared or sick or right when they die, because, uh, you shit your pants when you die...People die every day.

Manny: What do they do with all the dead people? Do they hide them?

Hank: Yeah.

Manny: So I'm like trash?

Hank: No. You're different.

Hank is right. Manny is not broken, empty, or useless though he might be smelly, considering that corpses start farting 10-20 days after death when gasses, a byproduct of decomposition, start to build up within the body. However, despite the film's insistence that Manny is not just 'different' but also useful, it also draws attention to the fact that society treats corpses the same way it treats trash and other forms of waste.

As the film progresses, it does more than simply neutralise disgust by rendering these objects as beautiful and useful. The material body becomes an essential link between the human and the more-than-human world. If allowed to decay naturally, the body will ultimately become the environment. At one point, Manny wishes he were dead(er?), and the scene immediately changes to a vision of his body decaying in fast-forward, reducing to bones and returning to the earth. Rather than being disgusting or even disturbing, the scene, like so much of the film's juxtaposition of nature littered with trash, is strangely beautiful. Our typical disgust at natural objects—things like poop, viscera, spit, farts, and yes, rotting corpses—suddenly disappears, losing significance in the constant onslaught of these objects of horror throughout the film, and leaves something entirely different in its wake.

Rather than reinforcing the idea that waste is lifeless and useless, the film recognises the vitality of all matter, but especially that which we throw away. Throughout the film, poop, trash, and corpses all share a similar agency, one that highlights the life of objects usually considered not only dead and useless, but offensive and disgusting. Trash is hidden away in landfills, or far-away

pockets of uninhabited space where we do not have to see it. Poop is flushed down the toilet where we neither have to look at it nor think about it. And corpses are filled with harmful chemicals and sequestered from any kind of ecological contact that would allow them to transform into something useful—food for plants and countless other living organisms. Manny’s super-corpse powers may be as ridiculous as they are funny, but they also make the point that corpses, like other forms of waste, have agency—and that life is powerfully demonstrated in how the film allows matter to matter. The elaborate creations that Hank builds to help Manny remember his life are all made of trash, objects that have been thrown away but prove useful in the world of the film. In the end, the film makes this final point: instead of trying to distance ourselves from the realities of material existence that bind us to the more-than-human world, perhaps, like Manny in the film’s final scene, we should seek a return, or more aptly, a recognition of our kinship with the material environment. Our materiality is what makes us human after all.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Swiss Army Man. (2016) [Film]. Quan, D. and Scheinert D. dirs. USA: Cold Iron Pictures.

‘Q&A with Filmmakers’. *Swiss Army Man*. (2016) [Film]. Quan, D. and Scheinert, D. dirs. USA: Cold Iron Pictures.