

Matti Kuusniemi

From Trash to S(h)itcoms and Beyond

How I became (and remained) an independent movie maker

Me and my friends come from the same hoods as the makers of the internationally spread movies *Iron Sky* and *Star Wreck* – but we did not go commercial. I was 12 years old when I started to make films with my friends. A brief look at a journey through 25 years of making videos tells us about enthusiastic pre-teen kids borrowing their parents' video camera turning into grown-ups with semi-pro video cameras, creating content in a changing world, but remaining true to their original vision.

I remember first starting to get interested in movies through my friends **Ossi**, **Ville** and **Andres**, who were starting to collect VHS tapes in the beginning of the 1990s. Another big influence was my big brother who was four years older than I and liked to watch horror and action films and somehow managed to have access to tapes that were banned in Finland.

At first the focus of my interest was to watch scary and gory movies and see them all. Then at some point we also got interested in storytelling and started to draw comics with Ossi and Ville. The comics were also gory, but mostly just funny. We created a magazine called *SOB* (short for *Son of a Bitch*) and photocopied our comics to deliver to our sub-

scribers (we actually only had three or four subscribers from our class).

At some point, maybe in 1991 at the age of 12, I was spending my summer holiday at Saimaa lake with my parents at our trailer, and with my godfather's son we decided to film our own version of *Nightmare on Elm Street* with our parents' VHS-C camera. We attached some butter knives to a glove and had fun shooting scenes all around the campsite.

Later that year, we spent a day at Ossi's home filming *Good Taste 1* (obviously taking the name from **Peter Jackson's** *Bad Taste*). As you may imagine, the quality was awful; the screen would turn into green whenever there was low light, and in Finland light is a rarity during the winter. We were happy with the result and decided to do more of the same in the coming years.

For many years our productions were pretty much the same: someone goes mad for some reason and randomly starts butchering the neighbourhood's kids (lots of ketchup and black currant juice splattered all over).

We also played the parts of parents, police, judges and others, but when you look at our videos at that time, it's kids playing and having

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fun. The reason for doing violent movies was just a natural one, we took influence from the banned movies we had watched, and it felt more exiting than doing comedy or drama. Our home movie “company” had various names in the beginning – for example, Erno’s Home Video (because it just sounded funny) and HVH-Home Video Hervanta (because we lived in a Tampere suburb called Hervanta that at in the past was notorious for a variety of social problems).

Discovering trash

In 1995 we wanted to shed our skin and came up with the name Trash Video, and that sounded just right. Sure, we knew what “real” trash-movies were even then, but I don’t think we ever decided to make trash intentionally.

The common denominators of trash movies are a low budget, a sort of carelessness towards what most people regard as quality, and willingness to mix or misuse different genres. *Toxic Avenger* and some other Troma-movies were on our watchlist, and perhaps even some Filipino-action-flicks, and Fred Williamson chewing on his cigars, but still we just wanted to make movies like those we had fun watching. Trash Video just sounded like an honest interpretation of our work and didn’t make

any promises of artsy or cultural content.

I guess our movies were (and still are) trash, but with a sincere premise of just having fun and not being afraid to let it show.

At the end of the 1990s, our movies had developed more, our camera was a bit better and we had a lot of experience in doing our stuff, and we knew our limits pretty well. During that time we started developing our content and our own skills as movie makers and started to challenge each other to do better.

We started to film some other genres and moved more from forest-splatter into action and gang-movies where content was not only saturated with blood and gore, but with alcohol and bad language, too. A real step-up.

Y2K and the digital revolution

From the turn of the millennium to the end of 2017 is a long time for someone to grow up.

At the millennium, we were about 21 and moving from the military service to universities around Finland. Who we were then was a very different thing from who we are today, but same goes with the so-called indie movie industry in Finland.

When we first sent our movies to *Gorehound* – one of the few Finnish movie mags in the late 1990s – and saw them get reviewed



TRASH VIDEO

Trash Video has produced 8 VHS and 10 DVD's between 1997 and 2014.



JOHN PALMEN

A hose and a lot of black currant juice is all you need to make bloody budget-action. A scene from the shooting of the video *Nato Commando*, summer of 2005.

in a printed magazine, it was so cool. We put out an ad to sell our movies via the mail, and I guess we made a few sales too.

Mailing and copying VHS tapes was the only way to show your work to anyone who wanted to see it. It also made it possible for us to order some movies made by other folks around the country. Seeing other people's movies gave us confidence: we're not that bad, let's do better still.

The digital age started to take hold, and we wanted to acquire a digital video camera. Those things were expensive, but via surprising circumstances a casual acquaintance of ours had come across a stolen Digi8-camera – the camera had a hole in the bottom as it had been ripped from a store-stand – and asked us if we were interested in buying it for a good price. Sure we were, and that's how we stepped onto the digital train. Our first movie shot with the digicam was *Summer of Action* (2000), a test short that had a image quality to blow our minds.

Before this we had edited all our movies with two VHS players, an analogue sound board, cassette/minidisc player and Amiga500 home computer (Amiga was used only for titles, logo animations and gun sounds).

Moving to digital non-linear editing was like unleashing ten years' worth of frustration from sitting on the floor of my room with Ville and trying to adjust audio levels with my fingers and hit the VCR record button with my toes just at the right moment so we wouldn't lose many seconds of action due to a lagging analogue recorder.

And at best that editing resulted in second or third generation copies and destroyed whatever quality there was in the original shot analogue footage. Now everything would be up to us and our movies could be just as good as anything out there if we just had the right content.

THE WEB¹

In 2000 I got into a college to study TV and video production, which was actually my last choice after being an art teacher or an industrial designer.

Now I had to get myself a PC and was happy that I had worked all summer cutting grass in Hervanta so that I could now afford

1. Articulated with just as much respect and gloomy realisations towards the subject matter as Jeff Bridges' opening lines from *Tron: Legacy* (2010). (See <http://youtu.be/SxvJfOBu5tE>.)

to buy one that could handle editing software. Non-linear editing was now getting cheaper, as were the cameras. I had already learned most things in my first school year doing movies on my own, so there was a lot of time and energy to make our own movies after school.

The Internet was also starting to gain momentum as a medium to distribute video content. We had made our first website sometime in the late 1990s while in upper secondary school, but now Ville was studying programming and web content creation, so it was possible to really boost our web presence and stand out in comparison to the few other movie groups that we knew about (although it wasn't a race).

We also started to do things in co-operation with some of the other production teams to incorporate their best aspects into our own work. We were also sometimes asked to shoot small inserts into other groups' projects. This way we could spread word of what we were doing.

The core of the Trash Video team was much the same as in 1995. Some of us started to focus on other hobbies and some outsiders started to become more active in our movie making. The fun of it all had remained throughout the years, so when we had outsiders joining in one of our movies who started to fight and yell at each other off-camera after an accidental bruising while shooting a fight-scene I found it very disturbing.

I guess we were pretty deep in our own bubble. It seemed like other people didn't understand why we were there making this movie. It was not work, it was not something to get angry about. It was to spend quality time together, achieve something, doing the best we could, but not at any cost.

Sure, there had been earlier cases of occasional frustration among our own crew too, mostly due to drinking on-set or the day before, or both. But we always understood that we were all here because we wanted to be, no one forced us there and none of us was getting any other compensation than the emotional high of yet another successful day at the shoot.

So through the years we had accumulated

quite a lot of different skills in our crew, from web design to graphics and 3D animation to composing music and of course quite a lot of experience in lighting, filming and editing. Most of the skills we learned from scratch just by trial and error. The more we knew, the more we wanted to learn, not consciously perhaps, but by setting higher goals and pushing each other further.

As we were studying or working in different cities, we had more time to plan and less time to spend on location. This kind of scheduling also gave us a chance to spend time doing other stuff too and one thing that we came up with was a webzine for all Finnish movie makers. Ville coded a website Findieffat.org and we wrote some articles related to filmmaking, tutorials, reviews of movies and then added the most important thing: the forum.

The forum quickly gathered a good audience and there was a lot of talk about movies and movie making. At best there were about five to ten other movie groups that I could name from memory and knew some of their movies. In total there were probably between 40 and 60 groups listed in some of our *Findieffat* and other services that were later also popping up (*Finfilms* and *Digivideo* to name a couple). It was suddenly much easier to share thoughts and have conversations.

YouTube still didn't exist, at least not in any form that would be useful to us, so the Internet was just a more graphical extension of the IRC (Internet Relay Chat).

Film festival

Around the same time, Tampere International Film Festival started to organize an annual Trash Movie Festival, and of course we were there. I'm quite sure we had one movie shown every year and it was also a nice event with thirsty friends and a full house of interested people.

In 2005, me, Ville and a few guys from other filmcrews got together and founded the Finnish Independent Movie Association – *Findie*. We started to work with Tampere Film Festival to arrange these annual Trash

Festivals and also some other events around Finland. Trash Movie Festival became Tampere Underground Film Festival (TUFF) and it's still held every year in Tampere during the festival week in March. Ville is still the main authority for movie selections of the TUFF.

This association works and of course our relentless moviemaking gave us something of a profile and we did a few interviews a year and that helped us to fill the local cinema on the day of the premiere. That also (I hope) made the whole moviemaking hobby more well known and got more people involved in it.

The BIGGER picture

After finishing college in 2003 I founded a company called 3Dolli with my former teacher.

Making movies was never a realistic goal for a day job. I could see very early on that it's a perfect hobby, but a lousy day job.

The only exception to this thinking was our *Partyboys* project in 2006-2008. The Trash Video team decided to make a 13-episode s(h)itcom for which we had made a few pro-to-episodes earlier. We decided to buy HD cams, rent a flat and put real effort into producing a TV-quality series with 100 percent

pure Trash Video content. The idea was to produce the first season cheaply by ourselves and then sell it to some Finnish TV-network and get the second season financed with a real budget.

We worked almost every weekend and had something like 70 filming days over one and a half years. The material was just as sick as we wanted, but later when we contacted TV networks no-one was interested.

We finally got the first season to premiere at a small digital TV station with no compensation. It was better than nothing and enough to create an underground audience, but it ended all of our thoughts of expanding movies from a hobby to something more. In retrospect, I don't know if that's a good or a bad thing.

The way of the new world

Scheduling is one thing that becomes harder when you get older. Getting a bunch of guys to the same location takes careful planning and nerves of steel. Though we had plenty of practice of scheduling from *Partyboys*, our later projects were different. We decided to focus on short movies instead of feature-length videos. To improve our odds of getting a crew on



Tope (Antti Murtonen) is threatening Kipe (Matti Kuusniemi) while Jammu (Andres Pass) is waiting for his turn. A scene from *Partyboys* (2008).



TRASH VIDEO

The release party for Partyboys with friends and crew in the summer of 2008.

location we hooked up with *Insane Bastards*, a film crew that had pretty much retired from movie making of their own, but we're still interested in being a part of a co-op with us. We went out to do a sci-fi trilogy, three movies released in 2010, 2012 and 2014.

In 2015 we came up with the idea of starting to make a web series called *VideoCop*. This time our core crew was even smaller, but that helped us to develop our workflow towards more efficient production. The series enabled us to make short movies in various genres to help keep things interesting and a chance to explore new genres (at the time of writing we're at episode 3, which is a hammer-horror style monster-mash. Episode 1 was a commando movie and episode 2 a western).

The history of Finnish independent cinema, of course, consists of many movies even before the video era, but the advent of affordable video cameras at the turn of the 1990s really started a new boom. While technology advanced and prices came down, the cameras became more common and hobbyists got hold of them. The real renaissance of indie movies in my opinion was between 2000 and 2010.

Around the end of this era most of the pioneers were out of the scene and the overall community had spread around the Internet. The crowds at events started to slowly diminish and social media brought a million other things to distract people with. Although Trash Video has a pretty solid online audi-

ence, I personally don't value that very highly because it's too easy to support anything by clicking on the web. However, I do value 100 percent people who show up to live events like premieres or even take the few minutes to comment our releases.

At that time Finnish independent movie scene also started to produce some titles that received international interest. Young independent movie makers like **Timo Vuorensola**, also from the Tampere region, made movies that got millions of views on YouTube and started to move their goals towards more commercial projects.

The Finnish films *Iron Sky* (2012) by Timo Vuorensola, *Rare Exports: A Christmas Tale* (2010) by **Jalmari Helander** and *Star Wreck: In the Pirkinning* (2005) by **Samuli Torssonen** can still be called independent since their production was not done conservatively but with the help of crowdsourcing and -funding, and they also might include some small trash elements, but personally I think money plays way too big a role in these kind of production for them to be interesting as examples of contemporary independent movie making in Finland. But it's perhaps just me, as I said before I have never seen movie making as work but more like a passion.

Trash Video's budgets for shorter movies (less than 30 minutes) have usually been under 1,000 euro. The biggest budget was of course for *Partyboys* season 1 (total of over 280 min-

utes over the episodes) which cost about 8,000 euro, but that included the new HD-camera equipment and rental costs for the apartment that took a big slice of the cake. The *Partyboys* project was financed together inside our team and we even started a company to give the project credibility.

Everything done before and after this was typically financed by the small streams of euros coming in from our DVD-sales. We sold a little over 2,000 DVDs between 2003 and 2015. After shutting down our webshop in 2015 we've been financing the productions by ourselves and partly with our businesses.

I think making movies is a great hobby, even if "hobby" as a word might not be comprehensive enough to express its character. It can include all kinds of art, project management, problem solving and lots of creativity.

One could think that blood, sweat and tears are what movie making is about, but as I see it there's certainly been a lot of sweat (but, hey, you sweat while doing workout too and it's a good thing) but on top of that mostly just laughter, deep life-long friendships and a healthy evolution of skills, goals and ambitions.

As always, we're still making movies just for ourselves and have fun doing it. Our movies can still be called trash, but it's hard to describe why, probably it's because we're still not interested in aiming our films at mainstream audiences and are still happy to reject any good taste.

Doing our best with minimal resources has resulted time and again in surprising but entertaining results, and I bet it will in the future, too.