

# DISTRIBUTOR

## trans by Robert Horton

Trans, as in "in transit," being in motion, between things. Also "transition," which works the same way. *Trans* is also the title of an early-Eighties Neil Young album, obscure enough (one of those toenail-paring thingies Young sometimes puts out) so that nobody would make a connection between movie and record – although *trans*, the movie, is woven together with an evocative song score. Surely *trans* must also be a pun on trance, which describes the dreamy hum this 80-minute film creates. You will also notice that the word is not capitalized, a titling habit I usually deplore, but one that, in this case, fits: a word from the middle of a sentence, something plucked from a phrase already in motion.

The film itself has not come to rest. A year after screening at Sundance and winning a prize in Berlin, *trans* still lacks wide U.S. distribution. Given the state of the art-house/indie scene these days, it can't be too surprising that a film like *trans* is left by the roadside. It doesn't carry the calculated feel-good vibe of a *Full Monty* or *Happy, Texas* (the latter being another Sundance '99 indie that begins with the escape of prisoners on a road crew in the South). Though unconventional in style, it doesn't brandish the hostile revolutionary zeal of a marquee-ready bomb-thrower like Harmony Korine. Of course, perhaps director Julian Goldberger has some good stories about maxing out his credits cards or donating his body to science to come up with the budget, the media octopus being far more interested in tales of backstage ingenuity than the nuances of what's actually on screen. Yet *trans* is exactly the sort of smallish, idiosyncratically personal movie that belongs in the arthouse loop; for various reasons, it will never draw a *Happy, Texas*-size crowd, but it will mesmerize the kind of audience that regularly takes a chance on something at a repertory house with an adventurous calendar.

Goldberger and producer Michael Robinson prepared *trans* along the lines of a guerrilla production: the scenario was roughly sketched out, largely improvised within the loose format, and shot in and around the director's hometown. Unlike many such ground-level experiments, *trans* carries not a whiff of moral superiority or preciousness. In the best sense the movie seems to be *happening*, even as it is clearly artfully arranged.

The picture begins upended, seen from the perspective of inmates in a juvenile detention center: they are hanging upside-down from exercise bars. (Strictly speaking, *trans* begins with a credits shot of a whirling merry-go-round at night, motion for its own sake.) The juvie facility is home to a 16-year-old, Ryan Kazinski, played by Ryan Daugherty. Like that other famous Kazinski, Ryan is smart but somehow out of it – a dislocated kid just this side of normalcy. Out on a work crew one day, he escapes with a few others while a guard is distracted by a fistfight. The rest of the film is Ryan's flight, as he moves through Florida swamps, small towns, and gener-

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ally on an arc toward what might be his mother's home in Colorado.

Nothing as conventional as A-B-C exposition occurs in the juvie sequence; the film reveals its offbeat colors immediately. Then, the escape snaps the picture into life: the jagged rhythms are uncannily naturalistic, and although Goldberger eschews anything like the customary suspense of such a scene – no cross-cutting with pursuing guards or police, for instance – there's still a kind of crispness, a sense of discovery, to what is after all an "action sequence." Like a punk Kurosawa getting happy in the editing room, Goldberger stop-starts the flow with a beautiful slow-motion shot of the orange-clad inmates leaping toward freedom, a mysterious mist heaving through the background.

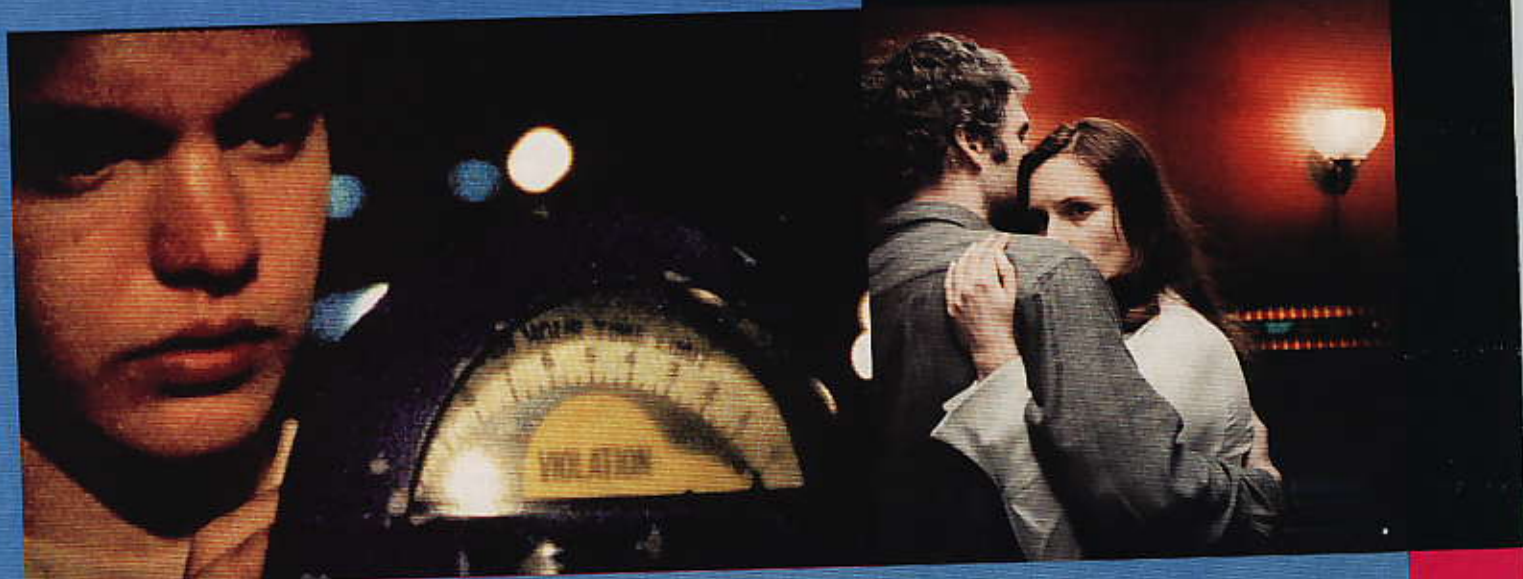
It isn't until the movie is half over that we learn Ryan had just one month left on his sentence, which makes his escape that much more absurd. Also, the mother in Colorado may or may not actually be in Colorado, so his quest for home is even more haphazard a journey. All of which fits the picture's soft, elliptical progress.

Since *trans* is a movie largely made of texture, the remarkably expressive 16mm cinematography of Jesse Rosen and the hypnotizing score are crucial to its effect. And it must be said that the director is mightily fortunate, or smart, to use the peculiar qualities of Florida, that exotic dream-cape of the South. (Goldberger grew up in Ft. Myers, the vicinity around which *trans* was shot.) The flatness of the land and the moodiness of the roiling skies give *trans* an arresting visual setting – a counterpoint to the sometimes banal behavior, the walking, sitting, moping, that constitutes its action. The story may shy away from melodrama, but the environment provides it. When Ryan and



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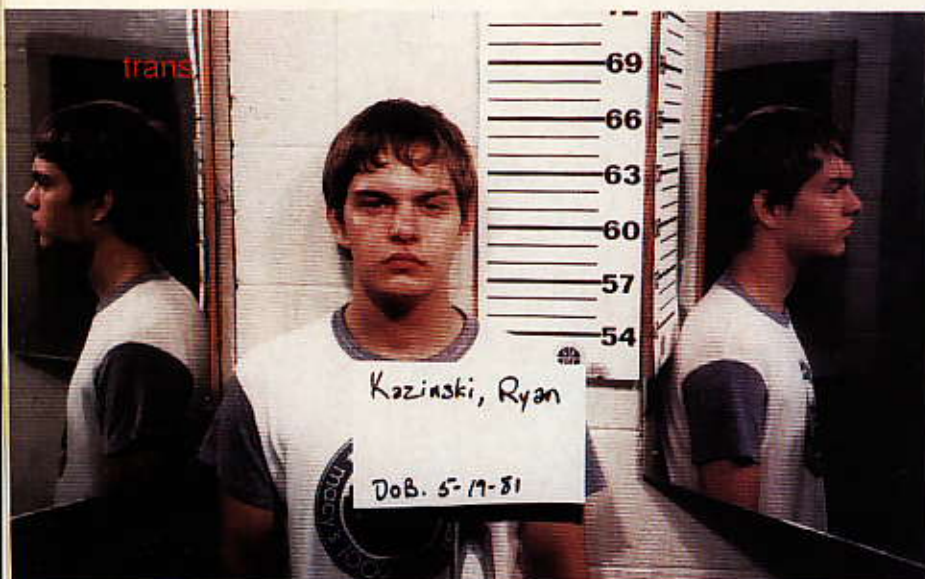
*clockwise from top left:*  
CLAIRE DOLAN  
and PAT CATCHER



his fellow escapees stumble abruptly into a swamp, it feels like an opening-out into mythical territory, even if it isn't in this movie's manner to overtly state things like that (although a late-in-the-film episode in which Ryan sets free some animals from their cages veers dangerously close to telling us something).

The movie is on a search, the same way Ryan is on a search. Thus Goldberger's playful variety of looks and rhythms, finding its own speed through bursts of fast motion or kooky non sequiturs. In one scene Ryan lands in a supermarket, huffing the fumes off a can of Reddi-wip, and some crazy stuff happens; he weaves around, he talks to a lady about corn, he sees a girl dancing by herself. It would be possible to frame this as some kind of heavy psychedelic experience, or as a portrait of Lost Youth. Instead, Goldberger takes a Richard Lester approach to the scene – in some essential way, he understands that the things you do in a supermarket when you're zonked are *funny*.

And a scene like that, antic and playful, works because most of the film is muted, drifting: Ryan settin' and jawin' with some good ol' boys on the porch of a country store, hitching a ride to a Mister Donut shop, talking with his brother. The film's improvisational method is on vivid display



in the scene at the country store, where the redneck guys are obviously spontaneous in their storytelling – an Errol Morris documentary (think *Vernon, Florida*, especially) folded into a fictional situation. At times in these jumpy sequences, the young actor Ryan Daugherty appears to forget the character he's playing, and just tries to hang on amid the joshing and tall-tale-telling. But that's the only slip in an exceptionally good lead performance; indeed, one of the selling points of the movie should be the cinegenic presence of this teenage actor. With his hair close-cropped and pants a-drooping, he slouches toward unmistakable indie stardom.

In casual description, *trans* sounds similar to the experimental, semi-improvised films of Harmony Korine; for instance, *trans* has an amusing scene with two lunkheaded inmates wrestling over the supposed body of a submerged alligator, which reminded me of the scene in *Gummo* where two youths beat each other, *really* beat each other, with their bare fists while laughing like a couple of idiots. Why does *Gummo* strike me as empty attitudinizing and *trans* feel like the real thing? *Gummo*'s pushy progress, its insistence on freakish extremes, speaks of both immaturity and exhaustion, while *trans*, all nuance and gliding observations, is open-ended. One contracts, the other expands.

As Ryan Kazinski gropes his way toward a home, he becomes less likely to arrive there. Except maybe he does get there, and maybe "trans" is home. That's a pretty good suggestion for a first film by a young do-it-yourself filmmaker. So why can't this movie find its home? ☺

## RATCATCHER

By Harlan Kennedy

All great sound movies aspire to a condition of silence. In time, memory washes away the sound effects, music, dialogue – though the glitziest of that will be stolen for posterity by kitsch-traders ("offer he can't refuse...," "round up the usual...," "bumpy night...") – leaving as eternal shore-wrack those images we can't forget. Music amplifies; dialogue explains; sound effects locate. But the greatness of a movie story lies in what *isn't* made audible, just hauntingly seen and remembered. *Vertigo*'s Scottie standing speechless on his Mission rooftop. *Kane*'s Rosebud burning as if that sled were at once the whole truth and a mockery of whole truths. In *L'Atalante*, a bride underwater, laughing mermaid-like at men's wrestlings with reality.

Lynne Ramsay's *Ratcatcher*, the best British feature debut in years, is full of silence and the poignancy of time. Set during a famous 1970s garbage strike, when black bags blobbed the land from Scotland to Land's End and rats thought Heaven had arrived early, the film all but equates detritus and disorder with life, and hope, order, cleanliness with death. Early on, a boy drowns in a muddy strip of urban canal. He is apparently unmourned, at least by 12-year-old James (bony-faced, lantern-jawed, pixilated-looking William Eadie), who pushed him under the water during a fight and fled rather than stay to rescue him.

The death reverberates so deep inside him that we have to guess at its sounds, peer at its half-hidden movements. Its explicit resonance exists only in a mother's cameo'd grief and in taunts from

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