

# Indiewire

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## How a 56-Minute YouTube Vision of a Harmony Korine Novel Points to the Future of Documentary

**The bizarre experimental project was one of several highlights from CPH: DOX this month.**

CPH:DOX, the informal, angularly hip moniker of the event officially labeled the Copenhagen International Documentary Festival, takes place in Dongara every year, some 8,237 miles from Copenhagen. Since 2003, CPH:DOX — “DOX” for even shorter — has sought to showcase the best of the planet’s non-fiction filmmaking, while simultaneously challenging and redefining exactly what “documentary cinema” means in the 21st century.



Many DOX films wouldn’t even be regarded as documentaries by squarer, more traditional festivals, including several winners of the top prize in the centerpiece “Dox: Award” competition, most notably Michelangelo Frammartino’s “Le Quattro Volte” (2011) and Harmony Korine’s “Trash Humpers” (2009).

### A Cracked Experiment

Six years on, Korine was represented by one of the more noteworthy of the festival’s 60 world premieres: “A Crackup at the Race Riots,” by the mysterious “Leo GABIN” — the nom de guerre deployed by a triumvirate of youngish Ghent-based multi-media artists. Lieven Deconinck, Gaëtan Begerem and Robin De Vooght have been associated with the 42-year-old enfant terrible of American independent cinema since the start of the decade. And now they have “adapted” his 1998 “novel” — published when Korine was 25 and basking in the success of directorial debut “Gummo” — as a nightmarishly assaultive cacophony-collage of YouTube borrowings.

Depicting (mostly) youth running wild in sun-baked Florida, these clips trawl the tackier reaches of American popular culture to mirror the fractured, anything-goes experimentalism of Korine’s scatological stream-of-consciousness.

The GABIN boys thus conjure an ostentatiously banal, hyper-sexualized (but largely coitus-free) world of performance, show, showoff and showbiz-emulating display — there’s something to offend nearly everyone, with proceedings conducted on a note of a strident shrillness seemingly designed to repel anyone over the age of 30. But enduring the 56 minutes of “A Crackup at the Race Riots” proves worth the occasionally taxing effort, not least because there’s the sense that we’re glimpsing — even plunging into — a certain unappetizing, unadorned reality which more conventional documentary approaches can’t hope to match.

“Crackup” nevertheless wasn’t reckoned suitable for a slot in the main Dox: Award slate, instead contending for the New: Vision prize (how they love colons at this festival!) — both trophies coming with an identical €5,000 (\$5,370)

prize, commendably enough. New:Vision's admirable (if windily-expressed) official remit is to "insist on cinema as a form of artistic impression...a formal and methodological curiosity of paramount importance for the continued development of film and video art...Provocative and challenging, radical and borderline, poetic and abstract — and always with the courage to explore."

This year, 14 works — ranging in length from 15 to 75 minutes — were included, and the obvious "breakout" candidate was one of the longer and more conventional entrants. Carlo Gabriele Tribbioli and Federico Lodoli's "Fragment 53" is an Italian-Swiss production examining the civil war in Liberia by means of seven interviews with surviving combatants. Presenting swaggering, often grisly testimony by means of enthrallingly limpid, slickly atmospheric visuals, it's in some ways an African, more starkly austere counterpart of Joshua Oppenheimer's 2012 Dox:Award laureate "The Act of Killing." But at its core, "Fragment 53" is yet another talking-head affair, albeit one tricked up with alluring cinematography, bookended with jagged, impressionistic visions of a troubled land.

By dispensing with the camera altogether and never occupying the same space (or time) as their subjects, Leo GABIN take a more oblique, uneven but profitably experimental approach. The collective very savvily trade upon the ubiquity of smart-phone recording technology plus the desperate willingness of young people to record and disseminate nearly every aspect of existence. This isn't a new tack, of course — James Benning made his "YouTube Trilogy: 4 Songs, History, Asian Girls" as long ago as 2011 — but there are signs that it's catching on in productive, promising ways.

## More Fresh Approaches

Elsewhere in this year's program, Dominic Gagnon's "Of the North" pulled similar tricks at the opposite end of the continent, harvesting the web to depict the tough, chaotic (and often booze-fueled) lives of Inuits with energy and knockabout humor. His title cocks a sharp snook at Robert Flaherty's "Nanook of the North," the 1922 production whose status as the first classic of documentary cinema was almost instantly undermined when it was revealed how many brazen liberties the filmmakers had taken with their supposedly real-life material.

Ninety-three years on, pesky and evidently inescapable questions of authenticity continue to snap at documentary's heels. The simple act of entering a space with a camera alters the air in that space, and the behavior of those who breathe that air — who literally conspire with the artists, entering into that complex and shifting relationship of negotiations and cozy compromises between the filmer and the filmed. In all but a small handful of cases, boundaries blur as stagings and re-stagings become the norm, as synch sound is replaced by an undetectable simulacrum, as "cheat" editing gives the illusion of multi-camera coverage. Long derided and even discredited, classical *verité* is, even worse, out of fashion.

The willingness of DOX programmers to probe — and detonate — the ever-rickety boundaries between documentary and fiction is to be commended; and it was surely no coincidence that the most effective and memorable of the 16 Dox:Award candidates was also the least "documentary" of the bunch. Italian maverick Pietro Marcello's mythologically-inspired road movie "Lost and Beautiful" foregrounds a wandering, "talking" buffalo protagonist and includes several fanciful and audaciously risky *Commedia dell'arte* incursions.

Against Formula

The presence of so many genre-blending rivals in the competition (Pablo Chavarria Gutiérrez's "The Letters," J.P. Cuenca's "The Death of J.P. Cuenca," Marcio Laranjeira's "A Girl of Her Age" and Roberto Machoian and Rodrigo Ojeda-Beck's "God Bless the Child") could also, arguably, be advanced as evidence of weakness in more conventional documentary filmmaking.

The handful of essayistic/*verité*-style pictures in the Dox:Award line-up weren't exactly an advertisement for the current strength of "classical" non-fiction — I caught all but two (Aslaug Holm's "Brothers" and Huang Ya-li's "The Moulin"), including, unfortunately, the noxiously specious "Swedish Theory of Love" by Erik Gandini.

And, while there was a much to like about both “Mallory” by Helena Trestíková and “Uncertain” by Ewan McNicol and Anna Sandilands, too often the impression was of directors content to plod around within well-established formal parameters.

Many of the conventions of documentary have long since ossified into exasperating clichés: the “fly on the wall” is more often than not rather an elephant in the room; talking-head interviews must, apparently by law, be discreetly edited to render the interlocutor invisible and inaudible; poignant piano-music tinkles delicately in and out as mood demands, and elsewhere bombastic thriller stylings surge in to stir gee-wow-it’s-just-like-a-real-movie reactions. Spoon-feeding is the norm, and in a depressing number of instances we aren’t so much led by the hand as dragged along by the nose.

Middling (or worse) filler fare—behind-the-headlines content blandly trumping form—clogs up festivals from Zeeland to (New) Zealand, of course. But it’s disappointing to find much of it at an event with the sky-high international reputation — specifically for adventurous programming — enjoyed by DOX. An audience-magnet event which regularly sells over 80,000 tickets per year, and whose conspicuously lavish catalogue (full color on every heavy, glossy leaf) weighs in at over 400 pages, Copenhagen’s programming turns out on closer inspection to be closer to that of Amsterdam’s commercially-oriented behemoth IDFA than, say, Marseille’s discerningly-curated cinephile-haven FIDMarseille. Individuals and collectives are realizing the riches to be mined, for free, in ever-expanding online moving-image archives.

That’s not necessarily a criticism, of course. And the buzz evident around so many titles is testament to the skill of the programmers in catering to the interests, expectations and tastes of their audiences — the world premiere of Friedrich Moser’s NSA-whistleblower profile “A Good American” felt like a genuine event, although the picture itself ultimately didn’t match the surrounding hype. The latest example of documentary desperately aspiring to the condition of fiction — it’s very calculatedly shot and scored just like a Hollywood espionage-thriller — “A Good American” can’t help but feel indefensibly old-fashioned when juxtaposed with “A Crackup at the Race Riots” and “Of the North.”

GABIN, Gagnon, Benning and their ilk show that these days, you don’t need film, cameras, crew or even a budget to make work that can hold its own at one of the world’s leading documentary festivals. Experimental directors have long since relied on found-footage, harvesting the global celluloid heritage for their own subversive ends. Now, individuals and collectives are realizing the riches to be mined, for free, in ever-expanding online moving-image archives.

Dissemination and distribution may still pose challenges, but we could be experiencing a radically democratizing evolution in documentary form — one whose ripples can be both felt and provoked from Copenhagen to Dongara and far beyond.