

## Fresh from the Archives: "POP SKULL" (DVD Review)

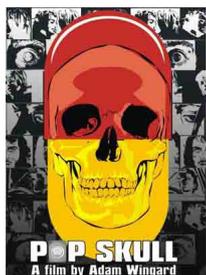
Written by Jeremiah Kipp  
Friday, 25 February 2011 14:27

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It was just announced that AUTOPSY screenwriter E.L. Katz's ZOMBIE PET SHOP script was bought by The Animation Picture Company. You can click [here](#) to read that article. And you can hit the jump to read Jeremiah Kipp's review of the DVD for POP SKULL, the 2007 Adam Wingard-directed film that Katz co-wrote.

This unnerving slice of pill-popping, acid-tripping Midwestern life (on DVD from Halo-8) feels like August Strindberg's DREAM PLAY filtered through the mind of retro-modern surrealists like THE MANSON FAMILY's Jim VanBebber and JULIEN DONKEY-BOY's Harmony Korine. But filmmaker Adam Wingard leaps beyond even those cinematic transgressors in terms of stripping away narrative conventions, to the point where POP SKULL is less a narrative than a disaffected meditation by a depressed 20something pill addict, Daniel (played by perpetually spooked-out Lane Hughes, who also scripted with Wingard and E.L. Katz).



There's no easy genre classification handy for this film. Even to describe it as "experimental" seems like a misnomer, since that implies certain art-house trappings—the movie feels more like flipping through the pages of a troubled young man's diary, so "personal cinema" is an easy label. But what gives with all the images of ghosts, pale-faced ghouls and sadistic white-trash murder sequences with girls taped down to chairs and beaten to death? The shock-horror tactics seem like Daniel's fevered thoughts, or a blur halfway between his mind and reality.

POP SKULL will easily prove frustrating to the casual viewer seeking popcorn entertainment, and maybe will be just as annoying to the film snob who likes even art-house pulp of the Abel Ferrara/Alejandro Jodorowsky variety to play by some kind of rulebook. Unless you connect to this material with some kind of primary gut instinct—like you would listening to an early Sonic Youth album—you're absolutely crashing the wrong party. One might describe the first scene as being about Daniel drifting into a convenience store to buy or steal some cough syrup, but the image quality seems like the bottom of an unclean ashtray, the sound design is a mix of nattering flies, burning paper, lonely guitar riffs, operatic moans and feedback distortion and the voiceover is a ramble about two brothers who murdered an innocent girl in the back yard, then

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committed suicide. Furthermore, the cut-up editing style doesn't follow a single continuous thread, but breaks off into divergent black-and-white/color images—a back country road at night, a hammer ready to swing, nostalgic—almost cornball—flashbacks of boyfriend and girlfriend on a swing, red pills being laid out on top of a mirror.

The careful viewer might be able to piece together the fragments of "plot" that emerge, and there are indeed a handful of dialogue scenes with actual characters in addition to Daniel. His beer-swilling best friend Jeff (Brandon Carroll) tries, in his own rambling, free-associative way, to push Daniel out of his introspective shell. Whether he's cruising around in some beat-up car or on an afternoon fishing trip (where the daylight reflecting off the water has a sickly-orange burning-ember glow), Jeff at least sinks his teeth into his boozy life. Not so Daniel, who feels trapped in a kind of post-breakup sadness after being abandoned by his girlfriend Natalie (Maggie Henry) until he meets spunky blonde Morgan (Hannah Hughes). But the dialogue sequences are all about Daniel pouring out his pathetic guts, Jeff acting macho and contrary, Natalie keeping her distance or Morgan vying between affection and anger.

The horror imagery that continually bubbles to the surface, sometimes involving the mutilation of central characters, is actually less painful to watch than the fumbling attempts of these young people to carry on the most superficial of conversations. Daniel, at his most articulate, says he's having a difficult time, really, and why can't anyone hear or see what he's going through? But it's like a deaf-mute reaching out to a world that can't see or hear him either, and for all the bursts of strobe lighting and flash-cut imagery that burst into his world, POP SKULL is hermetically sealed, a state of depression with no outlet other than madness. It's an angry film the way suicide is angry, all directed in some kind of inner fugue state that lacerates itself with no possible exit.

If that sounds confusing, just try watching the film and hacking through its tangles of freakiness. Bottom line: You'll either hate it or you'll have a caustic, begrudging fascination with it—but POP SKULL makes sure it is difficult to embrace, love or hold up as some kind of badge of honor for the depraved. You have to navigate the film like dealing with a drunken, troubled friend with a jumble of mutated thoughts in his head.



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If you think you'll get any extra added insight from the commentary track, guess again. Over the opening title sequence and the warning sign that this motion picture contains "scenes which may not be suitable for individuals diagnosed with epilepsy," Wingard and Hughes hum a prolonged "Ommmmmm" and then, giggling, ramble on a bit about the art of Robo-Tripping. At the midway point, they go off on a long digression about the audiences of the future having to fight off robots, because artificial intelligence has made the leap and TERMINATOR-style creatures have overtaken the human race. You'll either be entertained by their yammering or want to run screaming in the opposite direction. But they offer no defense of their movie, no interpretation, no apologies, and the most they share is that they had \$3,000 to make it and used Hughes' autobiography as a jumping-off point for the improvised script.

Claiming that they hate the pretentiousness and self-congratulatory back-slapping of most commentaries, the director and star do offer a brief talking-heads documentary where they discuss the practical considerations of making POP SKULL. They were fed up with sitting around trying to write movies and just said, "Hey, let's set a deadline for ourselves and go out and make a movie right now"—and the amount of footage they shot on mini-DV was more like the shooting ratio of a documentary than an indie narrative. They also discuss the numerous hours spent color-correcting the movie, which explains the distinctive look. Their goal, since they had no money, was to make the picture as textured as possible—which some might say is as "ugly" as possible. But I'd argue that their concept of oversaturated colors, deep shadows, high contrast and bleached, pale skin tones adds much to POP SKULL's mood.

Rounding out the DVD are deleted scenes, a blissed-out head trip of a music video, Jim Ether's bizarre short film about interpreting ink blots entitled A MINUTE OF YOUR TIME (which inspired POP SKULL's visual style), and five short films by Wingard, including PARADOX MARY (about a woman who finds herself faced with a double of herself and is amused by videotaping this phenomenon), DON'T WORRY and LITTLE SISTER GONE (variations on the theme of being a runaway) and the self-explanatory FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF A DOG and THE SCREAMING MAN. If you're interested in the freewheeling, nightmarish vibe of POP SKULL, the many extras will definitely have you on cloud nine.

MOVIE: 

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