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A Strange Mirror: Realism, Ambiguity and Absence in the work of Harmony Korine

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the work of Harmony Korine with a particular focus on his use of realism as a disruptive critical tool. My study combines a theoretical and an analytical project. My aim is to defend Korine’s works against charges of naïve realism by revealing the limits of a structuralist approach to Korine’s realism and arguing, instead, for the adoption of the phenomenologically grounded, realist criticism of André Bazin. I use Bazin’s observations about the referential or indexical relationship between the camera and the physical world and his definition of ‘phenomenological realism’ to argue for a privileged and fruitful relationship between Korine’s realism and the physical or affective dimensions of the cinematic image. I supplement this discussion with a critical application of theories of affect forwarded by such theorists as Vivian Sobchack and Laura U. Marks, as well as theories of the grotesque. In addition, my thesis extends the links that Bazin draws between the restraint defining phenomenological realism and a productive ambiguity to argue that, rather than presenting an unsophisticated realist approach, Korine’s realism operates as the primary critical tool in a confrontation with dominant sign systems and, ultimately, with the limitations of both verbal and filmic language.

My thesis examines three films: Kids, Korine’s screenwriting debut, Gummo, his first attempt at directing and julien donkey-boy, which Korine directed in line with the rules of Dogma 95. My analysis of Kids demonstrates the difference between phenomenological realism and the classical Hollywood model of realism which is so often criticized for using realism to disguise an ideological argument. Drawing on Bazin’s discussion of Italian neorealism, I explore the deflection of importance from narrative arrangement onto physical appearances in Kids. This chapter introduces the role of the grotesque and carnivalesque in Korine’s work and reveals the film’s emphasis on sex, ‘vulgar’ bodily acts and explicit violence as an important device in the film’s critique of dominant constructions of whiteness.
My analysis of *Gummo* explores how a play with documentary and fictional modes, operates along with sensual excess and an emphasis on grotesque physical anomaly, to destabilize commonsense ideas about the ethics of representation and to foreground and denaturalize dominant sign systems that play an important role in normative American identity construction.

My analysis of *julien donkey-boy* considers the relationship between the indexicality of photographic realism and the threat of death and absence. I critique Vivian Sobchack's arguments about sensual affect and use my analysis of this film to counter her argument against what she sees as a current theoretical overemphasis on the role of absence and lack in our sensual engagement with the cinema. Rather, the restraint demanded by *julien donkey-boy*’s adherence to the Dogma 95 conventions encourages an engagement with the inadequacy of verbal language and with the partiality of the cinematic referent. By drawing on Laura U. Marks’s definition of haptic cinema, I show that the partiality of the cinematic referent may be revealed through an emphasis both on the indexical elements of the photographic image and through the cultivation of sensory longing.
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Introduction

I'm obsessed with realism. The only thing that matters to me in film and artwork is realism or the presentation of realism. But, at the same time, I realize that film can never be real and that movies are never real, even documentary falls short. (Korine 1997a: par 6)

I wanted to make my own movies the way they should be made. More like a collage or a tapestry. Something more like a feeling. Something that you are affected by. (Korine 1997a: par 3)

My interest in the work of the controversial screenwriter and director, Harmony Korine, was sparked not only by the compelling originality of his films, but because his unorthodox filmmaking poses exciting questions and challenges for the theory and practice of film analysis, particularly with regard to issues of realism. My project in this dissertation is two-fold. On the one hand, I aim to rescue Korine from critical disdain and dismissal on the grounds of his supposedly naïve realism and exploitativeness. On the other hand, I use Korine's work to explore the limitations of semiologically based approaches to film analysis, arguing instead for the applicability of the phenomenologically inflected realist criticism of André Bazin. My thesis, thus, involves a dialectical exchange between a theoretical investigation and an analytical project, in which my analyses of Korine's films provide an occasion to test my theoretical arguments, while my exploration of theory provides valuable insights into Korine's filmmaking.

In the quotations that open this introduction, Korine defines his own approach to cinema. His comments highlight several features of his style that will form key entry points for my discussion. Firstly, Korine announces, somewhat paradoxically, his passionate interest in realism as "the only thing that matters" while admitting that true realism is impossible. The complexity of Korine's approach to questions of realism has far too often been ignored by critics. Instead of dismissing Korine's attachment to realism as deceit or naïvety, I aim to consider the ways in which Korine knowingly makes use of the
difficulties and ambiguities that attend attempts at realism to produce a disquieting assault on mainstream aesthetics and ideologies. Ultimately, I will show that Korine uses the inadequacies of cinematic realism to problematise representation in general.

Secondly, Korine announces the importance of cultivating an affective response from audiences while rejecting traditional approaches to narrative structure in favour of a "tapestry" or "collage". I will connect these aspects of Korine's aesthetic to his particular approach to realism. Korine's films foreground bodily excess and filth while offering little comment on these provocations by means of narrative. My contention is that Korine sees the realism of cinema as an opportunity to engage with the physical dimensions of his subject matter and to communicate with viewers through the affective appeal of the image rather than through an articulate system of signs.

When he was 19 years old, Harmony Korine, then college drop-out, film buff and skater, agreed to write the script for photographer Larry Clarke's directorial debut *Kids* (1995). Thus began a creative collaboration that was to launch the adolescent's filmmaking career. Korine gained widespread notoriety when *Kids* made its appearance on the festival circuits. In this early screenwriting exercise Korine's potential to polarise critics and arouse controversy was evident. While *Kids* was the talk of the Sundance festival and gained the admiration of respected filmmakers like Gus van Sant, the film was widely denounced by critics as exploitative, perverted, racist and sexist (Giroux 2002; hooks 1996). In the midst of the controversy Harmony Korine has been characterised as everything from the "last foot soldier" in the battle for good cinema (Werner Herzog cited in Korine 1999: 10) to a hyperactive brat with an inflated ego (Pride 1997: par2).

The fame he garnered from *Kids* allowed Korine to direct his first film *Gummo* (1997). This was followed by *julien donkey-boy* (2000), an exercise in Dogma 95 filmmaking. But controversy was to follow Korine into this next phase of his career. His more radical directorial work created an even greater split in critical opinion than did *Kids*. Janet Maslin of the *New York Times*, a writer who had praised *Kids*, slates *Gummo* as "the worst film of the year" (Maslin 1997: 1) and accuses Korine of exploitation: "Korine
casts non-professional actors, often freakish individuals whom the film flaunts contemptuously…” (Maslin 1997: 2). And even Korine’s one time collaborator, Larry Clark, dismissed *Gummo* and describes *julien donkey-boy* as “probably the worst thing [he’s] seen in [his] life” (Clark in O’Sullivan 2003: par 11). On the other hand, Gus van Sant has sung Korine’s praises on numerous occasions, having gone so far as to pronounce that *Gummo* “makes [him] want to create a film that is just like it” (1997: par 5). Werner Herzog is another filmmaking great who admires Korine’s work and has lent his acting skills to two of Korine’s projects. Mette Hjort and Scott MacKenzie celebrate *julien donkey-boy’s* experimental approach to the Dogma rules and cite the film as one of the few international Dogma 95 films of quality (2003: 9) calling it "one of the only non-Danish dogma success stories" (10).

Korine’s latest film, *Mister Lonely*, was released in May this year (2007) after an eight-year hiatus from filmmaking. From the few reviews of the film available at this stage it seems *Mister Lonely* has been met with the same critical dismissal that greeted *Gummo* and *julien donkey-boy*. However, as J.J. Murphy aptly notes, if critical trends are anything to go by then disdainful reactions to Korine’s latest film may be the marker of yet another startling and provocative piece of cinema (2007: par 9).

Korine is by no means prolific as a feature filmmaker, having produced only three films since his rise to fame with the 1995 release of *Kids*. Despite his relatively low output of films, Korine has been engaged in a number of curious creative projects outside the ambit of feature filmmaking. Korine likes to regard his repertoire of artistic engagements as a “unified aesthetic” (Korine 2000a: 273). His other directorial work includes music videos for Sonic Youth and Bonnie “Prince” Billy and a television special called *Above the Below* (2003) featuring Korine’s good friend, the magician, David Blaine. In addition, this dynamic individual has tried his hand at experimental visual art and has written a novel called *A Crack Up at the Race Riots* (1998). Like his films, this novel is highly unconventional in form. Daniel Kraus describes the work as “a collection of one-page vignettes, sketches, snatches of dialogue, celebrity rumors, really bad jokes, suicide notes and imaginary letters from Tupac Shakur” (2000: par 1). Korine lent his banjo-playing
skills to the album *SSAB songs* and claims to be "trying to revive the tap dance scene by developing an entirely new repertoire of semi-improvised extremely technical, avant-garde dance structures" (*ibid*). In line with this aim he has produced experimental videos of himself tap-dancing in blackface. Korine has even declared that he intends to pursue unicycling professionally (Korine 1998b).

After completing *julien donkey-boy*, Korine embarked on a film called *Fight Harm* which combined his attraction to extremes in cinema with his provocative personal demeanour. *Fight Harm* was intended to be a feature-length filmic experiment in which Korine walks around and provokes people on camera to the point where they resort to physical violence. As a result of this enterprise Korine was hospitalized and received a two-and-a-half month prison sentence (this, at least, is what Korine told interviewer, Kuriko Sato). Needless to say, with only 15 minutes of footage to justify the filmmaker’s suffering, this project was put on the shelf (Korine 2001: par 39-42).

It is difficult to know how many of Korine’s claims are *bona fide*, some of them may well be examples of his more creative interpretations of his own biography -- a characteristic interviewers have come to expect from the young virtuoso. Korine’s personality is just as outrageous as his filmic imagination. Without changing his deadpan tone Korine switches from sincere discussions of his work to blatant fabrications. When pressed about his background in an interview for *Indiewire* magazine Korine declared: “My parents are Trotskyites. They used to firebomb empty houses. They have kind of disowned me, my father more than my mother, because I refuse to make Marxist propaganda. But they're nice people” (Korine 1997a: par 9).

As Frank Broughton from *I-D* magazine notes, Korine is a self-confessed fibber:

His father drifts from being a preacher to a Vaudevillian entertainer to a documentarian, and Harmony talks about his own time "in the carnival" and you don't know whether he was there as a sword-swallowing rubber-boy who ate razor blades, or just as a kid watching his father make documentary films. (Broughton 1995: par 5)
In his perpetual clowning and license with the truth, Korine seems to extend his “unified aesthetic” into his own self presentation. Along with his often obtuse responses to questioning, Korine’s chaplinesque bumbling gait, peculiar dress sense, rumoured flirtations with amphetamines and his widely hyped romance with New York “it” girl, Chloe Sevigny, have granted him a cultish notoriety. Both his films and his behavior are influenced by vaudeville performances, magic shows and the work of minstrels like Al Jolson and comics like Jerry Lewis and Milton Berle. The real unifying feature of all of Korine’s enterprises is the vision he has of himself playing the role of a clown and a conjurer. Korine comments, "... above all, I'm a trickster, someone who tricks or someone who makes you believe, a magician" (Korine 1997e: par 5).

Trickster figures or idiots savants feature prominently in all of Korine’s films; from the playful trouble makers at the centre of Kids, through the hillbillies and misfits of Gummo, to the schizophrenic protagonist in julien donkey-boy. Clowning is the central element that links all of Korine’s activities and preoccupations. Throughout the history of literature the trickster figure has been known to threaten norms and disrupt standards of decorum. From Shakespeare to Chaplin, the fool has always been that figure in art whose eccentricities throw conventions into dramatic relief and in the process encourage startling insights. As William Willeford points out, the figure of the trickster operates both as a mirror to society and as a threat to boundaries and rational order (1969: 132). Because of their peculiar way of understanding and interacting with the world, fools can present an “antinatural or anticultural” (120) impulse, revealing the chaos and disorder of the universe that people try to understand through rational means (144). Most importantly fools incite ambiguity by confounding meaning and disrupting hierarchies. When Korine describes a trickster as “someone who makes you believe,” he relates this description of himself to his use of realism. Korine can be seen as a fool who uses realism to hold up a strange mirror to contemporary society. With this in mind we might understand Korine’s realism both as a way of confronting conventional aesthetics and as a means of provoking a productive ambiguity.
The ambiguity of Korine’s realism has been the object of many arguments against his work. Much of contemporary film analysis is based on Saussurean semiology and is geared to approach films as a structured arrangement of signs (Rosen 2001: 175). Philip Rosen points out that as a consequence of this trend it has become commonplace to disregard all kinds of realism as ideologically unsound (ibid). The popular argument seems to hold that it is irresponsible simply to represent things as “real” without offering reflexive comment on what you show by means of narrative arrangement and closure.¹ Seminal film theorist André Bazin, however, saw ambiguity as an essential feature of realism and as a powerful tool of cinematic communication (1967: 37).

For similar reasons that Korine’s films are often dismissed offhand as unsophisticated attempts at realism, realist theories of film like those of Bazin have been widely maligned in post-1970’s film theory (Rosen 2001: 6). After the rise of Saussurean semiotics, what Philip Rosen calls “Bazin bashing” (8) become common practice in writings on the cinema. Indeed many of Bazin’s claims for the ontological status of the photographic image do appear naïve. However, following Rosen, my study will reappraise Bazin’s work and endorse the view that his theory is far more nuanced than it may initially appear. It is also my aim to show how applicable Bazin’s ideas are to the analysis of contemporary films that engage with realism, where structuralist approaches are of limited use for films that exceed the concerns of narrative arrangement, symbolism and convention.²

Bazin praised a particular approach to realism evidenced in the films of the Italian neorealists for its formal openness. I will argue that the term that Bazin applies to the neorealist approach, “phenomenological realism” (1971: 87), can be used to describe the realism of Harmony Korine.

¹ See bell hooks’s argument against realism in *Kids*. I address hook’s claims in my chapter on the film.
² In this introduction I will offer only a brief overview of the ideas forwarded by Bazin that are applicable to my argument. The theoretical chapter that follows will provide a more detailed and qualified account of Bazin’s thinking.
Phenomenology is a school of philosophy that takes as its premise the idea that we can achieve knowledge of phenomena only through our senses. Phenomenological method involves a “bracketing” of the preconceptions, ideological beliefs and received ideas that cloud our apprehension of the nature of phenomena, in favour of fresh perception of the nature of the object world (Galway, 2002: 48). As Alemany-Galway points out, in Bazin’s thinking, cinema has a unique capacity for recording and representing the real world. Thus, Bazin saw film as able to reproduce the bracketing used in phenomenological reduction (54). Bazin writes:

Only the impassive lens, stripping its object of all those ways of seeing it, those piled up preconceptions, that spiritual dust and grime with which my eyes have covered it, is able to present it in all its virginal purity to my attention and consequently to my love. (1967: 14)

The cinema makes this possible because it features an automatic recording process which reproduces aspects of the phenomenal world without human interpretation (ibid).

According to Bazin, phenomenological realism is defined, not by verisimilitude, but by a certain restraint on the part of the director. Bazin understands the material universe as fundamentally ambiguous in relation to meaning. While mainstream approaches to filmic narration limit ambiguity by structuring reality according to a system of conventions and signs, phenomenological realism is an approach “which never ‘adjusts’ reality to meet the needs imposed by psychology or drama” (ibid).

Like the neo-realists whose phenomenological realism Bazin celebrates, Korine resists imposing clearly defined meanings on reality. The director complains of mainstream films: “They tell you exactly what to think...There's no margin of the undefined; it's all there for you”(Korine 1995: par 22). For Bazin, realism is not viewed as a means to an unmediated truth but rather as a way of introducing what Korine calls the “margin of the undefined” into one’s filmmaking. This thesis will explore the ways in which phenomenological realism works to cultivate that undefined margin that Korine finds missing from most films.

A vital and highly applicable aspect of Bazin’s thought is his interest in cinema as operating on two levels of expression. At the end of “The Ontology of the Photographic
Image,” Bazin writes, “On the other hand, of course, cinema is also a language” (1967:16). Bazin does not rule out the “linguistic” operations of film but rather explores the operations of the cinema as a dialectic between the coded meanings imposed by a director and the phenomenological appeal of the image (1971: 29-30).

Bazin’s recognition of these two different ways in which filmic images can be understood is vital for a consideration of Korine. Siegfried Kracauer hazards at the end of Theory of Film that “physical reality is revealed out of a desire to pierce the fabric of conventions” (1974: 308). I will argue that Korine sets up a dialogue between indeterminacy of meaning cultivated by a realist restraint and the determinacy of a host of symbols and references that feature in his films. In addition I will contend that Korine provokes a sensual response to the images onscreen as a way of complicating their status as signs. I will also pay attention to the connection between physical excess and an ambiguous relationship to meaning by drawing on theories of the grotesque advanced by thinkers such as Victor Hugo, Mikhail Bakhtin, Wolfgang Kayser and Geoffrey Harpham.

I contend, following these writers, that film can create a powerful sensual relationship between the viewer and images of the physical world. It is, however, equally important to recognize that cinema can never produce a complete approximation of lived experience. While the first part of my thesis is concerned with Bazin’s conception of the “ambiguity of reality,” the second half of this study takes Bazin’s understanding of the relationship between the filmic image and its referent as a point of departure. I will examine Bazin’s use of death imagery in “The Ontology of the Photographic Image” in order to show that Bazin really understands cinematic representation as haunted by the shadow of its missing referent. I will explore how Korine takes hold of the absence implied by realism in order to explore the inadequacies of language.

My study of the affective dimensions of the cinematic image are also greatly informed by the innovative work of Vivian Sobchack, who makes an impassioned argument for a consideration of our sensual engagement with the cinematic image. Like Bazin, Sobchack is influenced by phenomenology and places emphasis on cinema as ‘experience’ in place
of the narrow focus on the sign that dominates much film criticism. She expresses a well-founded dissatisfaction with the tendency in most film theory to separate our sensual experience of cinematic images from the mind and meaning. Sobchack's argues that "we have not yet come to grips with the carnal foundations of cinematic intelligibility" (2004: 59) and points out that our engagement with the meaning of cinematic images is not just a cognitive experience. The sensual appeal of filmic images plays an important role in the way that we draw meaning from them (63).

Sobchack is extremely valuable for my study because she is so concerned with embodiment and her thinking opens a number of fruitful avenues for discussion. However, as has often been the case with influential and bold new approaches to analysis, like Laura Mulvey's seminal application of psychoanalysis to feminist concerns in cinema or even Bazin's pioneering forays into film theory, Sobchack's originality also makes her vulnerable to criticism.

My major objection to Sobchack relates to the emphasis she places on sensory fullness and an immediate embodied relationship to onscreen images. Sobchack highlights the innate human capacity for synaesthesia--the ability to translate experience across the senses. She argues that our visual and aural engagement with the cinema draws a reaction from our whole sensorium. Thus, according to Sobchack "the subject both touches and is touched by the screen" (71). An appealing feature of Sobchack's work is the way in which she uses an emphasis on her own personal experiential and embodied engagements with cinema to open up a broad range of questions, including a consideration of the boundaries between documentary and fictional modes, but, most importantly, she uses a focus on embodiment to criticise conventional approaches to cinema.

For Sobchack, this embodied engagement with the cinema has the potential to complicate certain established ideas about cinematic communication. She writes that:

Our sensations and responses pose an intolerable question to prevalent linguistic and psychoanalytic understandings of the cinema as grounded in conventional codes and cognitive patterning, and grounded on absence, lack, and illusion (59).
I agree that a consideration of the role of the senses in cinema may complicate a conception of cinema as a system of coded signs. However, in opposition to Sobchack, I will contend that a consideration of the sensual appeal of cinema is not necessarily at odds with an understanding of the cinematic text as founded on lack and absence. On the contrary, my discussion of julien donkey-boy will combine a psychoanalytic approach with the work of Laura U. Marks’ (2000) to show that the sensory features of the cinematic image (and indeed my own embodied response to Korine’s cinema) can reveal and foreground lack.

I will be examining three films in this dissertation: Kids (1995), Gummo (1997) and julien donkey-boy (2000). I am, regrettably, not able to comment on Korine’s latest film, Mister Lonely (2007), which was released so recently that it is not yet being distributed in South Africa and is not available on DVD. Reviews suggest that Mister Lonely is less controversial than Korine’s earlier films in both subject matter and style. While Emmanuel Levy complains that he could not decipher, fully, what the movie was about, he describes it as a “romance between two misfits whose love is pure and whose happiness is interrupted by the outside reality” (2007: par 5) and notes that it, “like all of Korine’s pictures, is about an aggregate of colorful misfits, freaks, and outsiders” (par: 8). Levy also complains that toward the end the film “deteriorate[s] into a level of grotesque caricature”(ibid). While it may be less experimental, it would seem that this film displays similar concerns and aesthetic strategies that I highlight in Korine’s other work, namely grotesque tendencies and a self-conscious concern with questions of realism.

The first section of my thesis consists of a theoretical introduction and chapters on Kids and Gummo respectively while the second section features a theoretical introduction and much longer chapter on one film, julien donkey-boy. Julien donkey-boy is a remarkably complex text that prompted a detailed theoretical investigation. Julien donkey-boy also marks a certain maturation of Korine’s approach. The film heralds a move from experimenting with ambiguity to a confrontation with the very nature of representation.
Certain theoretical issues that pertain to each specific film are incorporated into the analytical chapters.

The first film that I analyse, *Kids*, was written by Korine and directed by Larry Clark while the last two films were written and directed by Korine. There are difficulties involved in looking for the marks of Korine’s aesthetic approach in a film directed by someone else. Korine has distanced himself from the film and from Clark after a dispute over *Ken Park* (2003), the film resulting from the second screenplay that Korine wrote for Clark. However, the naturalism of the dialogue and several eccentric elements of *Kids* are definitely attributable to Korine’s screenplay -- the original text of which is very close to Clark’s final product. I felt it important to deal with *Kids* because critical responses to this film so clearly articulate a certain kind of popular and critical discomfort about realism. At the same time, *Kids* is revealed as a more interesting and complex film when considered in the light of the grotesque and comedic elements of the realism that define Korine’s directorial work.3

My chapter on *Kids* will offer a detailed critique of bell hooks’s response to Larry Clark’s film. It is my contention that critics are objecting to the combination of realism and ambiguity that defines *Kids* without paying attention to the unconventional narration of this text. This attack on realism is a result of judging an unconventional film by standards set by the classical Hollywood paradigm – a model for filmmaking that offers its own ideological problems. While critics have found that narrative structure and narration do not provide any clear commentary on the disturbing images that abound in *Kids*, I will explore the way in which the physically disgusting images and sexual explicitness of *Kids* become a device for exploring the pathologies of the film’s white male protagonists. In addition I will consider the curious combination of documentary-style realism and grotesque imagery.

3 My exploration of Korine may be used as a case study for a realist trend within independent filmmaking. Many of the arguments I make about Korine are relevant to his contemporaries, filmmakers like Gus van Sant and Larry Clark (when he works without Korine) who also use realism in interesting ways. However in neither of these filmmakers’ work is there the same distillation of documentary-style realism, physical excess, semantic ambiguity, grotesque elements and unorthodox narration as is evidenced in Korine’s work.
Of Korine’s films, *Gummo* most obviously foregrounds his interest in tricksters. In his role as director, Korine the trickster constantly toys with the communicative tools of cinema. I will explore how Korine uses the properties of phenomenological realism to complicate the dominant symbols and aesthetics that construct aspects of American identity. Korine’s strategy involves a continuation of his appeal to grotesquerie and an irreverent play with the conventions of documentary and fiction.

While my study remains concerned with the expressive possibilities of a particular kind of realism, my chapter on *julien donkey-boy* moves on to consider the shadow of death, loss and absence that always haunts the immediacy of cinematic realism.
PART ONE

1. Bazin’s Phenomenology: Realism and Ambiguity

In photography, a mechanical process records the play of light and shadow on the object of the camera’s eye. For André Bazin, this automatic process means that the photograph has a special relationship with what it represents. Between the object and the camera there is no interpreting hand, only the ‘objective’ gaze of this mechanical recording device. Thus, argues Bazin, the photograph gives us proof that the material world it reproduces existed in that state at a certain time. He comments:

The objective nature of photography confers on it a quality of credibility absent from all other picture making. In spite of any objections our critical spirit may offer, we are forced to accept as real the existence of the object reproduced; actually re-presented, set before us, that is to say, in time and space. Photography enjoys a certain advantage in virtue of this transference of reality from the thing to its reproduction. (1967: 14)

As I suggested in my introduction, Bazin’s ardor for the realist properties of the cinematic image and his emphasis on the ontological status of the photographic copy, as expressed in statements like the one above, has lead many critics to dismiss him as unsophisticated. However, when Bazin writes that “cinema is also a language” (1967: 16), he makes clear his recognition of the processes of framing and authorship that play a role in all cinematic texts. As I mentioned in my introduction, Bazin’s use of the word also in this statement suggests that, as much as cinema may work through codes and conventions, it also offers viewers something more (Jerslev 2002: 51). I would like to

1 Since Bazin’s time new technologies allowing for the digital manipulation of images have cast a great deal of doubt on the credibility of photographic reproductions. However, trick photography was widely practiced long before the digital. It is important to understand that Bazin sees in photography and film the potential for an indexical relationship that some artists take advantage of and that others choose to defy.
call this ‘something’ phenomenological communication. Throughout this thesis I will be comparing the use of cinema’s phenomenological appeal to its communication through coded means. When referring to the phenomenological I will be using terms such as “experience” and “affect” while when discussing cinema as language I will be concerned with “symbols, “codes” and “conventions.”

I recognize that the division between the experiential and the linguistic is notoriously fraught. We do not experience anything without our perception being framed by language and language cannot escape its relationship to the real world and lived experience. Rather, as Derrida points out in his critique of Husserl’s phenomenological reduction, language and experience are always imbricated in each other. Derrida argues that no such thing as pure phenomenological intuition is possible because experience is temporal. Our every interface with the object of perception is determined by the memory or trace of experience that precedes our present moment of contact. Therefore experience itself relies on linguistic operations of substitution and repetition. Derrida writes; “The living present springs forth out of its nonidentity with itself and from the possibility of a retentional trace. It is always already a trace” (1973: 85). He continues; “Sense, being temporal in nature... is never simply present; it is always already engaged in the ‘movement’ of a trace, that is in the order of ‘signification’” (ibid). This does not mean that our experience of the world is reduced to language. Language itself necessarily involves a referential relationship to the world. In addition, as Vološinov\(^2\) points out, historical contingency plays a role in determining language (1989: 65). He objects to Saussure’s decision to rule spoken language (parole) out of the study of language in favor of a focus on language as a system of signs (langue) (Vološinov 59 – 61; 65 - 66). Vološinov argues that language is spoken, written and understood in an historical and ideological context (65 - 67). It is not a stable, enclosed system but “a ceaseless flow of becoming” (66).

\(^2\) There is some contention about the authorship of *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*. The work has often been attributed to Bakhtin (For example in the Bakhtin Reader by Pam Morris, 1997). I refer to Vološinov as the author following Ladislav Matejka and I.R. Titunik, \(^{59}\) whose translation of the original text I refer here.
However dubious the distinction between reality and language may be, there is a distinct difference for the subject between the lived experience of a phenomenon and the written account of that event or between the means of representation at play in a word and a photograph. I retain the distinction between the experiential and the linguistic because it is useful for understanding the different degrees of abstraction from the material base of experience that operate in verbal language and photographic reproduction. I use the word language in the way implied by Bazin’s use of the term-- to refer only to the arbitrary and conventional elements of signification. I do so in order to offer a clear contrast to the much neglected but equally important operations of reference and mimesis that are at play in all representation but which occupy a particularly important role in cinematic representation. I emphasise these “phenomenological” elements of a film’s appeal in opposition to a tendency to focus only on the sign.

Philip Rosen argues that such a tendency can be explained, in part, by the powerful influence of Saussurean linguistics on film studies. Theoretical perspectives such as “structuralism, semiotics, Althusserian Marxism, some tendencies in poststructuralism, psychoanalytic theory, and feminism” all contributed to a transformation of film studies in the late 60’s and 70’s” (Rosen 2001: 8). While these theories offer different permutations and critical reappropriations of Saussure’s thinking, they have in common a “principled antirealist conception of representation and textuality” (Rosen 2001: 8).

At the heart of Saussure’s linguistic theory is the concept of the purely arbitrary connection between signification and that which is signified (Saussure, 1959: 67). With reference to verbal language (Saussure’s chief concern), this means that the relationship between words and their meanings is arbitrarily defined by social conventions governing language systems. In addition, Saussure contends that words have meaning only through their relation to other words in the linguistic system (120). Saussure writes: "[I]n language there are only differences. Even more important: a difference generally implies positive terms between which the difference is set up; but in language there are only differences without positive terms" (ibid). Rosen points out that this idea allows Saussure to construct a highly abstract “closed system” for understanding language (Rosen, 1986:
4). Most importantly, Saussure's theory sidesteps a consideration of how signs make reference to the material world. As Rosen puts it, “Saussure moves to banish concern with the referent from the work of the linguist” (ibid).

When it comes to cinema, the idea of language as a differential system of arbitrary signs becomes more difficult to apply. Rosen points out that visual images complicate the idea that signification is based on an arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified. Visual signs “seem to be based on resemblance to a real-world object” (1986: 6) and cinema “appears at first glance to produce not just representations of reality but representations from reality” (ibid). In addition, rather than supporting the idea that language operates as a “system of difference” the cinema can also be seen as relying on a “positive relationship to something in the real world” (ibid) because, Rosen continues, “if cinema is primarily viewed as a photographic medium, there must be objects which can be filmed” (ibid).

This is what Bazin recognised in his engagements with the cinematic image. To describe the elements of filmic communication that operate in excess of coded language I will make use of two terms developed by the semiotician Charles Sanders Peirce: “icon” and “index” (Peirce 1955: 102). While Saussure’s theories of the sign have been a powerful influence on film studies, the ideas of C.S. Peirce are far more useful in accounting for the “something more,” or phenomenological aspect of cinematic communication. Saussure sees the relationship between signifier and signified as arbitrary, but Peirce identifies three different possible relationships between a signifier and its referent -- the icon, the index and the symbol. Like Saussure, Peirce sees the symbol as having a purely arbitrary relationship to that which it represents. But, in addition to this conventional relationship, signs may refer to their referents through relationships of contact and mimesis. An icon has a relation of similarity to its referent. It is a signifier that may look or sound like that to which it refers (1955: 102). Photographs have a very powerful iconic relationship to that which they represent, but one might argue no more so than an extremely accurate painting. What distinguishes the photograph from the painting is its role as index. This term accounts for the direct relationship of contact between the
photograph and object it represents. According to C.S. Peirce an indexical sign is “a sign which refers to the Object that it denotes by virtue of being really affected by that object” (ibid).

Film and photography have a powerful indexical function by virtue of their reliance on a mechanical recording process. Bazin delights in the automatic process of photography because it involves less interpretation than painting or writing. Coded language always comes loaded with received ideas, inflected by the speaker’s own context. But the object before the camera is reproduced by a machine that should, ideally, be without prejudice or preconceptions. While written communication connects the viewer to the referent through associations that are based on a linguistic code, there is a sense in which the cinema can actually reproduce elements of experience for the viewer. The indexical elements of the photographic image convince us that the objects before the camera existed at a certain time and the superior iconic features of photography allow the viewer to experience the onscreen world with a degree of visual detail and accuracy that makes it appear as if real. This capacity to re-present sensory experience is what prompts Bazin to consider cinema as a superior tool for phenomenological bracketing.

But, as many critics have pointed out, photographs and particularly films are almost always inflected with authorial intervention --“cinema is also a language.” Bazin’s conception of realism springs out of this realization. In order to preserve the phenomenological elements of a film’s address, a director must restrain himself from organizing the film according to conventions or symbols. As Philip Rosen points out, Bazin constantly contrasts two opposing attitudes toward the raw material of the world. He recognised in Italian neorealism an attitude of “respect” for the material of reality over an attitude of “manipulation” (2001: 4). The manipulative impulse in filmmaking involves planning “the significance for the spectator prior to the encounter of the camera with the profilmic” (2001: 4). Respect involves allowing the complexity of reality to inform the film. This approach demands a more active spectator whose job it is “to derive or experience the filmmaker’s communicative intentions” (2001: 5). Bazin described the second approach as “phenomenological” realism (1971: 87), because it strives to
reproduce, with minimum interpretation, the encounter between the human subject and the actual conditions of the material world (1971: 64-65):

...The Italian cinema has replaced "realism" deriving in point of content from the naturalism of novels and structurally from theatre with what for brevity's sake, we shall call "phenomenological" realism which never "adjusts" reality to meet the needs imposed by psychology or drama. The relation between meaning and appearance having been in a sense inverted, appearance is always presented as a unique discovery, an almost documentary revelation that retains its full force of vividness and detail. (Bazin, 1971: 87)

Rosen argues that Bazin's interest in the long take over editing is not simply a question of style. Rather it is in line with his approach to realism (2001:4). The more a film manipulates the image, the more inflected it is by the filmmakers' own ideas. "Manipulation" is connected to the imposition of a system of meanings planned by a director. "Respect" refers to the degree to which the director allows the profilmic field to inform his or her filmmaking (ibid).

It is important to note that Bazin's theory is very flexible. Bazin sees a central contradiction at the heart of filmmaking: "But realism in art can only be achieved in one way – through artifice" (1971: 26). While he admires Welles for his use of the long take, he understands that this process requires an expensive studio production and expert control of the material before the camera (27). Alternatively, Bazin celebrates Italian neorealist filmmakers for their use of outdoor settings even though the shooting conditions prohibit the dynamic deep focus shot set-ups mastered by Welles. Bazin explains that "[b]oth mark a decisive step forward in the direction of realism, but by different paths" (ibid).

Kaja Silverman describes Bazin's understanding of editing as a recognition of the ways in which language threatens an indexical relationship to the real world: "The transition from one shot to another threatens to disrupt this privileged relationship, to replace it with one which is arbitrary and artificial "(1988: 3). Bazin’s dispute with montage is linked to its relationship to the operations of language. As I noted earlier, language works with
preconceived ideas and associations. Bazin argues that the coding necessary to linguistic processes has the potential to prevent an authentic engagement with the material world in its fullest phenomenological dimensions. Montage relies on the juxtaposition of coded meanings and enhances the symbolic dimensions of the images over their phenomenological appeal. For example, in *Strike* (1925), Eisenstein cuts between shots of peasants being killed and shots of cattle being slaughtered. The cattle have no diegetic link to the story but operate to create a metaphorical relationship with the peasants in order to describe their killing as inhumane slaughter.

At the heart of Bazin’s theory is an opposition between conventional or symbolic expression and phenomenological mimesis. Bazin expresses a disdain for conventional or symbolic expression: “Look carefully at bad films and you will see that they are composed of nothing but symbolism and signs, of conventions, of dramatic, moral and emotional hieroglyphs. It is this fact which lends a certain validity to the common critical standard which considers ‘realism’ as a criterion of quality” (1971: 84 – 85). Such comments would, in part, explain Bazin’s hostile attitude toward the orchestration and conventionality of melodrama when he describes the Italian cinema as haunted by the “demon of melodrama” (1971: 31). Bazin would probably find little merit in the work of a filmmaker like Quentin Tarentino whose excessively intertextual works of postmodern pastiche like *Kill Bill Vol. 1* (2003) are constructed from a combination of generic types and formulas. On the other hand, Bazin praises the way in which certain filmmakers make use of the ‘real’ in order to produce an abstract meaning. Using nature as a metaphor Bazin describes the way that De Sica presents meaning in cinema in opposition to conventional filmmaking:

> Put salt into water, let the water evaporate in the fire of reflection, and you will get back the salt. But if you find salt water drawn directly from a stream, it is because the water is salty by nature. (1974: 68)

For Bazin realism is “valuable only in so far that it brings increased meaning (itself an abstraction) to what is created” (85). He praises Jean Renoir for balancing a commitment to realism with the expression of more abstract meaning. Renoir often derives his play of
themes from the object world rather than always manipulating the world to fit the meaning he aims to express. In a description of the final scene of *Boudu saved from drowning* (1932), Bazin celebrates the way in which such natural phenomena as water and dust come to have a direct phenomenological impression on him while at the same time communicating the themes of the film.

> [T]he camera picks up a bit of grass where, in close-up, one can see distinctly the white dust that the heat and the wind have lifted from the path. One can almost feel it between one’s fingers. Boudu is going to stir it up with his foot. If I were deprived of the pleasure of seeing *Boudu* again for the rest of my days, I would never forget that grass, that dust, and their relationship to the liberty of a tramp. (1974: 86)

Renoir has found his symbolism in an entirely organic moment derived from nature. It is up to the viewer to make the connection between the dust and the idea of freedom through his or her own engagement with the phenomenal world revealed by the film. It is this relationship to the viewer that, in Bazin’s estimation, unites the aesthetic attitudes of a diverse range of filmmakers. Welles, De Sica, Rossellini and Renoir all leave open for the viewer the “margin of the undefined” and leave the viewer to derive meaning from their experience of the appearances of the onscreen world.

**The Ambiguity of Reality**

The most important effect of phenomenological realism, in all its forms, is ambiguity. As Mary Alemany-Galway explains, Bazin understood that the “indexical and iconic nature of the film medium” is important precisely because it “allows the filmmaker to let the ambiguity of reality become a part of the film’s message as experienced by the viewer” (2002: 56) and Bazin recognized that the restraint of phenomenological realism best accommodates such an encounter.

The term, ambiguity, refers to a multiplicity of meanings and, importantly, to difficulty in ascribing one finite meaning to a phenomenon. Ambiguous narratives might well be viewed as problematic for creating a dangerous moral uncertainty (as is the case in the criticisms of *Kids* that I address in the next chapter). Why would Bazin see ambiguity as a useful artistic tool?
Bazin’s use of the term might better be understood in relation to his engagement with phenomenology. Ambiguity was a central feature of the philosophy of French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Like Bazin, Merleau-Ponty asserted that experience is in itself ambiguous. He writes: "...ambiguity is of the essence of human existence and everything we live or think has always several meanings" (1966:169).

As S.F. Sapontzis points out, Merleau-Ponty emphasises the role of ambiguity as a way of counterpointing rationalist reductions of experience into abstract theory. Merleau-Ponty uses the term ‘ambiguity’ to refer to phenomena which “do not have definite, identifiable essences” (1978: 540). For Merleau-Ponty, phenomenology is a way of unmasking reality from the ways in which we usually organise experience, in order to reveal the indefinite and muddled nature of the relationship between the world and the meanings that human beings draw from it. He contends that phenomenological reflection “alone is consciousness of the world because it reveals that world as strange and paradoxical” (1966: xiii).

The same can be said for Bazin’s use of the term to describe a particular function of cinema. In the case of cinematic realism, ambiguity describes a resistance to the abstraction of material phenomena into more finite systems of symbolic meaning. This becomes evident in his descriptions of neorealism:

Whether in the service of the interests of an ideological thesis, of a moral idea, or of a dramatic action, [classic] realism subordinates what it borrows from reality to its transcendent needs. Neorealism knows only immanence. It is from appearance only, the simple appearance of beings and of the world, that it knows how to deduce the ideas that it unearths. It is a phenomenology. (Bazin, 1971: 64 – 65)

Bazin’s analyses of the Italian neorealist films reveal a number of ways in which ambiguity can be a productive aesthetic tool. By making use of realist ambiguity, neorealist filmmakers recognized the complexity of experience that Merleau-Ponty describes and invited this element into their cinema.
But both Bazin and Merleau-Ponty's descriptions of the role of ambiguity suggest another important result of the indefiniteness of a phenomenological realism. Ambiguity grounded in concrete material conditions has the potential to draw attention to the irreducibility and indefiniteness of experience in general and thus it stands as a critique of conventional, habituated and ahistorical ways of understanding experience. Importantly, this resistance is intimately related to the irreducible contingency of physical experience, or as Bazin puts it “the simple appearance of beings and of the world.” My first two analytical chapters will explore how Kids and Gummo mobilize a certain ambiguous realist restraint in order to exercise this oppositional, demythologizing potential.

In addition to reading meaning primarily from the films’ use of conventions, the arrangement of the narrative, character types and symbols, my analyses will focus, especially on the ambiguous phenomenological elements of each film’s address. I am concerned, as was Bazin, with the representation of appearances and the films rendering of the physical dimensions of the raw material world. My analysis will pay particular attention to the relationship between the physical dimensions of cinema and the ambiguity that invigorates this kind of realism.
2.

Reading the Realism of *Kids*

Larry Clark's directorial debut, *Kids*, engendered much critical attention for its original use of a documentary-style realism and explicit sexuality. These two features of the film have been the object of both delight and much scorn from critics, but have received very little serious critical consideration. This analysis will intervene in the debate around *Kids* by focusing on elements of the film that have been dismissed as stylistic excess or perversion. I will suggest that in place of the rigorous dramaturgy, closure and intentionality of mainstream cinema, *Kids* features a kind of realism that derives its critical force from a focus on the material world it represents and particularly from an interest in functions of the body. I will put particular emphasis on the way in which these features aid a critical investigation of urban alienation and white masculine identity. My study will deploy the realist critical theory of André Bazin as outlined above. I will also draw on explorations of the grotesque mode by Mikhail Bakhtin and Wolfgang Kayser to shed some light on the bodily emissions, hedonistic consumption and sex that are so abundant in *Kids*.

*Kids* begins with a candid close-up of two sweaty teenagers embroiled in a long sloppy kiss. The shot is lit so as to highlight the beads of sweat on their foreheads and the prolonged kiss is accompanied by slurping sounds of saliva against busy tongues. In the shocking scene that follows, Telly, the gawky teenage antihero of the film, convinces the very young girl he has been kissing to sleep with him. They have awkward unromantic sex, complete with clumsy slapping sounds and earnest objections from the girl. While she pleads, "Stop Telly, it hurts" the unpitying young boy grinds away with his eyes shut in a contorted expression of self-absorbed pleasure. The scene is discomfortingly intimate and infused with blatant misogyny. Many similarly unsettling scenes take place throughout the rest of the film. In this scene Telly's violence is oriented toward a young woman but throughout *Kids* the viewer is made to witness, with overwhelming visceral
assault and deadpan documentary realism, either Telly’s or Casper’s aggression or
dominance toward the ‘other.’

It is such content that has caused divided reactions from critics. Janet Maslin of the New
York Times famously celebrated Kids as “a wake-up call to the world” (Maslin, cited in
Winter 2006:70) and Gus van Sant (1997) praised the film’s scriptwriter as the most
important new voice in cinema. In both conservative and progressive camps, however,
commentators found reason to be enraged by Clark’s film. Kids was “a nightmare of
depravity” for former US senator Bob Dole (Dole, cited on Harmony-Korine.com) and
for Rita Kempley of the Washington Post it was “virtually child pornography disguised
as a cautionary documentary” (Kempley 1995: par 1). Critics on the left like bell hooks
and Henry Giroux argue that there is nothing progressive or subversive about Kids. Both
of these critics slate it as a racist and misogynous film that uses the authority of the
documentary mode to legitimate a voyeuristic interest in teenage sexuality and to justify
right-wing attempts to control and repress the youth (hooks 1996; Giroux 2002).

Most critics recognize the way that Kids foregrounds an excessive display of bodies,
bodily emissions, ‘vulgar’ language and sex. However, critiques of Kids persistently
focus on character types, narrative arrangement and on the way Clark mobilises
stereotypes. While some consideration of these features is important, I will argue that
structuralist readings of Kids make the mistake of judging this film against the classical
Hollywood paradigm. I will take bell hooks’s argument as a key example of this
problematic reading. My analysis will show that Kids draws its aesthetic from two modes
that are antithetical to the idealizing operations of classical Hollywood cinema. Kids
displays the combined influence of the grotesque mode and a documentary-style realism
pioneered by the Italian neorealists. Both of these modes are marked by an emphasis on
material, sensual experience as opposed to the abstraction and resolution of classic form.

Realism and Representation

Kids has been treated by many critics as a particularly deceptive version of the classical
Hollywood film, one in which the authority of the documentary mode is used to create an
illusion of reality when the film really presents a very constructed fictional universe. In bell hooks’s critique of *Kids*, the hand-held camera and gritty outdoor aesthetic of the film are seen as a way of hiding the structuring voice of the director so that Clark is free to construct a racist and sexist universe that appears real rather than authored (hooks 1996). In her book *Reel to Real: Race, Sex and Class at the Movies*, hooks locates complaints about sexism and racism in relation to cinematic realism. She aptly points out that what filmmakers give us is not the world as it is but "the reimagined, reinvented version of the real" (hooks 1996: 1). Hooks goes so far as to quote experimental filmmaker, Stan Brakhage thus: "Film must be free of all limitations, of which the most dangerous is the imitation of life" (1996: 1).

Realism and the sensual properties of art have long been aligned with their role in maintaining the status quo. Terry Eagleton asserts that the aesthetic does important ideological work in negotiating between the sensate experience of our bodies and intangible theories or laws (1992: 20). Given the power of the cinema to confer sensual resonance onto abstract principles, paired with the persuasive photographic realism of the medium, it is not surprising that the cinema has become a major agent of the ideological work that Eagleton describes.

In the 1970’s Colin MacCabe and Stephen Heath’s searing criticisms of classical Hollywood realism revealed how the illusion of realism can disguise and naturalise ideological constructions (MacCabe 1985; Heath 1981). MacCabe applies the critiques of the classic realist text developed by Barthes and Brecht to Hollywood cinema. Classic realism is defined by the way that it structures discourses into a hierarchy. MacCabe showed how the classical Hollywood film is organised around a dominant discourse which discloses ‘truth’ and resolves contradictions. Narrative coherence and closure are important tools in this process (MacCabe 1985: 34 – 40).

Stephen Heath notes that films generally present a negotiation between the threat that is based in the real or material conditions and an ideological structure. The narrative structure works to contain the affective threat present in the cinematic image. He writes:
The narrative takes care of this affectivity...places it... Finally, the narrative is the very triumph of the frame...; the frame is what holds tight against movement and slippage, cuts short the interminable play of the signifier, the subject in process, imposes a coherence and a continuity of representation. (Heath 1981: 135-136)

This framing process is what allows the Hollywood film to tame matter in the service of the interests of a dominant group.

A principle function of classical Hollywood realism is idealization. While real problems may fuel the story, the work of the classical narrative is to resolve and contain problematic elements of the material world through narrative resolution (Ellis 1992: 68). Ultimately these films present an image of the world, not as it is, but as it should be.

Classical Hollywood film “uses realism as an alibi” (Bordwell 1985: 19) for the ideal universe that it constructs.

Eagleton notes that within the work of the aesthetic is a contradiction. While on the one hand aesthetic practices may validate social order, the materialism of the aesthetic can also bring abstract idealism into question (Eagleton 1992: 29). Eagleton draws on the ideas of the British moralists whose theories of morality are grounded in sensual experience:

Before we have begun to reason, there is, for the British moral sense theorists, that nameless faculty within us which makes us feel the sufferings of others as keenly as a wound, spurs us to luxuriate in another’s joy with no thought of self advantage, pricks us to detest cruelty and oppression like a hideous deformity .... The aesthetic may be the language of political hegemony and an imaginary consolation for the bourgeoisie bereft of a home, but it is also, in however idealist a vein, the discourse of a utopian critique of the bourgeois social order. (Eagleton 1992: 29-30)

Our sensory awareness allows us most keenly to comprehend the material implications of cruelty to other people. Moreover, the appeal to the senses made by artistic production grounds the experience of others in our own sensory bodies in a way that makes their suffering difficult to ignore.
I draw on the theory of André Bazin in this thesis because he recognized the complex ways in which films can interact with the material world and he saw in the material origins of cinema an important way in which film could awaken ethical consciousness. As I have suggested in my introduction, Bazin argued for an ambiguous kind of realism that involved an impulse away from ideal forms and a return to the unstructured and complicated material realm.

In his analyses of postwar Italian cinema, Bazin identifies a certain commitment to realism, not merely as a stylistic effect but as an approach to the filmmaking process. What defined the neorealist cinema was a restraint from attempts to impose a rigorous structure on reality. The works of filmmakers like Rossellini, De Sica, Fellini and Visconti featured loose narrative structures and a documentary style. Bazin recognized that these films were not merely deceptive attempts to mimic documentary style but the result of a principled approach to the real (Bazin 1971). Bazin describes neorealism as "essentially a form of self-effacement before reality" (Bazin, 1967: 29). Neo-realism demands a certain degree of restraint from orchestration and structure which makes the films more open to a complex and nuanced engagement with reality. Such an approach to narration avoids simplifying reality to fit an ideological standpoint.

One of the greatest strengths of the Italian cinema, moreover, is the way that the social context informs the film at every level. "Italian films are first and foremost reconstituted reportage. The action could not unfold in just any social context, historically neutral, partially abstract like the setting of a tragedy ..." (Bazin 1971: 20). The links between neorealism and documentary are thus not merely stylistic. Neorealist cinema shares with most documentary an interest in recording and revealing social conditions.

Crucially, this particular approach to filmmaking results in a sensitive handling of its human subjects. Bazin writes that "the Italian cinema is certainly the only one which preserves, in the midst of the period it depicts, a revolutionary humanism" (Bazin 1971: 21). A later comment on Bicycle Thieves (1948) provides more clarification of this idea. Bazin admires De Sica's film because in it "[n]obody is reduced to the condition of an
object or a symbol that would allow one to hate them in comfort without having first to leap the hurdle of their humanity" (Bazin 1971: 21). There are no real villains in Bicycle Thieves -- only people who are in various ways desperate or misguided. The neorealist approach, in its ambiguity and respect for material conditions, can represent people only as the complex and flawed beings that they are. This approach is revolutionary because it does not place the blame for the negative things that it represents on the head of one or two individual villains. Rather, it points obliquely to problems in the social context in which the characters find themselves:

If no-one is really bad, if face to face with each individual human being we are forced to drop our accusation ... we are obliged to say that evil which undeniably does exist in the world is elsewhere than in the heart of man, that it is somewhere in the order of things. (Bazin 1971: 73)

Bazin saw that by placing precedence on the material world over the narrative structure, phenomenological realism could offer a critical alternative to mainstream filmmaking by drawing on the viewer’s own physical engagement with the onscreen world to cultivate meaning. I would like to extend this idea to Kids -- a film in which ambiguous narration is matched by an emphasis on physical experience.

The raw documentary style of Kids is accompanied by a loose and ambiguous narrative structure. This feature of the film’s address has contributed to widespread confusion about what Kids is ‘really’ saying. In its ambiguity Kids presents a clear departure from the classic paradigm. Kids is loosely structured around two main narrative threads: Telly and Casper’s pursuit of virgins to deflower and Jennie’s attempts to find Telly and inform him of his HIV status. While the narrative is driven to some degree by character action, no real character development takes place and the problems that the story introduces merely escalate. Jennie fails to stop Telly from sleeping with Darcy. At the film’s close Telly has the same obsession with sexual conquest that he had at the start of film -- but the casualties of his habit have increased.

The narrative universe of Kids is characterized by extreme displays of violence, racism and misogyny. A classic narrative structure would explain these features through its
reliance on cause-and-effect narration and contain these elements through narrative resolution. But instead, the narrative of *Kids* gives way to divergences, prolonged sexual spectacles and detailed records of Telly and Casper’s aimless roamings through New York City. These elements elaborate the sense of chaos cultivated by this disquieting film. *Kids* is a far cry from the idealizing tendencies of the classic system.

However, bell hooks reveals her reliance on the classical Hollywood paradigm when she complains of the “heavy handed racism expressed by the two ‘star’ white boys” in *Kids* (hooks, 1996: 62). Does hooks mean to suggest that Telly, the foolish and filth-obsessed “Virgin surgeon” and his similarly depraved accomplice, Casper, are to be understood as classic heroes of the narrative whose actions viewers would be encouraged to emulate? Later she describes the world of *Kids* as a “New York City teenage transgressive utopia” (1996: 63). This is a peculiar description of a universe in which young people wander the streets of New York searching for sexual fulfillment and drugs and in the process infect themselves and others with HIV. If anything *Kids* is dystopian. Hooks demands idealization where there are only the aimless foibles of alienated teenagers and her complaints about the film reveal an equivocation between the real and the ideal. Here is a telling paragraph:

...showing cannot be confused with critique. *Kids* lacks a critical edge. There is no resistance to domination in this film, merely primitive embrace of ruling paradigms. The casualties are all the same as in the real world we live in, poor and working class boys; people of colour, especially black males; vulnerable coloured girls; and good white girls who would be safe if they just stayed home. (hooks 1996: 65)

Hooks doesn’t really have a problem with the veracity of Clark’s representation of ‘the real’ but she wants Clark to make a film about the way things *should* be and she’s right to say that *Kids* is not that film. Hooks reads *Kids* as if it were a classic realist text, finds it lacking and then condemns it by a critical standard that the text does not aspire to meet.

Implicit in the criticism of bell hooks is the idea that responsible filmmaking involves positing answers and presenting a politically and morally correct vision of the world. It seems that for hooks, behaviour that is not politically correct or in line with standards of
"decency", should be censored unless arranged in a narrative structure that offers explicit commentary and with an ending that punishes bad guys and rewards heroes.

When cause-and-effect narration gives way to the demands of realism, and to displays of sex, violence and verbal performance, surely these features warrant serious critical attention over and above the arrangement of figures in a narrative structure. In addition, when presented with such a visceral film, some attention should be paid to physical affect -- not merely as stylistic excess but as a medium of communication. My aim is to show that Kids is certainly not a mute film without a critical voice. It is oppositional on the level of its aesthetic strategies.

**Carnivalesque Degradation**

Kids takes the realist impulse toward the material to a new extreme in refusing to censor what is usually deemed unacceptable in representation. The film delights in bringing the scandalous to the fore. Instead of the "[g]olden, glowing bodies shot through filters and gauze..."(Krzywinska 2006:35) that we see in mainstream depictions of the human form, Kids gives us central characters who sweat, spit, piss, consume and copulate in a way that can only be described as grotesque. For this reason it would be helpful to apply some of Mikhail Bakhtin's analyses of the grotesque body and the carnivalesque mode to Kids.

Much of the criticism that Kids has received can also be explained with reference to the film's use of the carnivalesque mode. Robert Stam warns that carnivalesque texts are particularly open to critical misinterpretation “because their work has been judged by the canons of ‘good taste’ or ‘political correctness’ rather than as prolongations of a perennial carnivalesque tradition” (1989: 115). Carnivalesque texts also stand the risk of being misunderstood when they are viewed through the same critical lens applied to the classic realist text. Stam points out that the carnivalesque mode fosters a view of language “which valorizes the obscene, the nonsensical, and ‘marketplace speech’” (Stam 1989: 94). Kids presents in its dialogue a vast array of shocking, usually racially or sexually charged verbal performances. Telly and Casper call each other “nigga.”
refer to women as “bitches” or as “pussy.” Like the neorealist film, carnivalesque texts confront the norms of representation. They do not prescribe behaviour or offer role models and they should not be read as if they do. Ann Jefferson distinguishes carnival from conventional representation by pointing out that “carnival is a process, representation makes a product” (Jefferson 1989: 168). Texts operating within the carnivalesque mode do not posit finished ideals, they display social processes and debunk norms.

In the medieval carnival Bakhtin saw an exciting space in which hierarchies were dismantled and free and playful exchanges of speech could take place. Robert Starn explains that “[i]n carnival, all that is marginalized and excluded -- the mad, the scandalous, the aleatory -- takes over the centre in a liberating explosion of otherness” (1989 : 86). Bakhtin’s theory of grotesque bodies is based on a broader discussion of the carnivalesque in literature, specifically in the work of Rabelais, through whom he argues that certain literary modes borrow elements of their imagination and structure from the cultural practices of the medieval carnival (1968).

Bakhtin celebrates a focus on what he describes as “the material bodily lower stratum” (1968: 368). He makes a crucial distinction between the grotesque body and the body found in classic culture where surfaces are smooth and closed off from other beings, while the grotesque body is defined by openings and emissions (1968: 320). The grotesque form has the potential to return the body from its regimentation by social forces to its base natural origins (Bakhtin 1968:318). For Bakhtin this process of degradation brings about a utopian oneness with other human beings and the universe (ibid).

Bakhtin’s conception of grotesque realism may seem at odds with a phenomenological realism in that it is much less grounded in a commitment to a faithful representation of reality. Grotesque realism traditionally has highly fantastical elements (Starn, 1989). It is also parodic in contrast to the impassive and often tragic representational tone found in neorealism (Stam 1989). Bakhtin’s understanding of the grotesque mode is infused with
optimism while the grotesque bodily displays in *Kids* are always edged with desperation and fatalism.

Wolfgang Kayser’s theory of the grotesque mode reveals that grotesque degradation can operate in texts without the joyous sense of community and rebirth celebrated by Bakhtin. Kayser emphasizes the tragic and threatening features of the grotesque. For Kayser the grotesque is marked by a realisation of the absurdity and meaninglessness of human experience. It is "the expression of our failure to orient ourselves in the physical universe" (1963: 185). Kayser thus defines the grotesque in terms of a hopeless relationship to the material world. Bazin identifies a similar impulse in the ambiguity of neorealism. He writes that De Sica’s *Umberto D* (1952) expresses, not a metaphysical crisis, but the realisation that God does not exist. The realist form reveals the “particular tragedy of today’s world, the raising of a self-deifying social reality to a transcendental state” (Bazin 1971: 73). Both phenomenological realism and the grotesque share a materialism, a formal openness and a return to real material conditions that stands in opposition to the classic text. The negative tone of Kayser’s grotesque combines in *Kids* with the pathos typical of a phenomenological realist approach.

**White Boys: The Friendliest Ghosts in Town**

At the source of the sensual excess in *Kids* are two white adolescent boys with a crisis in purpose. Bell hooks is correct to assert that *Kids* deals centrally with the problems and identity struggles of white kids. However, this does not mean that *Kids* cannot function as an exploration of race. The film provides an insightful and highly critical insight into the problems of white male identity. Because white masculinity is considered the norm in Western society there has been little said about whiteness as a distinct identity (Dyer 2000: 733). This may in part explain critical responses to *Kids* which focus on the portrayal of women and minority groups without considering how whiteness is constructed in this film.
Richard Dyer explains that white bodies are regulated in most representations because whiteness maintains its dominance by appearing as an invisible non-identity (2000: 735). Whiteness operates as a norm by which other groups are judged and dominated. Dyer notes that while blackness can be discussed as an identity of its own, whiteness really comes to the fore only when it is highlighted in relation to other races. When this happens "it is often revealed as emptiness, absence, denial or even a kind of death" (2000: 735).

Representations of whiteness in the cinema have been characterized by a repression of the body. In contrast, blackness has been understood in terms of bodily excess, with “disorder, irrationality and looseness" (Dyer 2000: 736). Dyer’s analysis of the treatment of white bodies accords closely with Bakhtin’s understanding of the closed-off and regulated classical body.

In his discussion of Night of the Living Dead (1968), Dyer draws a useful connection between body horror and anxiety over whiteness: in this film white people are described as “the living dead.” In instances of body horror, "[t]he hysterical boundedness of the white body is grotesquely transgressed as whites/zombies gouge out living white arms, pull out organs, munch at orifices" (Dyer 2000: 748).

Kids features the white male body as grotesque and as the source of grotesque horror. It is interesting to note how much Clark’s camera lingers on male bodies in the sex scenes it depicts rather than on female bodies. When Darcy and Telly are kissing in the nude, it is Telly who is lit dramatically by a diagonal shaft of light on his sweaty shoulders. When he leans in to her, the camera frames their embrace so that Telly’s freckled shoulder bones are the focus of the composition. The representation of Telly and Casper’s bodies is characterised by an ambivalence that is inherent in the grotesque mode. On the one hand their bodily openness and amusing candid speech offers transgressive pleasure. However, this sexual freedom is ultimately revealed as destructive and as the product of existential despair. In the film’s final voice-over Telly announces that “Fucking is what I love. Take that away from me and I really got nothing.” Kids explores Telly’s obsession
with sexual conquest to reveal that beneath his aggressive pursuit of sexual gratification, is a crisis in identity.

Both Telly and Casper struggle with the problems of invisibility that Dyer describes. Casper’s name points clearly to his invisibility and his association with death. The cartoon character, Casper the Friendly Ghost, is explicitly referred to throughout the film. The cartoon version of Casper was always plagued by the fact that no-one would be his friend. Because he was invisible and ghostly, he could never assimilate into human society. Clark’s Casper seems to have the same problem.

Telly’s skeletal frame and gaping mouth contribute to his image as a kind of teenage grim reaper as he systematically infects virgins with HIV. The name Telly seems to refer to television. Both boys are connected to the influence of popular culture through their names. But Telly’s name, with its similarity to the Greek ‘telos’ also links him to the question of purpose. As he announces at the beginning and end of the film, Telly’s sole purpose in life is ‘fucking.’ Telly’s pursuit of sexual conquest makes him the very personification of Freud’s death drive as he infects all the women he seduces with HIV.

Telly and Casper react against their ghostly invisibility in three ways. Firstly, they define themselves in opposition to women through sexual conquest or objectification. Secondly, they perform black identity in an exaggerated way to disguise their own lack of identity and, finally, they present their undisciplined bodies against the cityscape. Telly and Casper are essentially carnivalesque tricksters and idiots. It is in the film’s play with the “trickster figure” that Korine’s influence as a scriptwriter is most pronounced. It also bears noting that Korine is interested in blackface minstrelsy. Like Al Jolson, Telly and Casper’s adoption of black identity reveals their own identification with the margins of hegemonic order. Also, as much as Telly and Casper play the role of fools, their humour has its origins more in the “satanic” and degrading laughter described by Kayser than in the regenerative laughter of Bakhtin’s carnival. Beneath their performances of misogynous language and black street cool is an absurdist despair and an unfocussed
expression of rebellion against all the forces that threaten to contain and regulate their bodies.

The physicality of phenomenological realism and a grotesque emphasis on the body are used in this film to offer an alternative to the conventional ways in which white masculinity is portrayed. *Kids* thus reveals the fallacies behind traditional constructions of whiteness while at the same time it makes patent the pathological nature of this void in identity.

**Bodies in the City**

Of particular prominence in *Kids* is the way in which young people offer their bodies as signs of resistance within the urban maze of New York City. In *Kids* the city stands in for absent parental authority as the site of officialdom and order. Telly is constantly spitting. Casper scratches his balls and pees against walls. Telly and Casper’s relationship to the city reveals their attempts to disassociate themselves from the dominant order which represses and regulates the white body.

After Telly has seduced and deflowered a young virgin he swaggers down the stairwell of her upmarket home. As he leans over the banister, the mobile camera reveals Persian carpets and tasteful décor. Telly releases a large blob of saliva and watches it drop down into the living room. He then makes his way merrily down the stairs, executing little jumps as he descends. While the film may not foreground Telly’s class, small moments of resistance like this one appear throughout the film. This first revolting display partially contextualizes (although it does not justify) Telly’s heartless behaviour toward the young girl he seduces. Whether he is spitting or ejaculating, all of Telly’s actions in this film reveal him trying to claim or mark territory. Telly is always presented as alienated from his environment and at war with it. He generally wages this conflict through ‘indecent’ physical behaviour like sex, spitting and pissing. Such small bodily acts of resistance like this first revolting emission of spittle, originate from Korine’s script and foreshadow the physical and grotesque preoccupations that are to characterize his directorial work.
We are introduced to Telly and Casper through a lengthy sequence featuring the boys walking around New York, discussing Telly’s sexual exploits. Telly exits the apartment of the young girl he has just seduced, in the opening moments of the film, to find Casper perched on the doorstep drinking out of a brown paper bag and reading a comic book entitled “HATE.” As the pair discuss Telly’s sexual exploits in graphic detail the camera tracks their movement down the road. Clark uses a telephoto lens to shoot the boys from a distance so that cars, streetlamps and passers-by constantly obscure their figures. This is a trick that Clark uses throughout the film to present the kids as thoroughly entrenched in the cityscape. We often see them through store windows or reflected in security mirrors. Like the Italian neorealists, Clark presents his subjects, not as masters of their environment, but as part of the city. Telly and Casper are essentially nomadic throughout the film and the city is a hostile playground. In this particular scene the boys have their lewd and misogynous conversation dwarfed by buses and obscured by passing traffic while the noises of the city compete with their dialogue.

Clark pays astonishing attention to detail in the way that the boys walk and interact with the street. In a beautifully observed moment, Telly, engaged in conversation, skips up onto the bottom stair of one of the brownstone apartments and swings back down again with absent-minded ease, his apish teenaged arms swaying all over the place. Casper is constantly spitting, sticking his hand down his pants and gulping at whatever he has concealed in his brown paper bag. He also boasts the most remarkable badass swagger a teenager could possibly cultivate. The boys’ urban wanderings are characterized by their purposelessness. In these sequences the ambiguity of phenomenological realism evokes a meaningless world and hence leans toward Wolfgang Kayser’s (1963) definition of the grotesque.

The boys articulate their aggression and racism toward keepers of order — like the Asian shopkeeper from whom they steal beer — but they also reserve a certain degree of respect for the city’s “invisible” outcasts. For example, they stop to listen to a blind accordion player in the subway. Later in the subway coach Casper gives a dime to a black legless
beggar and offers the man his blessings while everyone else ignores him. While racism underpins a lot of Telly and Casper's behaviour, their aggression is not driven solely by racial hatred but by a sense of their own marginalization. Sequences like these emphasise Telly and Casper's sense of sympathy with the marginal elements of New York's cityscape. It bears noting that such moments reveal hints of the interest in the "freakish" and dispossessed figures of urban America that define Korine's later filmmaking. Like *Kids*, *Gummo* and *julien donkey-boy* place young white males at the centre of films which foreground the "others" of the dominant American order. My analyses will show that this is not an attempt to confirm white male dominance, but rather a means of decentering and exploring white masculinity as an identity.

Such sequences also reveal the complexity of a phenomenological realist approach to character. Telly and Casper can be both wicked and kind. They are not standard villains. Because we are not allowed to understand their behaviour as a sign of their inherent evil, we have to look elsewhere for an explanation of their behavior. Bazin recognized that the ambivalence of neorealist cinema forces us to understand that evil is "elsewhere than in the heart of man, that it is somewhere in the order of things" (Bazin 1971: 73). The same can be said of *Kids*. It is worth following Bazin’s lead and interpreting the film as an indictment of ‘the order of things’ in capitalist America.

**Black Masks**

Bell hooks argues that the boys' adoption of cultural practices usually associated with black people works to place the blame for all the social malaise represented in the film on the influence of black culture. "The main agent of this corruption is never named in the film. Yet, since so much of the ‘style’ of the white kids is based on the popular culture and mores of the non-white poor, one more or less gets the idea that these influences are the corrupting ones" (hooks 1996: 62). She does not take account of how the posturing of these white boys as "niggas" reveals the vacuum of identity that is the condition of white masculinity. *Kids* is not about white kids being infected by black culture. It charts the reverse process; white boys quite literally infect everybody else with their deathliness.
Telly and Casper would be better understood as performing elements of “black” identity as a way of trying to find an identity. Crucial to their identity construction is an involvement with skateboarding subculture. *Kids* displays a particularly carnivalesque interest in the irreverent and subversive behaviour of youth subcultures, specifically skateboarding culture and rave (“the amazing sexual exploration” at the rave is particularly carnivalesque). “Cool” in *Kids* is more complicated than it initially appears. One has merely to recall the arguments of the early cultural theorists like Dick Hebdige (1979) on Punk subcultures, to recognize how teenagers’ dress and language can be political. These cultural activities have the same “decentralising energies” (Stam 1989: 85) that Bakhtin ascribes to the carnival. They operate in opposition to a “hegemonic project of centralization (officialdom, the language system)” (Stam 1989: 85).

*Kids* makes quite explicit Telly and Casper’s attempts to assimilate themselves into a multiracial group of skaters. When the pair meet up with a large group of male skaters in the park, their entrance into the scene is marked by a veritable orgy of backslapping, handshaking and greeting. Clark’s camera frames the scene from the side so that it is hard to tell whose hands belong to whom as it weaves like a body through the crowd. This moment is underscored by hip-hop music which eventually fades into the skaters on performances of a rap. *Kids* dramatizes the intimate details of subcultural behavior in a particularly resonant way. When the kids smoke a joint the viewer is made witness to the whole system of signs involved in the exchange and in smoking them.

Although the film delights in the decentering energies of subcultural activity, it is not content to present an idyllic portrait of interracial harmony. When a homosexual couple walks past holding hands, the skaters scream abuse at them. The sense of community of the skaters is cemented by their aggression toward other groups. This becomes patent in the horrific sequence of events that follow. Casper starts a fight with a large, black basketball player. Within the first few seconds of confrontation the entire troop of skaters amass and pound the basketball player to the ground with their skateboards. This event is presented in a fast-paced montage of shots taken from the perspective of the victim. The assailants are revealed from a low angle yelling into camera and pounding with their
skateboards. All the while, Daniel Johnston’s rendition of Casper the Friendly Ghost plays in the background. Casper delivers the final blow to the man’s face. In a confrontational close-up we see Telly gulp and drop a huge dollop of spit on the man’s bleeding face.

This is a brutal and devastating scene. It is particularly shocking for its deadpan depiction of violence against a black man. Instead of condemning the violence, Clark’s shooting suggests anarchic and dizzy power. The low camera angles and the composition of energetic moving bodies emphasise the dominance of this subcultural group over their helpless victim. As is often the case in carnivalesque texts, the violence of this scene is presented in a distanced way (Stam 1989: 108). Stam explains that the “unpitying nature of carnivalesque art is organically connected to its clear conventionality” (1989: 108). This is not the case in Kids where carnivalesque events are played out in the realm of the real. The film marries the carnivalesque mode’s frank refusal to omit the ‘indecent’ elements of social life, with a deadpan and morally ambiguous realism.

Bell hooks contends that the presence of black kids amongst the man’s attackers is used to justify what is a celebration of violence against blackness. She argues that the scene is a sign that “[v]iolence toward aggressive black male strangers is acceptable to moviegoing audiences in a society that has become completely socialised by the mass media to see blackness as a threat” (hooks 1996: 63). Hooks’ appeal against this violent scene has some weight considering the long history of media texts that have sanctioned violence against black people. In this instance the ambiguity of Clark’s realism runs into serious risks in terms of how it might be interpreted by particularly sensitive audiences and how it might enforce certain notions about blackness. While Telly and Casper’s sexual habits are ultimately shown to have tragic results, the boys’ violence is not shown to have any real consequences.

This violent scene may be irresponsible because it does not explicitly comment on what it shows but the scene is far from suggesting that such violence is justified. While hooks is definitely correct in questioning the efficacy of such extreme displays of violence, the
scene is more nuanced than she suggests. I have already discussed at length the way in which *Kids* differs from mainstream cinema that prescribes behaviour. The violence in this scene adds to a damning overall picture of destructive teenaged behaviour. The mass violence is not motivated solely by race (though racial issues definitely underpin Casper and Telly’s aggression) but by the group solidarity of the skater community and their need to define themselves in opposition to others. At least on the surface of the narrative the man is attacked because he threatens a skater, not only because he is black. This does not make the skaters’ actions any less ideologically problematic. This scene displays a giddy sense of hedonistic power expressed by a group of small social outcasts against a physically powerful, older man. However the aim of the scene is not to celebrate violence based on difference but to reveal the complex and problematic ways in which identity crises can result in violent self-differentiation.

The film does not condemn the violence but it certainly shows us where it comes from. The key players in the assault are Telly and Casper. In this scene they are far more menacing than any of the black or Hispanic characters. The scene reveals the pathological rage underlying the actions of all the kids in the park and suggests a more general crisis in identity underlying the behaviour of each of these characters. But the most intense aggression comes from Telly and Casper whose identity struggles the film reveals more fully. The use of a Daniel Johnston song in the soundtrack further enforces the suggestion of white pathology. Johnston, a white male with a conservative middle class upbringing, is a brilliant musician plagued by bipolar disorder and psychosis. As he does in the Casper song, Johnston commonly depicts himself as a ghostly cipher in an indifferent society.

The racism and misogyny on the surface of *Kids* emerges from the fractured identities of the film’s subjects. *Kids* is not a justification for racism, but a study of the way young people construct their identities in relation to others. The portrait of white masculinity that Clark creates in this film is complex and not without critical force. I do not, however, mean to excuse the film of all charges of racism. *Kids* is flawed in some its depictions of women, black people and Hispanic characters.
Two key scenes remain disturbing for me no matter how I look at them: firstly, the sexual conversation between Jennie and a group of other mostly Hispanic girls at the beginning of the film and, secondly, the swimming pool scene in which the dark-skinned Harold aggressively forces a kiss on a girl. The first scene presents Jennie as the picture of purity in juxtaposition to the sordid sexuality of the Hispanic girls. The second problematic scene presents black masculinity as threatening and aggressive. Later at the party, Harold forces himself on another girl. While all the white boys in the film beg and plead for sex, Harold’s sexual conquests occur by force.

In these instances stereotyping wins out over individualistic studies of complex identities. While these criticisms stand, the rest of the film should not be simply dismissed as racist and reactionary. *Kids* can be praised for confronting what is usually erased from representations of American culture. The repressed sexuality and thinly disguised racism that undergirds social organization in American cities emerges as a site of shocking rupture in the candid grotesque realism of *Kids*.

Beneath the slinging of abuse and the performances of gendered and racialised roles in *Kids* lies an incipient absurdity. The repetition of dialogue and framing in the treatment of Telly’s two sexual conquests creates the sense of an absurd circularity, further suggesting fears of an entropic slide into chaos and uncertainty. Both scenes feature a symmetrical medium-shot of the couple, facing each other and framed from the side. Telly repeats the same performance of affection and concern in order to seduce each girl. Like the first girl, Darcy asks Telly “Do you care about me?” and Telly responds, as if rehearsing lines from a script, “Of course I do.” What follows is the same performance of masculine domination and the same cries of “Telly it hurts”. The structure also shows that Telly’s appetite for sexual conquest will never be satisfied.

This scene suggests the true pathology behind Telly’s actions – it also reveals his behaviour as performance. As bell hooks does recognize, the young people in *Kids* are repeating and performing problematic structures of behavior that have been inherited
from their parents' generation. Hooks remarks that "if there is any crime Kids exposes it is that this is the culture that white supremacist capitalist patriarchy produces" (hooks 1996: 64-65). While Telly's behaviour has been labeled as perverse by critics, he is really repeating quite common sexual practices. All of his conquests involve heterosexual sex in missionary position.

The final sequence of the film presents a disturbing portrait of despair and absurdity – the tragic fate of the children in this film is related quite explicitly to an urban environment that alienates its inhabitants. Casper’s shocking rape of Jennie is followed by a stirring set of documentary style images of the city. Although the rape scene has so often been described as pornographic -- with pornography being defined as sexuality organized around phallic conquest (Giroux 2002; hooks 1996) -- we never see Casper come to climax. Rather, the camera wanders along the couch from the hideous and clumsy sex scene to the sleeping body of an unnamed young boy. Here the camera remains while the slapping and shuffling sounds of intercourse continue. The shot fades to black but the sounds linger for a while and then eventually fade out too.

A haunting electronic noise takes over the audiotrack. The camera speeds past a group of people who stand in a park and beat their hands against the air as if battling an invisible enemy or conjuring a spirit. The image disintegrates into a smear of colour as if shot from a passing car. This blur is cut against a more static image of a drugged or drunk street person leaning against a closed shop window and fighting the impulse to pass out. In the foreground, figures and cars move past him. The camera picks up pace again revealing a hobo prostrating himself before a fence, a man in a park reaching out to nothingness as if he were holding a girl by the waist. The camera pulls slowly away and the man is lost behind trees and streetlamps. The music stops and we are taken back to view the aftermath of the kids’ party.

Our final glimpse of Clark’s teenaged universe is shaded with death imagery. In a contemplative high-angle tracking shot, Clark then reveals a room full of sleeping semi-nude children. They lie in absolute silence. The image is at once innocent and shocking.
Their bodies are tangled together, like corpses in a mass grave. Finally we cut to Telly and Darcy sleeping in each other’s arms. The camera creeps in on their figures. They are lit dramatically from the side. Undercutting the tranquility of the scene is Telly’s frank voiceover: “When you’re young not much matters. When you find something you care about that’s all you got. When you go to sleep at night you dream of pussy. When you wake up it’s the same thing. It’s there in your face, you can’t escape it. Sometimes when you’re young the only place to go is inside…” Back in the lounge Casper wakes up from his drunken stupor with the glazed eyes of a zombie. He stares ahead as if looking into the camera and asks “Jesus, what happened?”

This moment achieves a very unsettling confusion between its real and fictional elements. It is unclear who is speaking these lines. Is it Casper, locked in a fictional universe and staring off into the space ahead of him, or is it Larry Clark winking behind Casper’s blank stare and directly addressing the viewer with this rather ambiguous question? Hooks finds the film’s representation of dominant capitalist values uncritical because the film does not resolve the problem through narrative closure. However Kids leaves a more enduring comment by refusing to tie up the problems it portrays. Instead of sealing off the disturbing events that the film presents in a fictionally enclosed world, through Casper’s final question, Kids asks the viewer to consider their own implication in the destructive symbolic and social structures that this film lays bare.
3.

**Gummo: America through the Looking-Glass**

[1]f you scrutinize reality closely enough, if in some way you really, really get to it, it becomes fantastic. (Arbus1995:2)

When the ‘boy wonder’ who wrote *Kids* took the director’s chair for his debut feature, *Gummo*, he produced a perplexing composite of documentary-style realism and grotesque imagery. *Gummo* displays many of the devices popularly associated with documentary realism but the world it presents as ‘real’ is a very peculiar place. Xenia, Ohio, where the action plays out, is populated by a bizarre assortment of characters: white trash, cross-dressers, midgets and mentally retarded people. The appearance of these figures is all the more disturbing because they are not treated as fairytale characters (as is often the case in texts dealing with physical and social abnormality from classic fairystories like “Beauty and the Beast” to Hollywood films like *Powder* (1995)) but are instead handled with a candid and visceral documentary style.

In our contemporary understanding, realism is often seen as a tool to corroborate and support habituated ways of seeing the world. When critics praise the disruptive potential of experimental filmmaking, they often focus on how these texts interrupt and complicate realism. However, in this chapter I am interested in the reverse process. I will focus my attention on how a certain kind of realism can be disruptive. In *Gummo* the combination of grotesque realism and documentary style that characterises *Kids* emerges in a more radical form.

The previous chapter outlined a number of ways in which a phenomenological realism paired with grotesque elements can focus attention on material conditions and disrupt standards of decorum associated with the dominant order. In the coherent narrative universe of *Kids*, realism works to criticise certain aspects of American social life. In this
chapter I will argue that Gummo is an assault both on traditional Hollywood filmmaking and on America as a symbolic space. The primary weapon in this attack, to reiterate, is a playful combination of a phenomenological realism and grotesque imagery.

I will outline two related ways in which a play with realism is used as a tool for dismantling the semantic system that underpins dominant American ideology. Firstly, I will explore how Korine toys with the boundaries between a documentary mode of viewing and a fictional address. Secondly, I will consider the role of the grotesque mode and the sensual properties of cinema in returning viewer attention to material conditions and undermining certain mythic American images and ideas.

To engage in these explorations, though, I need to bring into focus the work of key thinkers about the disruptive potential of realism. I will apply the ideas of Vivian Sobchack, Tom Gunning and Siegfried Kracauer, an early theorist who anticipated their work in interesting ways. A study of the grotesque in Gummo will benefit from a consideration of the writing of Victor Hugo and Geoffrey Harpham.

**The Documentary Eye**

The adoption of documentary codes in fiction cinema has aroused much ethical concern from critics. The use of such devices is often seen as little more than an attempt to give credence to the imaginative constructions of the film’s creators. However, as Vivian Sobchack points out, little consideration has been given to how tenuous the boundary between documentary and fiction really is. She writes: “…we might well ask to what extent the irreality of the fiction film has always been both complicit with and subverted not only by documentary footage but also, in its more diffuse appearances, by the real” (2004:260). Sobchack explores the embattled boundary between documentary and fiction in order to explore the different ethical responses demanded from these modes and, particularly, to discuss the relationship between an ethical sensibility and documentary realism (276). In a productive discussion of films that mix documentary and fictional modes, Sobchack argues that documentary and fiction, far from being discrete categories, often co-exist in films. Rather than naturalizing the depiction of reality in the film “real”
elements can be disruptive and draw the viewer's attention away from narration. Sobchack argues that viewers either enjoy the "con-fusion" (265) of documentary and fiction "or are jarred by their contact in what emerges as an experienced … heterogeneity of representation" (ibid). She considers the confounding of boundaries between these two modes in terms of a complex phenomenological experience of viewing (2004: 260).

Sobchack uses the Peircean notion of indexicality to discriminate between what she calls a "documentary consciousness" (2004: 261) and an engagement with the film as fiction. Films appeal to a "documentary consciousness" when they draw on or emphasise the privileged relationship between the camera and a real event – as is the case in documentary films. While fiction films often encourage viewers to put aside their consideration of events as "real," the documentary consciousness described by Sobchack can emerge in fiction films in instances when the indexical aspect of the photographic image bursts through the fictional frame. Documentary and fiction are not just modes of representation but ways of looking at onscreen images (2004: 258-270). Of course, certain films call our attention to the documentary aspect of the image more than others.

Sobchack uses the death of a rabbit in a hunting scene from Renoir's *The Rules of the Game* (1939) as an example of a cinematic image in which the referential or documentary aspect of the image disrupts the sense of coherent fiction. Sobchack found the 'real' death of the rabbit in Renoir's hunting scene more shocking than the fictional death of a human character, Jurieu. The shock came, not from a special sympathy with rabbits, but rather from the fact that the shot recorded the actual death of the rabbit while the film's human death was only fictional (268-269). Sobchack uses this example to argue that when we experience something as 'real' in the indexical sense it has more capacity to create a gut response and, according to Sobchack, makes a greater ethical demand on viewers. A documentary consciousness privileges a sense of sympathy for the onscreen characters that is felt in our own bodily responses to the images because the suffering of onscreen characters is registered as real and therefore "charged with… our present investments in our own lifeworld" – not enclosed in a fictional universe (274). Ultimately realism can make viewers feel responsible for their complicity in what is being represented on screen.
Realism draws attention to the ethics of representation (284). Hence the moral outrage and discomfort registered by critics in relation to Korine’s use of documentary realism to portray “real” people who are poor and disabled.

However, in her analysis of *The Rules of the Game* Sobchack occludes the role of Renoir’s directorial skill. While encouraging a “documentary consciousness” may be one of the ways in which a text draws an ethical response from viewers, it is not the only means to this end. This is made evident by what Sobchack omits from her discussion of *The Rules of the Game*. She sees these two deaths in the film as having an "equivalent mode of cinematic representation" (245). For Sobchack, the difference that produces shock lies only in the actual-ness of the rabbit’s death; Jurieu’s death is not as shocking only because we understand it as fictional. Actually, the two deaths are handled in very different ways by the director. In the hunt scene Renoir creates tension using parallel cutting and quite purposefully employs the images of innocent dying rabbits in counterpoint to the cool and detached cruelty of the upper-class hunters. As the gamekeeper’s men beat the ground with sticks in order to drive the rabbits and pheasants to their sure death, Renoir reveals, in intimate close-up, two little rabbits cowering next to each other and then another even closer shot of a frightened bunny beginning to flee. Renoir cuts, with increasing pace, between such images of helpless rabbits, the marching gamekeepers and shots of the merciless hunters waiting for their victims to come into sight before the rabbits are gunned down. Renoir’s manipulation of editing in this sequence can be compared to the masterful juxtapositions achieved by Sergei Eisenstein in the Odessa Steps sequence of *Battleship Potemkin* (1926).

Sobchack repeatedly refers to the death of *a* rabbit -- to one rabbit death, when in fact many rabbits and a few pheasants die in the hunting scene. It seems that it is the final shot of a rabbit in the last throes of life that is most disturbing to Sobchack. Indeed this shot is disquieting for it allows one to witness on film an innocent and rather cute animal’s last quivers before death. But this image is also more moving than those of the other rabbit deaths because of Renoir’s sensitive handling of the spectacle. The rabbit is framed in close-up, from behind, its small trembling leg making a striking diagonal across screen
space. A sense of moral responsibility is implied by Renoir’s lingering camera as much as it is by any awareness the viewer might have that they are watching an actual death. The attention Sobchack pays to this image over the other portrayals of onscreen rabbit deaths reveals that her response to the images has been influenced by Renoir’s directorial skill in creating a sense of shock that she attributes only to the indexical rupture of real death into fictional space.

Like the rabbit, Jurieu is slain while running and, as Marceau explains to Octave, he died painlessly “like an animal in the hunt.” However, when Jurieu is killed the viewer is not made privy to the spectacle of his last convulsions. As soon as Jurieu’s dead body is revealed to the camera Christine runs into the shot masking his form as she kneels on the ground next to him. Marceau and Shumacher step into shot in turn, further hiding the body from sight. Christine faints, again drawing attention away from the death as a spectacle and towards the narrative consequences of that death. Jurieu’s demise is accompanied by a distinct lack of tragedy. Renoir’s disquieting message seems to be that life goes on despite the misfortune caused by the folly of his characters. La Chesnaye continues his role entertaining his upper-class guests and Octave must go forth into the world alone.

The rabbit death and Jurieu’s death may share the same narrative universe but these deaths serve vastly different narrative purposes. Jurieu is a foolish and inconstant figure. Octave is certainly the moral and emotional centre of the film and at the end we feel much more for him than we do for Jurieu, whose death is an accident, not an act of cold and calculated cruelty. The rabbit, on the other hand, is an innocent slaughtered for the sake of amusement and its death serves to highlight the nonchalant cruelty of this sport.

Another film that compares fictional human deaths to a real rabbit death is, Roman Polanski’s Repulsion (1965). In this case, however the human fatality is far more shocking. Carol, the psychologically disturbed protagonist of Repulsion, leaves a skinned rabbit festering next to the telephone in her flat as she becomes increasingly lost to her own delusions. The rabbit’s body does belong to an actual rabbit and the corpse is slick,
limp and grotesque. The decay of the rabbit parallels Carol’s descent into madness and as the hideous carcass collects flies it provides a powerful point of narrative tension. Admittedly, we do not actually witness the rabbit’s actual death, but its carcass attests to the fact that it really has been killed for the film. However the real fate of the rabbit is used only as a thematic counterpoint to devastating murder scenes in the film.

Carol commits her first murder when Colin, a young man who is interested in her, breaks into the apartment. Carol’s psychosis reaches its climax and, in her delusional state, she kills him. Polanski reveals Colin’s corpse in a disturbing close-up. First we witness his hand issuing its last tremors (much like Renoir’s rabbit) and then the camera pans across his face to a spot above his ear where a slick of blood oozes down his neck. Only at this point does Carol recognise, with horror, the reality of what she has done. The way in which Polanski handles this revelation provides the shock value of the scene just as Renoir’s handling of the rabbit death made it seem so disturbing.

These qualifications aside, there is a sense in which the “realness” and live immediacy of the rabbit’s death encourages a unique response to the image. Sobchack is correct to point out that it is very rare, in fact almost unheard of, for real human deaths to be represented on screen. Of course there is a broader ethical dimension to this because actually killing someone is indeed a crime and a grave moral offence. Nonetheless, in the rare instances in which human death is caught on film, whether by accident or when justified by the conditions of war or government sanctioned executions, there is indeed an ethical dimension to the censures on representing real death. It seems that death brings into particularly sharp focus the moral questions around documentary and fictional representation. Because of the moral issues associated with them, onscreen deaths highlight the referential relationship between the camera and its object. In my analysis of Gummo I will show how Korine uses the death of animals as a recurring motif, and as a way of addressing ethical questions about representation.

The queries I have raised about Sobchack’s argument reveal how difficult it is to mark a clear distinction between documentary and fiction. Sobchack has recognised the potential
that a documentary revelation may have to burst through fictional space but, as I have shown, her responses to the “documentary nature” of the rabbit death in *The Rules of the Game* are also cued by the stylistic choices Renoir made in narrating the scene.

Sobchack uses the term ‘documentary’ to denote the experience of indexical reference in cinema but, as Stella Bruzzi has argued, documentary is itself a fraught term. Bruzzi contends that it is problematic to define and evaluate documentaries simply by means of their relationship to an ultimate truth or realism. Documentaries, Bruzzi argues, have always presented themselves to viewers as a negotiation between the indexical role they perform as records and the artistic or ideological intentions of the filmmaker: "...it is this very juncture between reality and filmmaker that is at the heart of any documentary" (2000: 6). She suggests that viewers do not naively respond to the effects of documentary images without recognising the way they are framed and presented by the director: "...the spectator is not in need of signposts and inverted commas to understand that a documentary is a negotiation between reality on the one hand and image, interpretation and bias on the other" (4). At the other end of the spectrum, Bazin’s analyses of fictional cinema have emphasised the important role of indexical operations in fiction films which are often analysed merely in terms of symbolism and narrative structure. Like Sobchack, Bazin recognises that the documentary elements of neo-realist cinema have particular ethical pull.

As much as Sobchack underplays Renoir’s directorial control over the two deaths, she has noted a tendency very specific to Renoir’s style of filmmaking, a certain openness to the contingency of reality. As Bazin’s analyses of Renoir reveal, it is not only the hunting scene that allows an indexical encounter with actuality. Renoir’s entire film is constructed as a playful weave between the raw material of the world and Renoir’s directorial intervention – a mixture of documentary indexicality and fictional narration. This is why Renoir has been associated with the so-called ‘poetic realists’. Sobchack’s distinction between documentary and fictional consciousness does not consider the range of realist modes and how each relates to the documentary/fiction divide.
Even though both fiction films and documentaries are invigorated by two divergent relationships to the real -- a commitment to record reality faithfully and the tendency to abstract the real into fictitious constructions -- we cannot do away with distinctions like documentary and fiction, however contested these terms may be. In order to do justice to films that play games with their relation to reality we still need a vocabulary to define these competing impulses. It is best to view documentary and fiction as two modes of practice that are not rigidly opposed but rather as gradations on a continuum. I use the terms ‘documentary’ and ‘fiction’ to identify and group certain tendencies at work in *Gummo*.

Sobchack’s concept of documentary consciousness relates to the Bazinian term, “phenomenological realism,” that I used to describe certain operations in *Kids*. In so far as phenomenological realism encourages the viewer to engage with the indexical aspect of the photographic image, this engagement could be defined as documentary consciousness – an experience of viewing in which the viewer is attuned to the relationship of reference between the onscreen image and the empirical world. A documentary consciousness is informed by an understanding of the objects onscreen, not just as symbols or vehicles of meaning but as sharing our own reality. As Bruzzi’s observations reveal, viewers may recognize certain phenomena as having an origin in the real world without adopting the naïve position that the medium itself is a transparent “window on the world.”

Sobchack argues that fictional consciousness is generally dominated by symbolic operations and characterized by generalization. There is, according to Sobchack, a tendency in fictional presentation for real objects, animals and human characters to operate as symbols for the abstract ideas that they represent (2004: 281). In opposition to this, Sobchack argues that a documentary consciousness encourages a consideration of people and objects in their specificity. These distinctions need to be tentatively considered. As viewers we may generalize from documentaries and pay attention to the specificity of fictional characters.
Importantly, the terms “documentary consciousness” and “fictional consciousness” refer to ways of apprehending the relationship between the image and the referent rather than to discreet categories of filmmaking. So a viewer can indeed employ a documentary consciousness when considering the specific hue of Italian sunlight in a fictional film set in Italy or a viewer may apply a fictional eye when making generalizations from documentary images. It is exactly this negotiation between a fictional and documentary consciousness that is at play in the critical engagement Bruzzi argues viewers bring to documentary cinema. Sobchack contends that our understanding of fictional cinema can be informed by a recognition of the way in which the images presented relate to the world we experience as real.

When a documentary consciousness marked by indexical relations of reference intervenes in the fictional world it can produce what Sobchack describes as the “shock” or, in a less extreme form, the “nudge” of the real (2004: 274). We engage with objects and sometimes with characters in fiction films as generalized types, until our attention is called to their specificity by the documentary elements of a film’s address. This is a very similar concept to Bazin’s description of the “revolutionary humanism” of Italian neorealist cinema in which “nobody is reduced to the condition of an object or a symbol” (1971: 21). This is not to say that documentaries do not often generalise or inflect their depictions with ideological assumptions. A “documentary consciousness” is not the same as documentary. Sobchack’s term refers to an ideal relationship between viewer and onscreen image in which the operations of phenomenological bracketing made possible by cinematic realism allow the viewer to engage with the objects represented in their specificity rather than as symbols. Such a “pure” relationship is never entirely possible, thus the term refers to a tendency that operates alongside our inclination to understand cinematic images through symbols and conventions.

The observation in Sobchack’s description of the death of the rabbit can be extended to a number of viewing experiences in which the real intervenes in the abstraction of fiction: [...the rabbit’s] quivering death leap transformed fictional into documentary space, symbolic into indexical representation, my affective investments in the irreal and fictional into a documentary consciousness charged with a sense of
the world, existence, bodily mortification and mortality, and all the rest of the real that is in excess of fiction. (Sobchack, 2004: 269)

I am interested in the way in which the “shock” of the real that Sobchack describes can undermine certain problematic operations of symbolism in fictional constructions. Sobchack’s categories are very useful for a discussion of Gummo, a film which works to undermine the categories of documentary and fiction by using one mode to interrupt the other.

Tom Gunning recognises certain forms of cinema in which this tussle between reality and fiction is central to a film’s appeal. Gunning contends that the titillation provided by early cinema was founded on a play between the spectator’s sense of the onscreen image as ‘real’ and their awareness of the image as ‘illusion.’ He contends that a similar dynamic is put into play in some avant-garde cinema (Gunning 1990).

Sobchack gives an account of the “shock” effects of an intrusion of realism into fictional space and connects this to an ethical response in viewers. For Gunning, however, the realist potential of cinema operates less as an ethical tool and more as a means for producing a disruptive ambivalence. Crucial to his understanding of this process is the lack of narrative structure in early cinema. Early cinema did not display the intense focus on storytelling that was to develop in Hollywood and dominate filmmaking in the years to come. Instead, the emphasis was on spectacle and exhibition.

Gunning writes:

From comedians smirking at the camera, to the constant bowing and gesturing of the conjurers in magic films, this is a cinema that displays its visibility, willing to rupture a self-enclosed fictional world for a chance to solicit the attention of the spectator. (1990: 57)

Storytelling quickly became the dominant mode of cinematic communication but, according to Gunning, the self-conscious visual spectacle of early cinema can still be identified in certain avant-garde films. I plan to show how Gummo adopts the “bowing and gesturing” attitude to the spectator that Gunning ascribes to early cinema.
Gunning discusses the first film screenings of the Lumière brothers’ films as an indication of how early cinema appealed to its audiences. In many early film viewings the image would be presented initially as a still frame and then slowly ‘cranked’ into motion. Such displays highlighted the act of exhibition and the constructedness of the illusion. Gunning argues that: “Far from credulity, it is the incredible nature of the illusion itself that renders the viewer speechless” (1999: 822).

Gunning borrows the term ‘attractions’ from Eisenstein who developed it and applies it to this experience of film viewing. According to Gunning, Eisenstein initially understood the attraction as a device to disrupt the impression of transparent realism in theatre and later in film. Gunning defines the term thus:

An attraction aggressively subjected the spectator to ‘sensual or psychological impact’. According to Eisenstein, theatre should consist in a montage of such attractions, creating a relation to the spectator entirely different from his absorption in ‘illusory depictions.’ (1990: 50)

However, Gunning is careful to note that in early cinema attractions are not achieved through montage. Instead the “shock” effected by these films is created by the realistic effect of the photographic medium itself.

As Vivian Sobchack notes, there are problems in applying Gunning’s “cinema of attractions” to contemporary viewing (2004: 57). Audiences, now, are conditioned by an entirely different social and cultural climate. In an age saturated by visual representation we are highly unlikely to be thrilled simply by the appearance of photographic realism. Sobchack does not, however, consider the role of narrative in neutralising the potential shock effects of photographic realism. Gunning’s description of the experience of early cinema spectatorship in which “[t]he realism of the image is at the service of a dramatically unfolding spectator experience, vacillating between belief and incredulity” (1999: 821) is in fact very similar to Sobchack’s theorisation of the contemporary viewer’s relationship to ambivalent uses of cinematic realism. Gunning, however, connects this experience much more explicitly to the issue of narrative structure. Referential realism can be more disruptive when viewers are not encouraged by narrative
to entrench themselves in an illusory story world. Gunning shows that when narrative is not dominant, we are not necessarily left with a naïve window on the world from which equally naïve audiences derive an unsophisticated sort of excitement. Rather, non-narrative cinema can draw on a fruitful play between a documentary consciousness and a celebration of cinematic trickery.

Gunning also explains how this triumph in showing images of the world relates to a particularly modernist way of understanding experience. The thrill provided by much early cinema was drawn from its ability to invoke a play between realism and illusion but it was also extracted from the medium’s ability to reconstitute vision. Early cinema audiences were astonished by the cinema’s capacity to disturb “a prior and firmly entrenched sense of reality” (1999: 825). Thus Gunning, like Bazin, suggests that realism, when it operates in films with a loose narrative structure, can draw attention to the way in which our understandings of reality are conditioned by conventional ways of seeing the world.

In my analysis of *Gummo*, I will combine Sobchack’s recognition of the ethical charge sometimes provided by the indexical realism of cinema with Gunning’s understanding of the role of realism and fiction as operating in a relationship of productive, defamiliarising ambivalence. In *Gummo* Korine employs the moral discomfort often produced by images that we understand as real to provoke questions about representation and ethics. In this film an ambiguous relationship between documentary and fiction is used to denaturalise symbolic constructions and draw attention to the ethical implications of a generalising impulse within representation.

**Sensual Shocks**

Gunning stresses the affective potential of the realist image. And indeed the realism of cinema allows for an overwhelming sense of immediacy and credibility because of the medium’s superior ability to reproduce sensory experience (at least visual and aural
experience). The sensual properties of cinema are an important part of the capacity to produce the shocks that Gunning describes.

In addition to her phenomenologically grounded exploration of the viewing experiences involved in documentary and fictional modes, Vivian Sobchack provides a discussion of the importance of cinema’s role in stimulating the senses. Like Bazin, she recognises that cinema exists as both a system of signification and a reproduction of experience (2004: 53-60). Drawing on Umberto Eco’s terminology, Sobchack points out that the cinema uses "lived modes" of perceptual and sensory experience (seeing, movement and hearing the most dominant) as "sign vehicles" of representation. Using such lived modes, the cinema exists as an ambivalent and ambiguous sensual and perceptual structure. (2004: 74)

Sobchack recognises an ambivalence that structures our physical reactions to the material world as we experience it onscreen. This ambivalence is cultivated by two different ways in which the cinema appeals to viewers. On the one hand, we understand cinematic images as a purely conventional system of signs. However, we also have physical responses to the cinema. Movies give us goosebumps, and make us cringe, salivate, get turned on or feel dizzy. Our embodied responses to cinematic images come close to our real reactions to the material world. This is because the realism and the indexical nature of cinema encourage an embodied engagement with onscreen objects (2004). Sobchack’s analysis of the two-fold operation of cinema is extremely useful to a discussion of Gummo. My analysis will explore the complex way in which this film handles sign systems in combination with sensually evocative and often disgusting imagery.

Sobchack’s discussion largely focuses on the way in which a sensual engagement with cinema can support the themes of the film and the meanings articulated by the narrative. She acknowledges that her account puts a great deal of emphasis on the idea that in cinema, as in life, sense and symbolic meaning can be experienced as “commensurable” (2004: 74) with one another. Sobchack writes that meaning in cinema is “constituted as both a carnal matter and a conscious meaning that emerge simultaneously (if in various ratios) from the single system of flesh and consciousness that is the lived body” (73).
Here, Sobchack notes the different degrees of confluence between sense and meaning. She also recognises that this confluence is not always the case in cinema. She writes “…although I have in this chapter emphasized the commensurability of body and representation because dominant theory has so long insisted on their incommensurability, I certainly do not deny the possibility of the latter – particularly in the film experience” (74) and points to Lesley Stern’s account of the “discontinuities between feeling and knowing” in instances of the uncanny in cinema (Stern, cited in Sobchack 2004: 75).

Sobchack, however, suggests that instances of the incommensurability of sensation and linguistically coded meaning in cinema are an aberration while the marriage of sensual and materially embedded experience and meaning is the norm both in life and at the movies. She writes: “…it is an undifferentiated experience of sense that grounds and conjoins body and language, feeling and knowledge – their coincidence so ordinary in our experience that their sudden divergence is marked as frustrating or uncanny or, in the extreme, pathological” (75)

Certainly, Hollywood films present the world in such a way that sense and meaning inform and support one another. But Sobchack does not acknowledge the degree to which traditional cinema must work to contain the sensual aspects of our experience into structures of meaning or use matter to back up meaningful constructions. While in experience our sensory perception and symbolically coded knowledge may often appear in agreement, this sense of agreement does not necessarily correspond to the pre-symbolic ground of the real world. The material world certainly does not always present human subjects with the delightful confluence of material and meaning that is generally present in the Hollywood cinema.

Indeed outcries about the filth and physical excess of Kids and Gummo reveal how much Hollywood films conform to accepted standards of taste and hygiene. Hollywood films are certainly sensually rich, colourful and evocative but the sounds, colours and textures onscreen are justified by the film’s narrative line and operate in support of the film’s
ideological argument. Thus the emphasis on masculine anatomy and firearms, the gritty texture and the frequent spectacular explosions that produce the sensual appeal of an action film like *Die Hard* (1988) enforce and support certain ideas about masculinity and power. *Clueless* (1995), a comedy that adapts Jane Austen’s *Emma* into film about wealthy L.A. teenagers, creates a universe of clean, sleek material wealth, colourful clothing, leafy gardens, swimming pools, toned adolescent flesh, malls and colourful, over-the-top clothing. This world is contrasted to a grittier environment first by the appearance of the “grungy”-looking Tai whom Cher adopts and trains in the ways of Beverly Hills teenaged narcissism and, secondly, when Cher is abandoned and mugged at a gas station in the Valley. In this sequence the sensual devices of the film emphasise dirt. Grime and grease stains abound and Cher does not want to lie on the floor (as demanded by the robber) because it will dirty her dress. The scene is lit by seedy fluorescent lighting and Cher’s assailant is suitably slimy-looking. Cher is, of course, rescued from the Valley and the film ends with all characters enjoying themselves at an extravagantly decorated wedding. While *Clueless* adopts a somewhat ironic stance toward the spoilt behaviour of its protagonists, the film ultimately celebrates Cher’s insular world of wealth and excess. The sensual elements of the film make this world all the more appealing.

Like most Hollywood characters, Cher, does not seem to urinate, defecate or perform the requisite but unglamorous duties that ensure bodily hygiene, yet her appearance is always so perfect as to make her inhuman and ethereal. While sexual desire is an important driving force in the narrative and sexual intercourse is constantly discussed by the characters, the act of sex is never displayed. The most physical intimacy that the film presents is kissing. *Clueless* and many films like it produce sensual cues only in support of the storyworlds these films create and for a narrative purpose.

To recall Eagleton’s argument, aesthetic production involves a negotiation between the material and the immaterial which generally serves the maintainence of capitalist hegemony. As I argued in the previous chapter, in mainstream American cinema fictional operations of storytelling, such as narrative structure and symbolic generalisations,
arrange the worldly material objects around us in such a way that they appear infused with and inseparable from meaning. The sensual elements of the filmic image are made to answer to the ideological imperatives that govern the particular world view proffered by the film’s producers. In Hollywood cinema this world view is almost always influenced by the powerful relationship between the Hollywood system and capitalist power (Schatz, 1983).

This complex negotiation between ideology and the expression of real physical conditions has an important place in Siegfried Kracauer’s arguments about cinema. Though, like Bazin, Kracauer’s thinking has become unfashionable in recent theory, Kracauer anticipates Gunning and Sobchack in his recognition of the sensual appeal of cinematic realism. He writes: “No doubt a major portion of the material which dazes and thrills the moviegoer consists of sights of the outer world, crude physical spectacles and details” (1974: 285). But Kracauer views this capacity as offering the potential to disrupt ideological systems of meaning and provide a fresh view of the physical world. In my introduction, I put forward Kracauer’s idea that “physical reality is revealed out of a desire to pierce the fabric of conventions” (308). According to Miriam Hansen, Kracauer saw that by focussing on its realist aspect cinema could enact a kind of deconstructive shock that had the power to upset bourgeois ideological constructions (Hansen 1993).

Kracauer finds in the photographic realism of cinema the potential to explore the material base of human experience. The materialist impulse of realist cinema, he suggests, is resistant to “articulate meanings” and thus potentially capable of unsettling established ways of thinking. Because of its capacity to undermine bourgeois ideology, Kracauer saw the physical and sensual dimensions of cinema as comparable to the processes of dialectical materialism (Hansen 1993: 451). Importantly, he considered the tendency toward narrative coherence and closure as being in opposition to the potentially disruptive materialism of the cinema. In traditional storytelling, “each image, instead of being established as a fragment of reality which may yield multiple meanings, must assume a meaning derived from contexts alien to the medium -- contents which gravitate towards an ideological centre” (Kracauer 1974: 223). As Hansen notes, Kracauer finds
theatrical intrigues and the film d'art problematic for the same features it shares with contemporary narrative film: "[H]e objected to a dramatic form that implied a hermetically closed, purposefully organised, and meaningful world" (Hansen 1993: 450). Such closure neutralised the disruptive potential of cinema's appeal to real material conditions.

Kracauer's contentions are similar to the arguments of André Bazin outlined above. Bazin celebrates the semantic ambiguity created by the loosening of narrative organization in Italian cinema. Bazin recognized that the complexity of reality posed a challenge to abstract systems of meaning. The peculiar specificity and contingency emphasized by a documentary consciousness as opposed to a fictional consciousness has the potential to complicate common-sense ideas about the world. Kracauer saw that the material contingency of cinema has the potential to foreground the diffuse, random and constantly changing nature of the material universe. Such a vision of the world would offer a powerful challenge to the way in which aesthetic production grounds ideological generalisations in concrete sensate experience.

In Gummo, Korine combines an emphasis on the sensual dimensions of the material world with a loose narrative trajectory comprised of episodes inspired by the conditions of the films setting -- an impoverished and tornado-ravaged town. Korine's film, however, like the early cinema described by Tom Gunning, self-consciously foregrounds questions around the reality status of its images. The film employs the devices celebrated by Kracauer and Bazin, not to avoid ideological inflection, but to foreground and complicate the way that symbolism and ideology operate. I will show that by drawing near to the ground of material experience, Gummo poses questions about the relationship between material experience and the meanings people draw from it.
Realism and the Grotesque

It is in the potential to question the relationship between material forms and their projected meanings that the photographic realism of the cinema corresponds with the operations of the grotesque mode. Thus far I have considered Bakhtin and Kayser’s ideas about the grotesque. I would like to extend my earlier discussion by taking up the insights of Geoffrey Harpham and Victor Hugo. Both of these theorists draw links between the grotesque and the actual. Harpham (1982) points out that the fantastical distortions and demonic images found in the grotesque, actually have their origins in a certain commitment to realism. Like phenomenological realism, the grotesque involves a tendency away from ideal forms toward the heterogeneity and specificity that can be found in the real world but is often ruled out of representation.

Harpham writes:

The grotesque stands as a warning sign of writing’s dangers, which may be characterised as the tendency to constitute an autonomous system unconnected to the ground of being or the origin of meaning -- unconnected to reality or nature. (1982: 131)

Kracauer’s theory of the realist functions of cinema comes very close to realising the operations of the grotesque mode:

Film brings the whole material world into play; reaching beyond theatre and painting, it for the first time sets that which exists into motion. It does not aim upward, toward intention, but pushes toward the bottom, to gather and carry along even the dregs. It is interested in the refuse, in what is just there -- both in and outside the human being. (Kracauer cited in Hansen 1993: 447)

This is remarkably similar to Harpham’s description of the grotesque as a state of “low-as-high and high-descending” (1982: 74).

Like Bakhtin and Harpham, Victor Hugo sees the grotesque not as fantastical but as drawn from reality. He describes the grotesque as “the richest source that nature can offer art” (2005: par 41). In his famous preface to Cromwell, Hugo offered a useful theory
about the role of the grotesque in art. According to Hugo, classical art presented an impression of life that was in line with a certain aesthetic paradigm. He sees the emergence of the grotesque in modern times as offering the promise of a "new poetry" (par 31) "...the purely epic muse of the ancients had studied nature in only a single aspect, casting aside without pity almost everything in art which, in the world subjected to its imitation, had not relation to a certain type of beauty" (par 31).

Hugo noted that the classical paradigm of beauty required a certain homogenization. All beautiful people and objects are similar in their symmetry and harmony of form. On the other hand, it is possible to be ugly in a myriad of different ways. Thus, in the grotesque Hugo discovers a wonderful variety of forms, ignored and excluded by the norms of classical aesthetics. He comments:

The beautiful has but one type, the ugly has a thousand. The fact is that the beautiful, humanly speaking, is merely form considered in its simplest aspect, in its most perfect symmetry, in its most entire harmony with our make-up. Thus the ensemble that it offers us is always complete, but restricted like ourselves. What we call the ugly, on the contrary, is a detail of a great whole which eludes us, and which is in harmony, not with man but with all creation. (par 43)

According to Hugo, the grotesque form can present a world alien to traditional representation and highlight restrictive convention by drawing on the multiple variations of form supplied by nature.

Hugo’s insistence on the relationship between the grotesque and nature suggests an interesting link with Bazin’s thinking about photography. For Bazin writes that “[p]hotography affects us like a phenomenon in nature, like a flower or a snowflake whose vegetable or earthy origins are an inseparable part of their beauty” (1967: 13). There is, according to Bazin, an organic relationship between the photograph and the object world before the lens and this feature allows films and photographs to present impressions of the world less influenced by conventions or standards of taste. Realist cinema, then, has a particular affinity for the grotesquerie that emerges from the natural world.
Gunning makes a link between early cinema and Augustine's concept of *curiositas* -- an interest in "unbeautiful sights, such as a mangled corpse..." (1999: 827). *Curiositas* combined a voyeuristic impulse with an intellectual curiosity allied to scientific discourse. For Gunning this was a defining feature of the modern period. The cinema of attractions featured such spectacles as elephants being electrocuted and the beheading of criminals (1999: 829).

An emphasis on indexical realism in cinema and photography often coincides with an investigation of extremes. Linda Williams argues, with reference to Bazin, that theories of realism inevitably run the risk of justifying "‘ultimate’ obscenity" (Williams, 1989: 37). Williams discusses Bazin’s own concerns about the pornographic impulse within cinema. Bazin’s ethical misgivings are prompted by his reaction to a newsreel featuring the execution of spies. He describes this footage as “[a]n ontological pornography” (38). As for Sobchack, it is the issue of real onscreen death that produces a moral discomfort for Bazin. Williams notes that “[b]y the logic of a realist ontology, the vision of ... ultimate or extreme “truths” should be admitted to view, no matter how shocking simply because they exist” (ibid). She argues that Bazin cannot reconcile the contradiction between his realist theory of the cinema and the tendencies toward the pornographic and violent (ibid).

While the representation of extremes such as sex and death may be morally disquieting, these features also have the potential to bring into particularly sharp focus the standards, norms and taboos of a society. It is for this reason that certain practices in avant-garde filmmaking share with early cinema a flirtation with the obscene and extreme. But it is not necessarily just a primitive, pornographic and exploitative interest in obscenity that drives these images -- such explorations also channel a concern with extremes and limits that challenge norms.

This feature of both early cinema and avant-garde practices of film and photography is usefully understood through the figure of the 'freak.' The dark and disturbing mood of
Gummo is achieved, in part, by the way in which it foregrounds characters with physical abnormalities like dwarfism, Down's syndrome and albinism. Korine is part of a tradition of filmmakers and photographers such as Tod Browning, Werner Herzog and Diane Arbus who have found in the bodily anomalies of freaks a means for exploring more universal questions about embodiment, subjectivity and specificity.

According to Elisabeth Grosz, human freaks are interesting because they bring into focus questions around normativity and what it is to be human (1996: 55). She writes of freaks:

> They occupy the impossible middle ground between the oppositions dividing human from animal...one being from another... nature from culture...one sex from another...adults and children... humans and gods.... and the living and the dead. (1996: 57)

Freaks confront normative thinking about humanity with their physical, boundary-blurring obscurity. For Diane Arbus, whose photographs are undoubtedly an influence on the imagery in Gummo, the phenomenon of freakery is best served by the photographic medium (Arbus 1995). This is perhaps because, in the figure of the freak (in our culture) a person's very humanity and their outward appearance are so obviously intertwined. The entire personhood of a freak seems bound to their physical limitations. Importantly, freaks are resistant to generalisation because their embodied experience is so unique and irreducible. With their bodily abnormalities on obvious display freaks are the ultimate realisation of the photographic tendency toward the specific, contingent and materially circumscribed. Freaks encourage a grotesque pull toward the material aspects of existence and away from ideal forms and the concepts of mastery and coherence that such forms embody.

Gummo combines the specificity of phenomenological realism with the representation of bodily anomaly in a film that foregrounds physical experience while resisting the clarity offered by traditional storytelling. I will now explore how this combination of features produces a decentring ambiguity.

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1 See the 1997 interview with Tom Lyons in The Eye, in which Korine discusses the influence of Arbus and writers within the Southern Gothic tradition.
**Gummo**

Near the beginning of *Gummo*, Solly and Tummler, the two cat-killing anti-heroes of the film, make an ethical decision. While the boys shoot stray cats on a regular basis and with little apparent remorse, Solly stops Tummler from shooting Dot and Helen’s pet, Foot-foot because it is a housecat. But by the end of the film the boys have changed their minds and Foot-foot meets the same fate as all the other unwanted felines in the neighbourhood. The boys’ initial moral position distinguishes the inexpedable from the expendable.

Korine draws a powerful comparison between *Gummo*’s many stray cats and the disaffected and parentless human characters in the film. It would seem that *Gummo* is concerned with the way in which certain creatures are considered valuable while others, the dispossessed, are viewed as disposable. The characters in *Gummo* are poor and variously disabled. Few of them could be considered traditionally beautiful and most of the characters could be described as “freakish” by popular standards of beauty. These figures live in filthy houses. They get drunk, take drugs and don’t seem to engage in any productive form of labour. They come from incomplete families and display what some might call really “bad taste.” As such, Korine’s male subjects stand in strong contradistinction to the idealised American citizen who is able-bodied, a heterosexual upwardly mobile man of action, a family man who is clean and typically white.

As much as *Gummo*’s characters may constitute the opposite of the American ideal, they are entirely the products of American culture and history. For these figures are usually found at the margins of American cultural production -- the “other” against which “civilized”, bourgeois, WASP middle America defines itself. *Gummo* brings these figures to the centre of his film to produce a portrait of America as a carnival of difference and “deformity”. However, unlike freakshows of old or various forms of exploitation media, *Gummo* does not produce this portrait as a counterpoint to flatter normative identities. Instead Korine infuses his urban wasteland with distinctly American symbolism and
popular culture, presenting us with America as constituted by its forgotten and dismissed members.

As much as the use of Super-8 footage and documentary devices may give the film a realist aesthetic, *Gummo* actively foregrounds operations of symbolisation. Korine toys with the incongruity of traditional symbols of American prosperity and freedom with this impoverished setting. *Gummo* addresses the role of symbolic structures at work in the lives of its characters (particularly the pervasiveness of ideas about masculinity and violence). More importantly, *Gummo* addresses and denaturalises the symbolic operations involved in the construction of “otherness.” In this process, documentary realism and sensory excess play important roles in complicating sign systems and drawing attention to the gaps and stumbling blocks between the material world and the play of signification upon it.

**Documentary and Fiction**

Foot-foot’s disappearance and demise is the very loose line of narrative tension that runs through *Gummo*, a film otherwise comprised of loosely interwoven dramatic tableaux with little narrative drive or intrigue. The film is punctuated by a mundane domestic sort of violence (a drunk man wrestles a chair) and various murders -- sometimes presented as a performance (a boy feigns his death in a children’s game) and at other times coded as real (in the case of the cats). Korine constantly contrasts these “real” animal deaths perpetrated by Solly and Tummler to the often violent battles performed by the film’s characters. This is just one of the ways in which Korine toys with the boundary between documentary and fictional modes in this film.

The aesthetic of *Gummo* is composed of a number of different styles. The film includes hazy Super-8 footage, Polaroid snaps, and surveillance-style shooting with the artful camerawork of Jean Yves Escoffier. Characters often address the camera or narrate their stories through voice-over as subjects would in a documentary film. In other instances the camera respects a sense of enclosed dramatic space and Korine adopts a style of filmmaking near to classical narration. While the question of realism is at stake in every
image, it is clear that Korine is not interested in producing a transparent documentary portrait. Rather, the composite style of the film, combined with its excessive use of intertextual references draws attention to the fact that is has been authored. *Gummo* is intriguing because it never allows the viewer to be certain of where the film stands in relation to documentary and fictional modes.

Like the Italian neorealists whose filmmaking Bazin praised for an open engagement with the material world, *Gummo* adopts a documentary approach to its subject matter — allowing real conditions to inform the film’s style. Korine uses the word “mistake-ist” (Korine, cited in Kelley 1997) to describe the way in which his filmmaking embraces the accidental and the contingent. *Gummo* was shot on location in Nashville. Many of the scenes of excessive filth were shot in the homes of the film’s cast members. Korine goes so far as to claim that nothing was added to any of the indoor sets — they were simply found like that (Korine, 1997e: 56). The film features a cast of largely unprofessional actors whose performances are sometimes so “bad” that they reveal a peculiar honesty.

As I have suggested, Korine’s film has come under attack for its use of these real people in a fictional film. The popular argument is that Korine is exploiting his subjects’ “freakishness” and poverty for a shock effect. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to argue about the ethics and implications of filming real people — particularly of those suffering real misfortune or pain. I would simply suggest that Korine is not unique in this dilemma and the same moral questions attend many documentaries that feature human subjects. However, the value that Korine and a number of other directors — including his hero and friend Werner Herzog— place on the “real” people and real “freaks” goes beyond mere voyeurism or shock tactics. Certainly, there is an aesthetic value that Korine discovers in the realism of his strange-looking performers’ often awkward posturing before the camera. But this aesthetic commitment to realism ultimately provokes a powerful questioning of dominant moral and aesthetic standards. As I will show, Korine’s interest in representing freaks using realism is related to an interest in challenging ideal standards of American normalcy. In addition the ethically questionable behaviour of some of these characters (sleeping with a mentally retarded prostitute,
shooting cats, switching off an old woman's respirator) is less an attempt to exoticise them and more an attack on common understandings of decency.

In response to criticisms about his depiction of disabled people Korine reveals a distinct aversion to romanticising or idealising his subjects. If Korine holds any ethical stance toward his subjects it is a sort of basic humanism and an aversion to transcendental moral systems that take no account of the pressures of an individual's environment. This, again, is very much a feature of phenomenological realism. As in Kids, no matter how depraved or unorthodox their actions, Gummo's protagonists retain a sense of innocence outside of conventional moral judgement. Solly and Tummler may shoot cats but we are still encouraged to feel for them when they lie in a rain gutter sniffing glue and Tummler sings lines from the Roy Orbison song, Crying while reminiscing about his "queer" brother who left town. I will later explore in more detail how Gummo's characters are presented both as victims of the "order of things" and of the order of signs.

In defence of his portrayal of disabled characters, Korine comments:

I mean you could have Tom Hanks play someone like that and win an Academy Award because it's some romantic idea of life with a handicap, but you show the real thing and it's suddenly too intense or grotesque for an audience. I just don't get it. (Korine 1997b: par 14)

Here Korine suggests that reviewers' reactions are inspired much more by their own aesthetic response to depictions of disability than by any moral imperative.

Sobchack's discussion of rabbits, death and realism reveals that documentary realism can draw particular attention to the moral and aesthetic norms held by a society. When actions we find morally reprehensible are represented as "real" on film, objections are often based on the way in which the film attests, in a Bazinian sense, to the fact that these actions have actually taken place in the real world. This is one of the common objections against pornography and, particularly, snuff films. We are not merely objecting to the representation or the idea of an act but to its actual occurrence for the sake of its filmic reproduction. Korine does not use this feature of indexical realism to enliven, in viewers, a sense of moral outrage for the depravity of the world he represents (though this has
often been one of the effects the film has had on dismayed viewers). Rather, a
documentary style realism is used to focus attention on basic moral assumptions.
In addition, by constantly undercutting the sense of documentary realism that he sets up,
Korine also toys with the differing moral feelings that documentary and fictional modes
inspire.

The film’s commitment to elements of phenomenological realism is also evidenced in its
rudimentary narrative structure. This feature of the film contributes to negative critical
responses because Korine makes no judgement on what he presents. While *Kids* featured
a loose narrative structure similar to neorealist plotlines, it is quite difficult to decipher
any narrative organisation at all in *Gummo*. The film is constructed out of a somewhat
disparate collection of scenes. The main characters, Solomon and Tummler, spend their
time shooting cats for money in order to buy glue and pay for the services of an underage,
mentally handicapped prostitute. Other key characters are the platinum blonde sisters Dot
and Helen, whose beloved pet cat, Foot-foot, the boys ultimately shoot. A mysteriously
beautiful young boy wearing bunny-rabbit ears and dirty shorts makes regular
appearances throughout the film. In addition, home-video style footage of Nashville
residents is woven in with more orchestrated dramatic tableaux.

Korine’s restraint from narrative orchestration and the openness of his filmmaking to real
characters and environments would suggest that he is more interested than most
filmmakers in engaging the documentary consciousness that Sobchack describes. The
images in *Gummo* demand an attention to specific social circumstances and they are
disturbing because they draw on the stylistic devices of documentary to provoke the
viewer to consider the situations depicted as continuous with our own reality rather than
sealed off in a fictional universe. Of course, many viewers may not respond to the
eccentric universe of *Gummo* as a portrait of reality. And, as I have suggested, as much
as Korine draws on the sensitive ethical and individual focus of a phenomenological
realism, he also complicates this kind of realism.
An example of such unsettling shifts between a documentary address and a fictional mode occurs in our introduction to Ellen, the mentally handicapped girl who wears metal band T-shirts and shaves off her own eyebrows. This scene is marked by a subtle play with the distinction between a documentary and fiction. Ellen walks toward camera smiling shyly into it and singing the ABC song. The camera tracks back with her movement. Ellen makes frequent eye-contact with the camera revealing a somewhat sheepish awareness of its presence as she performs her song. Then the camera assumes a stationary position and Ellen (in quite an obviously rehearsed way) stops singing and walks away from the camera toward Dot and Helen who are leaning on a fence bordering a tennis court. As Ellen approaches the pair Korine cuts to a frontal shot of the three women from the other side of the fence. In this reverse shot the cameraman whose presence was so strongly implied by Ellen's behaviour, has disappeared. The rest of the scene is filmed using the conventional invisibility of the cameraman common to fiction filmmaking.

Korine further problematises any sense of realism he creates by frequently inviting the viewer to consider images as general and symbolic in a way that, Sobchack argues, is encouraged from viewers by the fictional mode. While Gummo has no clear narrative trajectory, the film is teeming with references to pop culture, recurring motifs and mythical images. Such images ask us to draw on our fictional consciousness -- our capacity to read specific objects in cinema as symbols or metaphors.

For example, Korine indulges in punning play with the word 'pussy.' Mike Kelley points out that the film features the repeated motif of dead pussycats and also frequently reveals its young protagonists using the word pussy as a curse (Kelley, 1997). Korine packs his film with references to quirky, underground and forgotten figures in American popular culture. For example, the characters Dot and Helen are named after two members of the notoriously terrible late 60's band, The Shaggs. The film itself is named after Gummo, one of the Marx brothers who left the group early. Korine told David Letterman that Gummo left because he liked to dress in women’s clothes (Korine 1998b) -- this is another of Korine’s imaginative interpretations of the truth. Gummos was actually forced
to stop acting when drafted into the army (Kanfer 2000: 54). In his assertion that Gummo Marx was a crossdresser, Korine may be referring to an incident when Gummo and Groucho sabotaged the costumes of two female performers who were upstaging them (Kanfer 2000: 49 – 50). Nonetheless, Korine’s comments suggest that he finds Gummo Marx interesting because of his status as an obscure and forgotten figure in American popular culture.

The film enacts curious reconstructions of classical Hollywood tendencies. For example, Korine makes use of Chloë Sevigny’s cult image to liken her to classical Hollywood stars like Marylin Monroe. When the platinum blonde Sevigny shakes her hair seductively for the camera in a gratuitous slow motion close-up, Korine interrupts the realism of the film with an image of classical Hollywood excess and specularity. One could take such an image as an example of the visual spectacle and flattening of screen space that Laura Mulvey recognises in the treatment of female stars by the classical Hollywood camera (Mulvey, 1989). Solomon and Tummler ride into the narrative world of Gummo on their bicycles like the heroes of a Western on their steeds. In a more obvious reference to the Western genre, two foul-mouthed young boys play a game of “Cowboys and Indians” in which they enact the violence common to the genre on the strangely innocent Bunny Boy. I will return to this scene in more detail later in this chapter. Gummo also resembles the world of Oz in a number of ways, notably in its tornado opening and distrust of parental control. In The Wizard of Oz (1939), a film made very much within the classical Hollywood paradigm, a clear line was drawn between the normality of the ‘real’ world in Kansas and the strangeness of Oz. Korine produces a picture of Middle America in which Oz and Kansas are imbricated. The ‘real’ world of America is presented as strange.

The mysterious Bunny Boy is one of the first characters we encounter in Gummo. He strides onto a filthy bridge over a freeway appearing, in one sense, as very much part of the real environment he inhabits -- dirty, topless, wearing polyester shorts and missing a front tooth. He also happens to be wearing a pair of baby-pink bunny ears. It is plausible enough to imagine that he found the rabbit ears, put them on and went off to skulk around on a freeway bridge. But the ears grant him a degree of incongruity with his
environment and, ingeniously, they connect him with more mythic ideas. He is the Easter Bunny, Alice’s white rabbit, The Playboy Bunny and Jesus Christ with his pink arms outstretched. At the same time he is not any of these things -- just a boy playing on a bridge. In this image the documentary interest in specificity is contrasted to the impulse toward generalisation demanded by a fictional address.

After the opening Super-8 images, this sequence is shot on a much higher quality camera and with the use of a tripod. The camera changes position with each cut, dramatically shifting between extreme long-shots and intimate close-ups of Bunny Boy. At some points, the camera treats him as a glowing starlet and accordingly he struts and looks daringly into the camera. Other shots appear as if they were recorded by an invisible observer and Bunny Boy’s acting is fittingly naturalistic. This see-sawing between an exhibitionist, confrontational address to the audience and an almost ethnographic, observational realism, characterises the rest of the film.

_Gummo_ offers more than the ruptures of fictional space by documentary conventions as described by Sobchack. It engages in a more extreme play with the boundary between fiction and documentary -- demanding that the viewer occupy a rather uncomfortable position in relation to the on screen world. This spectator position can be compared to the viewing experience theorised by Gunning for early cinema audiences -- a position "vacillating between belief and incredulity" (Gunning 1999: 821).

Perhaps the most important way in which the mythical elements of the Bunny Boy image are complicated is in the physical presence of this character. We are confronted with the little boy’s material body in a very disquieting way as he holds his arms and shivers, scratches his bottom against the fence behind him like a rabbit, spits and pisses onto the traffic bellow him. The images of this bare-chested child, kicking at trash and breathing hot smoke into the cold rainy air around him are physically affective. This is particulary true of the final shot of the sequence -- an extreme close-up of the boy’s pink lips as they pucker together, about to shoot forth another blob of spit straight in the direction of the viewer.
American Grotesquerie

Korine announced to David Letterman: “Bacon is my aesthetic actually” (Korine 1998b). He was referring to one of the most physically disquieting scenes in Gummo in which Solomon eats Spaghetti and later chocolate, while taking a bath in an astonishingly filthy bathroom. A piece of bacon is taped to the wall behind him. Through this reference to a piece of bacon, Korine announces an aesthetic approach based on an interest in absurd physical details -- things that appeal directly to our gut but confound meaningful interpretation. Gummo gives us signification that doesn’t ‘make sense.’ At the same time the abstract ideas that the images allude to are grounded in an unsettling and ambivalent material contingency. In a double entendre typical of Korine, the use of the word ‘bacon’ also hints at the work of the visual artist Francis Bacon who constructs nightmarish and violent images of corporeality. Bacon’s paintings are greatly informed by an interest in photography and like Korine’s films, his works produce a destabilising ambivalence by fusing realistic elements with absurdities that complicate meaning. In Gummo the ambiguity produced by such foregrounding of physical extremes is particularly targeted at compromising certain American values and aesthetic standards. It draws its grotesque aesthetic from three main cultural influences that each have a very intimate relationship to the “underside” of American cultural history. Gummo pays homage to slapstick comedy and the American freakshow. The film also draws on the Southern Grotesque tradition, particularly in its mobilisation of the Hillbilly figure.

A feature of Gummo that I have already addressed in some detail is its foregrounding of “freakery.” While bodily anomaly and difference has been an influence on cultural production worldwide since ancient times, Gummo draws on a distinctly American manifestation of the enduring human interest in freaks. Rosmarie Garland Thomson (1997) argues that the nineteenth-century freakshow served an important cultural role in this formative period in American national identity. The freakshow provided diverse examples of extreme physical anomaly against which Americans could construct a sense
of normalcy and a unified national identity in such a way as to neutralise the contradictions between the founding American principles of equality and individualism:

The freak show's prevalence after about 1840 can be seen...as serving to consolidate a version of American selfhood that was capable, rational and normative, but that strove toward an ontological sameness upon which the notion of democratic equality is predicated. Extravagant in its repudiation of the typical, the displayed freak flattened the spectators' peculiarities and aligned them with the familiar. (1997: 64)

Thomson offers the example of Joice Heth, one of P.T. Barnum's first "Freaks," to argue that it was not necessarily extreme bodily anomaly that went into being an American Freak but rather the signs of social lowness that marked freaks from normal people:

A black, old, crippled, blind toothless slave woman, she fuses a combination of characteristics the ideal American self rejects. Joice Heth thus represents America's composite physical other, the domesticated reversal of America's self-image...She becomes a freak not by virtue of her body's uniqueness, but rather by displaying the stigmata of social devaluation. Indeed Joice Heth is the direct antithesis of the able-bodied, white, male figure upon which the developing notion of the American normate was predicated. (1997: 59)

Thus, like the fool of ancient times, the freak in American history occupied a mirroring role as the other by which normative identity and embodiment are established and confirmed. Crucial to the freak's operation as flattering "other" is an important operation of symbolic reduction or textualisation. For Thomson the "cardinal principle of enfreakment" (ibid) is that "that the body envelops and obliterates the freak's potential humanity" (ibid). She continues: "When the body becomes pure text, a freak has been produced from a physically disabled human being" (ibid).

Thomson notes that while the freak's bodily abnormality has mainly been used to support and confirm normative American identity there is also, within the freakshow, another potentiality: the freak is an ambivalent figure and the freakish body is positioned as "both wondrous and repellent" (1997:136). Thus Thomson also discovers "a counternarrative of physical difference or the mark of distinctive individual or collective history that interrogates the very definition of the ideal American self" (137).
Thomson emphasises the importance of juxtaposing “freaks” with those considered normal. In popular freak shows, racial others and disabled people were constituted as “freaks” when placed on display next to women who were considered conventionally beautiful by Western standards (64). However in Gummo there is no such juxtaposition. 

Gummo produces a portrait of America as a place whose population is “freakish”.

Korine’s use of “freakish” people may be contrasted to the tendency within classical Hollywood cinema to cast actors who meet a very narrow definition of beauty. Thus American blockbusters such as Titanic (1997), Pearl Harbour (2001) and Spiderman (2002), give us heroes who are healthy, handsome, mostly white and able-bodied along with heroines who are attractive (often blonde), slender and physically fit. While many advances have been made in recent years in terms of the representation of black people, Latinos, homosexuals and other minority groups in the cinema, these figures (despite a few exceptions like Will Smith or Halle Berry) still generally occupy marginal roles in major releases. Even as the racial profiles of movie casts are changing, ugliness is still something of a taboo issue. When mental or physical abnormality is represented in Hollywood it is often treated sympathetically, but as a problem: the contrast between the “freak” and normal people is the driving drama of the film. This is the case in films like Mask (1985), Forrest Gump (1994), Powder (1995), The Other Sister (1999) and I am Sam (2001). In Gummo freakishness is a normal condition of everyday life. This film parades the unusual appearances of its characters to reveal another view of America, one that undermines idealised images of an American type.

Crucial to Thomson’s account of freakery, is an understanding of the way in which the freak’s body is reduced to a symbol and, by this process, the humanity of the person in question is denied. My previous discussion highlighted the links between photographic realism and an approach to freakery that explores the specificity and irreducible particularity of freaks. Photography may, in many instances, be a vehicle of the problematic textualisation and reification of the freak’s body. However, there is also the potential within the photographic medium to address bodily anomaly as a marvellous
discovery of the unique and different, like the understanding of the grotesque celebrated by Hugo as a means of disrupting the norms of representation, or the proclivity toward difference achieved by Bazin's phenomenological realism.

Indeed, Korine uses his camera in an anthropological way, to reveal the specific and irreducible strangeness of each and every character. In the director's commentary included on the *Gummo* DVD Korine comments:

> I don't see any one person as being any one way. I don't think things are as easy or as simple as they are said or shown to be in most movies. For me it wasn't hard or complex showing the complexity of these characters; of a girl with Down's syndrome showing her beauty because her beauty is obvious and transcendent to me. (Korine, 2000b)

Korine seems to echo Bazin's sentiments about a realism of appearances. He is not interested in presenting his characters as "objects" or "symbols" as they would operate in a classical Hollywood film. Korine employs the wide range of physically different people in his film because of their power to defy classification and pose problems for interpretation. *Gummo* emphasizes the 'freakish' appearances of its characters in a way that highlights the idiosyncrasy of each character. Amongst the film's 'freaks' are a prostitute with Down's syndrome made up with cascading blonde ringlets and colorful make-up, a flirtatious albino woman who describes herself on camera as if placing a personals advert and professes her attraction to Patrick Swayze, a black dwarf who defeats a normal-sized man at arm wrestling and Ellen, the mentally handicapped girl, who also happens to enjoy shaving off her eyebrows and wearing death metal T-shirts. Each of these characters has more dimension to their personalities than their status as different or freakish.

This combination of realism and celebration of physical anomaly is not unique to Korine's film or to the medium of cinema. It is a central feature of Southern Grotesque writing. The works of Southern greats like William Faulkner, Erskine Caldwell (in his Appalachian works), Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, Flannery O'Connor, and Cormac McCarthy have been informed by an interest in grotesque material such as bodily extremes, poverty, violence and dirt.
As Richard Gray points out, the South has traditionally been associated with a "sense of aberration and anomaly" (1996: 4). The area has a dark history of slavery, poverty and racial tension. Poverty and displacement have been particular features of the Southern experience for poor whites since the civil war and for black people since the beginning of their history in the area as slaves. The South is associated with backwardness in representations of the region as a place inhabited by primitive Hillbillies. For these reasons Allison Graham writes that the South has been seen as "[t]he 'dark' underbelly of the nation, the reversed image in the mass media mirror, the South was and is America's repellent yet all too compelling Other" (Graham, 1996: 335). Writers who have represented this underbelly have been characterised as working within the "Southern Grotesque". It is not surprising, given Korine's interest in the symbolic construction of American "others," that he should evoke the South in his film, a South whose "grotesque" fiction is driven by an inclination to uncover the sinister, threatening and shameful elements of American life that are often excluded from representation.

The hillbilly is an important figure through which Gummo draws on the Southern Grotesque. J.W. Williamson notes that hillbillies often appear in American media as the fools against which American values are contrasted and consolidated (1995: 4). Solomon and Tummler, the central tricksters of the film, adopt many hillbilly traits. Their cat shooting, drug abuse (in place of boozing), hokey hairstyles, connection with dirt and general aimlessness connect them to the hillbilly stereotype. The hillbilly's filth, laziness and aimlessness define him in clear contrast to the values associated with American capitalism. The hillbilly is linked instead to America's rural and primitive past. Williamson describes the hillbilly as a quintessentially American incarnation of the fool and argues that he operates as a "mirror" to American society, a mirror that "flatters, frightens and humiliates" (ibid).

Williamson notes that the hillbilly can be threatening because "[o]ur secret dread is that the dark, drunken hillbilly is no Other, but us" (1995: 6). Whilst the hillbilly is often used as a point of contrast and ridicule against which American values are affirmed, in Gummo
the filth and primitivism of this figure emerge not to “flatter” mainstream sensibilities but to undermine notions of American civilisation and prosperity. Through Solly and Tummler, the hillbilly emerges as the central figure in Korine’s depiction of America. Korine makes no separation between contemporary American values and backwoods primitivism. *Gummo* combines this hillbilly aesthetic with more contemporary elements of the American cultural landscape. In this way the film connects references to the country’s primitive past with modern cultural influences as diverse as “black metal,” skateboarding and Madonna.

Solly and Tummler are perhaps most like the stereotype of the hillbilly in their inclination to shoot animals. Like Telly and Casper in *Kids*, Solly and Tummler are harbingers of death. They not only kill cats, but ultimately end the life of Jarrod’s brain-dead grandmother by switching off her respirator. In this violent inclination they hold up the mirror to an American society founded on conquest and violence against those that have been deemed expendable such as Native Americans and slaves. Though *Gummo*’s hillbilly fools are threatening, they are also relatively sympathetic figures -- they lack the sinister dimensions that hillbillies display in films like *Deliverance* (1972) and *Cape Fear* (1991). Despite their actions Solly and Tummler remain innocents. However they remain innocent fools who create productive ambiguity. Solly and Tummler’s cat killing, in particular, produces a fruitful moral discomfort about realism and the representation of death. I will discuss this idea in greater depth later in this chapter.

Another American manifestation of the fool that emerges in *Gummo* is the slapstick comedian of early cinema. Robert Sklar argues that, when the American comic tradition found its way into motion picture filmmaking, these combined forms “found support for their freest and wildest natures, for the crudity and bawdiness which the middle-class social code tried so persistently to suppress” (1975: 104). For Sklar early American silent comedies “gave expression to the underside of American values and behaviour, the opposite pole from order and decorum... they projected their grotesque exaggeration, their extravagance, violence and sexual licence, on a screen as large as the world” (ibid).
Sklar recognises that the realism of cinema is particularly suited to the chaotic potential of slapstick comedy because slapstick relies so much on the relationship between the individual and his physical environment. I have been arguing for the important relationship between the physical elements of experience and phenomenological realism. Both Bazin and Kracauer have made the same observation about the relationship between realism and slapstick. Bazin writes that “[s]lapstick is first and foremost, or at least is also, the dramatic expression of the tyranny of things” (1971: 112). This is certainly the role slapstick plays in Gummo, a film in which characters are constantly swamped by dirt and clutter. The homes in the film are not just filthy, but overrun by objects in a fantastical way. This is particularly true of the piles of things that line the walls of Dot and Helen’s house.

Gummo draws on the tendency in slapstick comedy for the comic to have an absurd relationship with objects, for example, in a powerful and much-praised scene in which a man wrestles a chair until all its legs break off, Korine himself admires the grotesque operation in which “a chair becomes a person” (Korine, 1997e: par 21) and notes the truly absurd and existential dimensions of this image by asking “what would happen if the chair won?” (Korine 2000a: 269). If the chair did defeat the man, his status as human being would be at risk. Slapstick scenes like this one can threaten boundaries such as those between humans and objects in a particularly grotesque way.

In a discussion of Chaplin and Keaton, William Willeford comments:

> The fool breaks down the boundary between chaos and order, but he also violates our assumption that that boundary was where we thought it was and that it had the character we thought it had: that of affirming whatever we take for granted and in that way protecting us from the dark unknown. (1969:108)

An important boundary frequently transgressed by Gummo’s particular brand of physical comedy is that between comedy and pathos. For example, in a poignant scene, Solly’s mother steps into his father’s oversized tap-shoes and dances before a mirror. In this scene she looks every bit like a clown. This image is both comic and tragic. The huge
empty shoes speak so eloquently of Solly’s absent father. Comedians like Chaplin and Keaton often produced this peculiar mixture of comedy and sadness that is also a powerful feature of *Gummo*.

**America Orphaned**

A major thematic concern of *Gummo* is the issue of parenting. Solomon’s voice-over at the opening of the film announces: “A lot of people’s fathers died in the great tornado” and later in the voiceover he reveals that his own father was also killed this way: “People died in Xenia. Before dad died he had a bad case of the diabetes”. Tummler’s relationship with his father is uneasy and he mourns his lost mother. He writes in his journal: “His dad never gave a crap. Not even at the end of his game....” At the close of the sequence, the camera focuses on the word “dad” scrawled in Tummler’s notepad as he scratches the word out with aggressive pen strokes.

*Gummo*’s Xenia, Ohio is inhabited by a host of incomplete families and incomplete people. Korine presents us with a number of adult children like Ellen who is at one point shown holding a plastic baby doll and treating it as if it were a real baby. Dot and Helen are raising their younger sister Darby. Jarrod Wiggley, the young crossdresser who offers Solomon and Tummler some competition in their cat-killing enterprise, has to support his brain-dead grandmother. Cassidy, the Downs syndrome prostitute that Tummler and Solly visit, is prostituted by her guardian, and the old man who offers to give Dot and Helen a lift ends up trying to molest them.

Many have criticised Korine for his interest in such “small” issues as family problems. One reviewer comments: “Korine’s film is puny; it’s mainly a protest film about parents who aren’t nice enough to their kids” (von Busack, 1998:18). I would argue, however, that Korine is making a comment, not only on the dysfunctional family unit, but about America as corruptly parented. The inherited wisdom and the popular images on which children build themselves in *Gummo* are revealed as grossly corrupted.
This idea is illustrated quite obviously when Korine gives us two young cowboys re-enacting the tropes of the classic Western genre. The boys are introduced in long shot as they hurl pieces of scrap metal around with gusto and curse at imaginary cops. Each boy is wearing a cowboy hat, gun holsters, and a waistcoat. In a medium-shot, Bunny Boy enters the scrap yard with a resolute look on his face and a cowboy swagger. His entrance resembles those made by Western heroes at the beginning of a duel. Bunny Boy walks toward the camera until he is framed in close-up. Offscreen one of the cowboys shouts “Damn you, rabbit. You smell like fucking piss.” The elder boy joins in: “You can kiss my ass.” The film cuts to a long-shot of the two cowboys with Bunny Boy in the foreground of the image, his back turned to the camera. The boys are now arranged in traditional Western standoff.

The cowboys reproduce with shocking vehemence their aggression toward Bunny Boy: “I hate goddamn rabbits.” They bend in readiness to shoot, hands on their gun holsters. In unison they cry out “Kill his ass!” and whip out their toy guns. As they do so there is a cut to a close-up of Bunny Boy. He rolls his eyes back and tumbles to the ground in a feigned death. Once Bunny Boy has fallen to the ground the boys look over his still form and carry out their verbal abuse with increasing gusto. The cutting and camera work become more frenetic and unstable. The two cowboys scream things like “Rabbits are queer. They always gotta shit on themselves!” The boys, thus, re-enact the violence against outsiders or Others commonly expressed in the classic Western Duel. The scene denaturalises and exaggerates the binaristic violence of the Western genre by staging it in a child’s game. It also suggests that popular culture continues this legacy of violence by raising children with these symbols.

Another important operation in this scene is the play with realism and fiction. Bunny Boy’s death, along with the violent attitudes of the boys, is quite obviously performed. But somehow the scene is still tragic and disturbing. Perhaps what we have here is the reverse of the effect produced, in Sobchack’s view, by Renoir’s rabbit in The Rules of the Game. The death of Renoir’s rabbit was shocking because it took place in the realm of
the real. The rabbit died to make the movie she was watching and thus Sobchack felt implicated in the represented death.

The death in this scene draws attention, not to the ethics of realism, but to the politics of fiction. The scene shows a highly coded, symbolic action entering, in an uncanny way, into the ‘real’ world through the boy’s game. While *Gummo* denaturalises the relationships between sign systems and the material ground of meaning, Korine also shows that symbols have real effects. The emphasis on verbal abuse in this scene draws further attention to the violence encoded in sign systems and language. While Bunny Boy does not actually die, there still seems to be a sense in which he is quite gravely injured.

At the end of the scene, Bunny Boy’s limp body is shown in a birds-eye-view long-shot as the two cowboys exit the scene. The youngest mumbles “Who gives a shit about rabbits?” reiterating the film’s questioning of the way in which sign systems and linguistic classifications allow us to consider certain individuals, either human or animal, as morally expendable. In this scene such a tendency is explicitly connected to foundational American values through the tropes of the Western genre.

**Who Gives a Shit About Rabbits?**

Rabbits are a well-known feature of magic shows: from rabbits in hats to Lewis Carroll’s white rabbit these creatures have been noted for their place at the juncture between reality and fantasy. Korine’s creation of Bunny Boy certainly relates to his own regard for his role as a cinematic magician. When Korine pulls this particular rabbit out of the proverbial hat, he tests our ethical reactions to fictional and documentary modes and suggests the dangers of a certain symbolic violence operating in fictional constructions.

In Jean Luc Godard’s *Weekend* (1967), a rabbit also becomes a tool for inciting anxiety about the ethics of realism and fiction. Rabbits emerge twice in Godard’s damning portrait of French society ravaged by capitalist values. The first rabbit appears when the greedy squabbling couple at the centre of the film -- Roland and Corinne Durand -- are hijacked by a man who calls himself Joseph Balsamo. He claims that if the couple take
him to Paris, he will grant them all their wishes. To prove his powers he asks Corinne to look under the dashboard. There Corinne finds a rabbit and declares, “Oh shit, it’s a miracle.” Corrine nonchalantly drops the rabbit back where it came from as if it had never been there in the first place and begins listing her wishes. The rabbit appears to vanish like a white rabbit in a magic show. Here Godard hints at the illusionism basic to cinematic creation. *Weekend* is a film that, like *Gummo*, constantly toys with its status as truth or fiction. Famous literary characters play alongside characters in the story and the characters themselves often comment on their own status as fictive beings.

Godard introduces an ethical dimension into the question of fiction when Corinne and Roland meet Emily Brontë in the woods. At the beginning of this scene, Roland comments: “What a rotten film, all we meet are crazy people” -- relaying a sense that he and Corinne are themselves fictional figures. They set Miss Brontë on fire because she provides them with obtuse philosophical insights instead of showing them the way to Oinville. However, when Corinne expresses doubts about what they have done, Roland retorts “Can’t you see they’re only imaginary characters?”

“Why is she crying then?”

“No idea. Let’s go.”

Here Roland suggests that it is quite alright to kill off characters in a fiction, while killing real people remains problematic. The scene highlights the idea that reducing people to figures of fiction or symbolism makes it easy for one to disregard their humanity. And as they leave Emily Brontë burning, Corinne observes:

“We are little more than that ourselves.”

At the end of the film, Corinne follows through on this idea in a disturbing way as she contentedly eats her husband’s flesh along with that of a slain pig, happy to ignore his
humanity as she did Emily Brontë's. By fictionalising people, Corrine and Roland exempt themselves from any moral responsibility.

Rabbits come to the fore again in a scene entitled "A Rabbit for Monsieur Flaubert." As Roland and Corinne's mother walk though the countryside and haggle over their share of the father's fortune, the mother carries a rabbit that they have presumably just shot. As she walks ahead of him, up the stairs to their home, Roland grabs her from behind and begins killing her. Corrine, waiting at the door of the house, joins in with a knife. The woman's dead body does not appear onscreen -- rather Godard presents us with a close-up of the dead rabbit that she has dropped on the floor. The woman's blood washes over the pebbles next to the rabbit's head. In a closer shot revealing the rabbit's mortified head in more detail, a huge wash of blood covers over the head and envelops it as the two murderers express their plans to dispense with the body in voice-over. Here the visceral image of the rabbit corpse is used to suggest the way in which Corrine and Roland view the mother as no more than an animal and a prize in the hunt. Weekend comments on a society so dehumanised by the commodity fetishism of capitalism that its characters are able to ignore each other's humanity and become, themselves, inhuman. Like Korine, Godard suggests that the symbolic violence by which we classify others as dispensable is just as dangerous as real physical violence.

It is likely that Korine quite self-consciously draws on the use of animal deaths in films like The Rules of the Game, Repulsion and Weekend both in the Bunny Boy figure and in the dead cats that abound in the film. Fortunately for Korine's cats, current laws prevent cruelty to animals for the purposes of cinema and the cats in Gummo are not really killed onscreen. However, their deaths (especially in the context of Gummo's realist style) look convincing enough to arouse curiosity in the viewer about whether what we are shown is real or not. These deaths are also coded as real in contrast to Bunny Boy's obviously staged Cat deaths in this film play two important roles. Firstly, they produce ethical anxiety around the cat's onscreen death in ways that draws attention to Korine's toying with realism. The apparently "real" deaths of the cats offer an interesting counterpoint to the fictional death of Bunny Boy. Secondly, as I have argued, they act as a thematic motif
and underscore the way in which the various American “others” in *Gummo* are considered by mainstream America.

In Solly and Tummler’s estimation, house cats are granted humanity by relation to their human owners. An ideological world view determines whether the animals live or die. Symbolic systems prove just as murderous as the boys’ BB guns. All the characters in *Gummo* are a bit like Bunny Boy, already slain by their place as the dispossessed of the American symbolic order. After he has turned off Jarrod Wiggle’s grandmother’s respirator, Tummler leans in toward her and says “She’s always been dead. She’s been gone a long time.”

It is not clear why Solly and Tummler eventually shoot Foot-foot the housecat. It would seem that they don’t even sell her, because at the end of the film Bunny Boy carries the corpse out of the woods. *Gummo* depicts the mounting pressures on the characters’ own sense of their humanity as human and animal become increasingly undifferentiated. It would seem that Solly and Tummler ultimately kill Foot-foot in a gesture of hopelessness and existential despair (much in the way that Casper and Telly engage in dangerous sexual practices because of their displacement and aimlessness). The tone of the film’s closing sequence suggests a deep dissatisfaction at the heart of the boys’ actions.

The sequence opens with Dot and Bunny Boy kissing in the centre of the frame while Helen smiles and watches. They are in someone’s backyard fibreglass swimming pool in front of huge pylons and power cables. It is raining and against the dim, grey, overcast sky, Bunny Boy’s pink ears create a startling counterpoint to the electric blue of the swimming pool. The melancholy notes of Roy Orbison’s *Crying* are playing on the soundtrack. The two giggling peroxide blondes take turns kissing the boy. Considering the age difference between the girls and the boy, this scene could be handled as something disturbing but instead Korine’s characters exude a remarkable sense of innocence and playfulness. But the tragic tones of the music and the looming power lines add a touch of pathos to this happy image, suggesting that this is a doomed and fleeting moment of innocence in an unsympathetic world.
The following scene further enforces the melancholy tone of the film’s closing. It begins with a long-shot of Solly and Tummler drenched in rain and standing in an overgrown field pointing their BBguns at a black cat (Foot-foot) in the centre of the frame. Korine cuts to a close-up of Tummler loading pellets into his gun. His expression is sombre and rain drips off his furrowed brows. This shot is followed by a cut to a close-up of the wet cat limp on the ground as the pellets pound into its flesh. Then Solly is revealed in medium-shot loading pellets into his gun with great concentration. It seems as if the boys don’t want to shoot the cat but they continue out of a blind compulsion, perhaps because this is what they do and the only thing that defines them. The use of Roy Orbison on the soundtrack adds some weight to this idea. Earlier in the film Tummler identified with Orbison when he told Solly that Orbison used to shoot things. It is as if Tummler and Solly are trapped in their “hillbilly” identities, and like Casper and Telly in Kids they repeat destructive patterns because of a crisis in purpose. After much shooting, Tummler steps on Foot-foot to see if she is still alive. The boys stand still for an extended moment.

After another close-up of Tummler looking pensive, Korine cuts to distorted footage of a tornado much like the footage that opened the film. This circularity (both in terms of the repetition of images and the circular spinning of the tornado) suggests that Gummo's narrative universe is a place of devastating repetition and entropy where the young repeat patterns established by problematic symbolic constructions of ideal American identities. At the climax of the Orbison song Korine cuts to an extreme long-shot of Bunny Boy running through a field toward the camera carrying Foot-foot’s limp carcass in his hand. When he is framed in medium-shot, Bunny Boy stops running and holds the dead animal up to the camera. He addresses the viewer with a confrontational glare. Foot-foot’s lifeless face and hollow eyes seem to glare too. Her red, heart-shaped tag sways from side to side reminding one that she was once a treasured pet.

In this final sequence Korine brings together two of the films “animals”, Foot-foot the pet cat and Bunny Boy, suggesting that his contrast between the “real” death of the cat and
the symbolic or performed victimisation of Bunny Boy are central issues of the film. Bunny Boy’s accusatory stare suggests (as does Casper’s vacant questioning look at the end of *Kids*) that we viewers must take some kind of responsibility for Foot-foot’s death and all that it implies. But, as with the final image of *Kids*, Bunny Boy’s final gesture to camera also suggests a certain playful ambivalence about the documentary truth value of what is being shown. The exhibitionism described by Gunning is very present in this image and somewhere beneath his glowering face we get the sense that perhaps Bunny Boy is laughing. For like the fool of old, Korine has used his trickery to introduce chaos into the system of symbols by which America defines itself.
PART TWO

4.

Bazin’s Mummy: Indexicality and Absence

André Bazin begins his arguments about realism in cinema with the image of a Mummy. He argues that all the plastic arts involve the same psychological impulse that drove the Egyptians to preserve the bodies of the dead— the desire to defeat death by preserving the human form against the ravages of time (Bazin 1967). Most of the criticism against Bazin has been leveled at statements which suggest that in cinema the image of an object somehow is that object magically transmitted onto the screen without an interfering human hand (Rosen 2001: 8). However Bazin’s use of death imagery throughout the “Ontology” essay reveals his true understanding of photography as always characterised by longing, absence and loss.

While Bazin argues that a photograph is in some way a part of the object it represents, as a mummy is the corporeal part of the person whose soul has left it, it is never a complete approximation of the referent. Like a photograph, Bazin’s Mummy provides the evidence of the life once housed in the preserved body. However, the presence of the Mummy also highlights a frightening absence. The corpse, in some ways, is the deceased but we realize that it is only a part of that person. The body is missing its spirit, like a pupa left behind

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1. I have recently encountered Laura Mulvey’s latest book: Death 24s a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image published in 2006. Mulvey’s book also draws connections between Bazin, Barthes and psychoanalytic theory in order to explore the relationship between the indexicality of the photographic image and the deathly threat of absence (2006: 53-66). Mulvey is, however, more concerned with questions of stillness and motion, particularly with the ways in which the still frame can induce uncanny effects, while I am concerned with realism, sensory perception and the texture of the cinematic image.
by a moth. Laura Mulvey also notes how Bazin "uses words and terms that evoke the ghostly" (2006: 64).

Bazin continues his death metaphor throughout the essay, describing the photograph as "a decal or transfer" (1967: 14). All of Bazin’s comparisons speak of photography as what is left behind by a distinctly absent whole. Photography is compared to a molded death mask, a fingerprint and, most revealingly, to the Turin shroud (1967: 14). Bazin describes the Turin Shroud as both a photograph, a molding taken by light, and a relic (1967: 14). In each of these metaphors the indexical relationship to the object reproduced is emphasised over the iconic relationship to the referent. Indexicality is important because of transience; the inevitable presence of absence in all experience. It is essential for the image to be derived automatically from life, so that it can attest to the existence of the referent before this referent is lost to the effects of time. The power of the Turin Shroud as a symbol of faith lies much more in its indexical function than in its mimetic function. It gives evidence of the existence of Jesus Christ and speaks tragically of his absence in death. Also noticeable is the importance that Bazin places on faith in the creation of indexical relationships between viewer and image.

By describing photography in terms of death Bazin suggests a certain potential in the operations of realist film. As much as it may seek to hide the absence of the material object, realism may, in some cases, be able to explore issues of partiality, absence and the impossibility of total representation. Cinema, as a realist medium that works both iconically and indexically to give evidence of the existence of what it represents, can present issues of representation in a unique way. We need not see the indexical impulse in cinema as simplistic and regressive. We should rather look at this specific feature of the photographic image as granting a new opportunity to explore the very issue of representation. This, second, section of my thesis will explore the ways in which Harmony Korine makes use of a phenomenological realism to explore the difficulties of language for the subject and to expose the inadequacies and gaps in cinematic representation. I will undertake an analysis of one of Korine’s most difficult and unorthodox films, *julien donkey-boy*. 
Subject, Object and Affect

Bazin uses the trope of a mummy to describe a tendency within the plastic arts to conserve the spirit of a person from death by preserving, not their soul, but their outer “bodily appearance” (1967: 9). This idea that outward appearances can reflect inner spiritual truths pervades Bazin’s writings about the cinema. However, as I have suggested, Bazin knows all too well that the mere appearances provided by statues and portraits are merely approximations for the full spiritual and physical existence of a living person. He points out that “[n]o one believes anymore in the ontological identity of model and image” (10). The image is effective only in helping others to remember the deceased person. But cinema is exciting for Bazin because it restores a crucial part of what is missing from the mummy: consciousness. Is it not the loss of our capacity to experience the world that makes death so frightening? By representing movement in time, the camera takes a step toward reproducing human perceptual capacities. In photography and cinema “nature at last does more than imitate art,” Bazin proclaims, “she imitates the artist” (15). Of course, movies can and do reproduce images of the human body. But the most exciting thing about cinema is its power to represent the way human consciousness relates to the physical world. When Bazin describes the cinema as “change mummified” (ibid), he recognizes that cinema can cheat the passing of time by capturing its very flow on celluloid – thus making immortal, not the human visage, but the way people look at the world. Cinema can represent subjectivity itself.

It is easy to overlook the fact that Bazin’s central metaphor for the realist impulse in cinema is, essentially, a human body. Bazin describes his mummy in physical terms as “a corporeal body” (1967: 9) and “flesh and bone” (ibid). Bazin thus locates debates about realism in relation to the question of embodiment. While the motion picture may have restored to the mummy his consciousness, sight and hearing, as the preserved corpse of time, cinema is still a body without feeling.
Where photography is “time embalmed,” (Bazin 1967: 14) cinema as “change mummified” (14-15) may be the most successful of all art forms in preserving experience against the erosion of time, similarly to the way the Egyptians embalmed dead bodies. However, as a mummy is a body without consciousness or a sensorium, so is cinema an image without the physical and material depth that would make it a more complete approximation of reality. The cinematic image can suggest spatial relations and textures but it can never really reproduce life in all its dimension and sensuality. Ironically this is what gives cinema its unearthly magnetism. It is mysterious and awe-inspiring like ancient mummies because it speaks so profoundly about absence and loss by being able to link us directly, indexically to that which is absent -- but to deny us a full experience of the phenomenon.

However, some theorists have pointed out that films encourage us to imagine the onscreen world with the understanding of texture and taste that we bring from our other senses. In my discussion of Gummo I relied on Vivian Sobchack’s observations about the neglected role of our senses in the cinema. Counter to my emphasis on absence and lack in the phenomenological experience of cinema, Sobchack (2004:67) argues that the cinema encourages a fullness of sensory perception and an immediate identification with the sensual experience of onscreen characters. An important feature of Sobchack’s discussion of a phenomenological approach to film spectatorship is her observations about relations of subjectivity and objectivity in cinema viewing. Sobchack argues that in our sensory experience of cinema the line between objectivity and subjectivity becomes blurred. The sensory sympathy that we have with onscreen characters allows us, in some ways, to inhabit their experiences (ibid).

In the next chapter I will be examining a film produced according to the rules of the Dogma 95 movement. This school of filmmaking has often been understood as aimed at producing a cinema of immediacy or directness in which the viewer experiences the kind of boundary-blurring identification with onscreen characters that Sobchack describes. However, I will argue that julien donkey-boy, Korine’s Dogma film, is characterized
much more by the way it emphasizes perceptual difficulties and the impossibility of fully accessing the world it represents.

While Sobchack’s innovative arguments open up exciting areas for debate and analysis, it is my contention that Sobchack’s discussion of the way the senses operate in cinema -- as well as similar arguments stressing immediacy -- is problematic because it does not account for way in which the absent sensory stimulation may make evident the lack and incompleteness of the cinematic representation. An attractive feature of Sobchack’s approach is the way in which she grounds her arguments in her own personal experience. I will, however, contend that this method has severe limitations when it comes to drawing general theoretical conclusions for a personal viewing experience.

Sobchack draws on Merleau-Ponty and other phenomenological theorists to argue that cinematic sounds and images make appeals to the whole of our sensorium and encourage a physical reaction to the images on screen. She goes so far as to say that we literally feel the textures suggested by onscreen sounds and images. Sobchack argues that all people have the ability to translate sensory experience from one sense to another. Our senses are not closed off from each other but linked. Therefore, when we see an image of food or flesh, our whole bodies respond to this visual stimulus (2004: 53-60).

She concedes that this experience of sensation is not the same as in life. We cannot actually reach out and taste an apple on screen. But Sobchack draws on phenomenological ideas about the reversibility of perceiver and perceived to suggest that in cinema the experience of sensation is not poorer than in life. She argues that it is, in some ways, more powerful. This is because when the viewer cannot literally feel what is on screen, the impulse to touch the onscreen images bounces off the screen and returns to be felt in the viewer’s own body. In this process the viewer’s sensory experience is “doubled” (77):

Certainly this feeling and the sense I have of sensing at the movies is in some ways reduced in comparison with direct sensual experience – this because of my only partially fulfilled sensual grasp of the cinematic object
of desire. But just as certainly, the sense I have of sensing when I watch a film is enhanced in comparison with much direct sensual experience – this because my only partially fulfilled sensual grasp of the original cinematic object is complete not in the realization of that object but through my own body, where my sensual grasp is reflexively doubled since, in this rebound from the screen, I have become not only the toucher but also the touched. (ibid).

Sobchack argues that, because we experience movies through our whole sensorium in a hyper-sensitized state in which the body of the viewer reproduces the feelings of the onscreen body, distinctions between subject and object become less meaningful. She suggests that a cinema emphasising touch can sensitize the skin of a viewer to the degree that the viewing position that he or she occupies is no longer separate from the image on screen. Sobchack bases her arguments on her own experience of the indistinct opening images of The Piano (1993). She claims that while her eyes could not initially determine the forms onscreen “her fingers knew” (2004:63) what she was seeing. In this moment Sobchack claims her fingers became undifferentiated from those pictured on screen: “those fingers were first known sensually and sensibly as ‘these’ fingers and were located ambiguously both offscreen and on – subjectively ‘here’ as well as objectively ‘there,’ mine as well as the image’s” (ibid).

In Sobchack’s estimation this immediate sensory knowledge is acting before a more conscious knowledge that is allowed when the object is revealed more clearly to vision. She explains our experience of sensation in cinema as both literal and figurative at the same time. Drawing on Richard Dyer’s description of the somatic effects of film, Sobchack describes the cinematic experience of touch and taste as both “real” and “as if real” (2004: 73). But, for Sobchack the best term to describe the cinematic experience of other senses is “sensual catechresis” (82). She differentiates catachretic expression from metaphoric expression. While metaphors stretch the meaning of a word beyond its normal or literal context, catechretic expressions like “the arm of a chair” substitute a word from another context when there is no other word to fit in its place. The term stretches the meaning of the term “arm” to refer to the wood and fabric that makes up the arm of a
chair, as would a metaphor. However it is not a proper metaphor because there is no other word for this operation.

Sobchack explains that in catachretic expression the literal and the figural are conflated because of a gap in language or a failure of words. Similarly, in cinema the gap in experience is filled with a bodily response that “applies a figurative sense as a literal one, while yet retaining the look and feel of figurality” (Schiff, cited in Sobchack 2004: 82).

So, Sobchack argues, we make up for the sensory gaps in the cinematic experience by substituting them with our own bodily response. We recognize the images on screen as at once separate from our sensory grasp and as actually affecting our own sensorium as we move between the literal and the figurative senses of our own sensory experience.

Sobchack’s argument that we respond in an embodied way to onscreen sensory cues will be very useful for my discussion of julien donkey-boy. However, I want to comment on a number of areas in Sobchack’s thinking which I perceive to be problematic. Sobchack conceives of embodied responses as having power to produce a “general and diffuse” (2004: 77) viewing experience and eliminate the barriers that we usually see separating the viewer from the screen and the characters onscreen. Sobchack bases this argument on a number of questionable assumptions.

As much as my viewing body may respond to visual stimulus and be sensitised by the complex and reversible relationship between me and the screen, my sensory longing cannot be fully satisfied. Being sensitised does not mean experiencing the same feelings that the characters onscreen may feel. Sobchack over-emphasises the capacity of our bodies to fill the gap in experience. For example, watching people eat delicious food in a movie makes me feel hungry -- not full. She also neglects to consider how much our sensory sympathy with the characters onscreen is predicated on desire. Desire is necessarily about lack. Even in her examples from The Piano, Sobchack does not acknowledge how much the images foreground desire -- when Ada reaches her fingers out to beams of light, she is trying to touch the ephemeral.
The viewing position we find ourselves in when film is immediate and tactile or sensual is a hungry viewing position. This is tied to the way narrative cinema is fuelled by desire and anticipation. In narrative cinema the fictional frame, our attendant suspension of disbelief and the narrative drive neutralise the threat of realism’s dark shadow – the absent referent. But in a cinema that isn’t organised around storytelling this threat is more disruptive.

Sobchack also assumes that our sensory response to the image will be mimetic and ignores the difficulties involved in this process. While Sobchack qualifies her argument by noting that our synaesthetic translations of visual sensation into bodily responses “are always acculturated and never lived as discrete or raw” (61), she also writes that “our lived bodies sensually relate to ‘things’ and ‘matter’ on the screen and find them sensible in a primary, prepersonal and global way that grounds those later secondary identifications that are more discrete and localised” (65). Sobchack does not allow much space to consider how differences in cultural knowledge or life experience may operate as barriers to the kind of full sensory experience she associates with the cinema. Before we can derive a “prepersonal” sensory experience from the cinema we need certain specific and often localised sensory knowledge.

Knowledge and memory play a big role in our embodied response to films. For example, I do not know what it is like to be shot in the heart and I have difficulty imagining what this must feel like but it happens to characters in movies all the time. We do not all have the same sensory experiences or sensory knowledge. As Laura U. Marks points out, sensory knowledge is informed by memory and our personal and cultural experiences (Marks, 2000).

Different films also require different degrees of bodily sympathy -- for example, the violence in Tarantino’s Kill Bill Vol. 1 (2003) is so stylized that, although it can shock viewers, it will not necessarily encourage mimetic sympathy. Filmmakers can play with images that encourage bodily sympathy in viewers in the same way that they can
manipulate the use of point of view in camerawork, either to encourage identification with characters or to objectify them.

Most importantly, Sobchack doesn’t consider how different viewers might react to the onscreen image -- her argument is based primarily on her own experience. It is more problematic to generalise about somatic effects than to do so in regard to meaning derived from sign systems and conventions. Sensory experience is more individually specific than language which operates through shared codes. While Sobchack’s fingers responded to the opening shot of The Piano, my fingers must be rather stupid because they didn’t “know” anything. I saw the image as an abstract composition of shapes rather than as a sensually resonant image. The degree of embodied sympathy with an image is different from one individual to the next. This problem makes Sobchack’s ideas difficult to generalise in filmic analysis.

Instead of saying that embodied responses to cinema create a fundamentally “general and diffuse [Sobchack’s emphasis]” (2004: 77) viewing experience in which it is difficult to distinguish object from subject and vice versa, it would be more accurate to say that sense experience complicates the issue of objectification in interesting ways. Tactility in cinema can provide the potential for play with the objectivity of images.

Rather than generalising about how viewers’ bodies may react to the sensual elements of an image, it would be more useful to look at the deployment of sensually evocative imagery as a particular rhetorical strategy that is often used to encourage identification and immediacy. But we must also consider how physical affect can highlight the viewer’s separation from the image and can create blocks to perception.

Laura U. Marks does not see somatic affects in cinema as merely a transposition of experience onto the body of the viewer. Rather, she considers the filmic encounter as a “meeting of two different sensoria” (2000: 153), each informed by different cultural knowledge and life experience. She provides a useful discussion of how particular cinematic devices can encourage an embodied response to the visual images of cinema.
She also theorises very usefully about how tactility can emphasize and describe difficulties in perception and representation. Marks makes use of the term “haptic cinema” to describe a viewing experience in which touch, movement and immediate visual presence are emphasized over objective representation (162). Marks defines “haptic visuality” (ibid) in opposition to what she terms “optical visuality, which sees things from enough distance to perceive them as distinct forms in deep space: in other words how we usually conceive of vision” (162). Importantly, Marks sees optical visuality as much more involved in the act of representation while haptic visuality emphasises material presence.  

Optical vision involves the recognition of forms as distinct objects. It therefore relies much more on conventional knowledge, or a kind of linguistic discourse. In opposition to this, haptic vision emphasises direct physical experience before language. Marks writes: “The works I propose to call haptic invite a look that moves on the surface plane of the screen for some time before the viewer realises what she or he is beholding” (ibid). One might describe Ada’s hands at the beginning of The Piano as a haptic image. Sobchack’s profound feeling of sensory awareness in the opening moments of The Piano was produced by a difficulty in seeing. Sobchack notes:

[W]hat is extraordinary about the opening shot of The Piano is that it offers (at least on first viewing) a relatively rare instance of narrative cinema in which the cultural hegemony of vision is overthrown, an instance in which my eyes did not “see” anything meaningful and experienced an almost blindness at the same time that my tactile sense of being in the word through my fingers grasped the image’s sense in a way that my forestalled or baffled vision could not. (2004: 63 - 64)

Marks provides a more nuanced account than Sobchack does of how we may discuss an embodied experience of cinema. Drawing on Bergson, Marks takes into consideration the ways in which memory, culture and life experience influence individual responses to cinema (2000: 152). However, she sees the cultural specificity of embodied responses as potentially productive. This element of our response to film can allow for cinema to

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2 Laura U. Marks is not the only exponent of haptic theory. Guiliana Bruno (1993) uses the term haptics to explore the relationship between viewers and city space in cinema while Una Chaudhuri (1995) applies the term to a discussion of theatre performance.
examine the relationship between embodiment and culture: “I am exploring sense experience in cinema not to seek a primordial state of sensory innocence, but to find culture within the body” (ibid). She points out that even immediate perception actually relies on memory: “All sense perceptions allow for, and indeed require, the mediation of memory” (147).

Marks points out that we cannot simply adopt the primitive view that sense experience is not related to cultural experience. She argues that ideas introduced by Foucault, feminism and cultural anthropology have made us aware of how much embodied experience is encoded by culture. “When we speak of embodied perception, we must include the embodied blocks to perception and to full participation in the world” (152).

Importantly, Marks sees what she calls “tactile visuality” as able to describe loss as much as to create the sense of presence:

Tactile visuality is still not touch. Often there is a mournful quality to the haptic images I have described, for as much as they would like to touch the skin of the object, all they can achieve is to become skinlike themselves...By shifting from one form of sense perception to another, the image points to its own asymptotic, caressing relation to the real, and to the same relation between perception and image. (192)

For Marks the haptic image is not about completely filling gaps in perception but about mobilising a desire for that which is absent. This desire drives our bodies to become sensitized to the visual cues provided in the image. She writes:

...haptic visuality inspires an acute awareness that the thing seen evades vision and must be approached through other senses – which are not literally available in the cinema. Haptic visuality implies a fundamental mourning of the absent object or the absent body, where optical visuality attempts to resuscitate it and make it whole. (191)

Marks’s formulation understands subjective engagement in terms of a motivating desire. She describes an active engagement rather than the passive experience of affect: “By interacting up close with an image, close enough that figure and ground commingle, the
viewer relinquishes her own sense of separateness from the image – not to know it, but to give herself up to her desire for it” (183).

Marks successfully explains how certain images can encourage a subjective intimate relationship between the viewer and the onscreen image, while other images encourage a more objective relationship. The haptic image, because of difficulties in viewing and identification, forces the viewer to address the image less as a representation and more as an experience. While there is an immediate -- perhaps pre-linguistic -- relationship between the viewer and the image, haptic images cannot be described, as Anne Jerslev points out, only in terms of presence and immediacy. Rather they are about desire, the processes of perception and the difficulties of presence: “Regardless of their content, haptic images are erotic in that they construct an intersubjective relationship between beholder and image” (Marks 2000:183).

Marks offers an interesting critique of phenomenology by noting that it does not consider the possibility of certain culturally or historically defined difficulties in perception. For example, she describes the experience of “feminine embodiment as confinement” (Marks, 2000: 152). Marks argues that in haptic cinema the “relative weakness of the visual image -- the lack of things to see” (153) can describe such culturally circumscribed problems in the relationship between the perceiving subject and the world. I shall apply Marks’s idea more specifically to julien donkey-boy in order to examine Korine’s play with perceptual difficulty and blindness.

The Haptic Image in the Realist film

This thesis is particularly focused on the role of realism in Korine’s filmmaking. While a recognition of objects and settings of the real world could be considered as a central feature of realism, haptic cinema works to obscure the perception of objects. This is the case if we consider realism to depend on the photographic image’s ability to show us forms that we can recognise as real. Haptic images make forms and objects difficult to recognise. Bazin points out that the photographic image, however warped or distorted it
may be, still retains the ghostly presence of those who stood before the camera. It is the automatic process of photography and the interface between the material world and the camera that are important to realism.

No matter how fuzzy, distorted, or discoloured, no matter how lacking in documentary value the image may be, it shares, by virtue of the very process of its becoming, the being of the model of which it is the reproduction; it is the model (1967: 14).

Notice here that, although Bazin seems to conflate the reproduction with the object in a problematic way, in his earlier description of the photograph as a “decal or transfer” (ibid), Bazin is quite aware of the limitations of photography in actually reproducing the object.

Bazin sees photography as the best replacement for what cannot be present. Later he describes “[t]hose grey or sepia shadows, phantomlike and almost undecipherable” (ibid). Marks’s comments on the effects of video decay seem quite similar to Bazin’s statements in relation to old photographs. For Marks, the decay is essential to the process by which certain video images become haptic. Marks writes: “Both film and video become more haptic as they die. Every time we watch a film we witness its gradual decay: another scratch, more fading as it is exposed to the light, and chemical deterioration, especially with colour film” (2000: 171).

I will argue that *julien donkey-boy* often creates haptic images by exaggerating the indexical aspect of the photographic image so that this film is at once haptic and realist. Haptic images refer to the real world. They insist upon the actual existence of the objects in it and bring the viewer into a relationship with the material referent. But these kinds of images also make us aware of the processes and difficulties of perception. In the haptic image, tactile visuality and indexical realism work intimately with one another.

I do not mean to suggest that haptic images are the only images that encourage an embodied response from viewers. In my analysis I intend to discuss a number of ways in
which the film aims to evoke a fuller sensory experience. I draw on Marks’s argument because it is a strong example of the connection between Bazinian realism and sensually evocative images.

Absence, Lack and The Real

In her discussion of haptic cinema Marks makes crucial observations about absence, perceptual difficulty and the problems of language. These are also key concerns of psychoanalytic film analysis. Particularly applicable to *julien donkey-boy* is Lacan’s articulation of the relationship between language and that which lies beyond it -- the Real.

According to Lacan, before human infants acquire language they experience a fragmentary sense of self and do not differentiate themselves from all that exists in the object world. At a certain crucial point in his development the child recognizes his image in the mirror and begins to construct an impression of himself as an image (2006: 2). Because of the underdevelopment of human children in comparison to other animals, the child’s experience before this point is characterised by helplessness, need and insufficiency (2-4). In the mirror image the child finds an imaginary impression of himself as whole individual. In the mirror the child projects an ideal conception of himself and experiences a gratifying sense of visual mastery as the coherence between inner and outer aspects of his being (4-5). The child also has the imagined sense that, like his mirror image, his mother responds to his every impulse (1977: 217). This state of being is aligned with the ‘Imaginary’ realm and it is characterized by the child’s illusory sense that he fulfills all of his mother’s desire.

But at the same time as the baby makes this fictional identification of himself as a complete being, he is also confronted with a split in his identity. The mirror image is external to him and he must come to understand this vision of himself as other. The mirror stage ends when the child recognizes this separation from other beings, most notably the mother (2006: 6). This process of recognizing difference is the beginning of the child’s birth into language and it is also his initiation as a subject. With the adoption of language the child enters into what Lacan calls the ‘Symbolic Order’. While the
Imaginary is characterized by a sense of union with the mother, the Symbolic order is marked by the categories, rules and social obligations that come with language.

The moment in which the mirror-stage comes to an end inaugurates, by identification with the *imago* of the counterpart and the drama of primordial jealousy...., the dialectic that will henceforth link the *I* to socially elaborated situations. (2006: 6)

Lacan associates the symbolic order with the laws imposed by the Father. At this stage the child must learn to regulate and repress his desires in relation to the demands of society and it is out of this repression that the unconscious is born.

Thus language introduces absence into the child’s experience. The child’s sense of self is constituted by a lack initiated by his recognition of the difference between himself and his mother. The loss endured by a person during their birth as a subject leaves them in a constant state of longing for the sense of completeness experienced in the mirror stage. This longing is often expressed in relation to the mother but it is experienced more generally as a yearning for intersubjective unity with any person, or as Lacan puts it with “the Other” (*ibid*).

This desire for the Other can never be fully satisfied because, as Lacan contends, what we seek in the Other or the loved one is really something beyond them, something Lacan calls the *objet petit a* (1977: 263). In love the subject seeks to be seen by the other in an ideal way -- such a desire harks back to the sense of unity experienced at the mirror stage and ultimately stands as a fantastic protection from the threat of the Real. Lacan writes:

As a specular mirage, love is essentially an illusion. It is situated in the field established at the level of the pleasure reference, of that sole signifier necessary to introduce a perspective centred on the Ideal point, capital I, placed somewhere in the Other, from which the Other sees me, in the form I like to be seen. (1977: 268)

The mirror stage introduces not only desire for the other but aggressive feelings towards the other. This aggressivity is necessary in order for the subject to achieve a sense of self
as separate from others (Lacan 2006: 7). The conditions for the Oedipus complex are set up at this stage when the child feels hostility toward the father due to the imposition of the rules of law by which he must define himself as subject, and at the same time feels the desire for a pre-linguistic sense of unity with the mother (6).

Freud used the myth of Oedipus to demonstrate the psychoanalytic theory that every boy at some stage in his development subconsciously wants “to kill his father and take his mother to wife” (1991: 243). Lacan’s model explains how a longing for the mother is linked to the traumatic sense of absence confronting the subject in language and this trauma is ultimately related to the subject’s loss of a sense of unity at his birth into the symbolic order associated with the Name-of-the-Father (2006: 6). The child desires to be the object of the mother’s desire. This need for the “desire of the mother” or what Lacan calls the “phallus” (320) offers a deflection of the threat of the Real -- that most frightening absence that haunts all representation (Lacan 1977: ix).

The Real, for Lacan, is a point beyond the grasp of language even though it is what ultimately gives all symbolic activities their relevance (Wright 1984: 110). Lacan sees the Symbolic and the Imaginary as operating in competition for control of the way in which the subject comes to interface with the Real (Lacan 2006: 206 - 220). Thus for Lacan our perceptions of the phenomenal world are determined both by the language and symbols with which we filter experience and by our unconscious desires, but the Real in all its raw materiality is beyond our grasp.

Lacan uses the word *tuche* derived from Aristotle to describe “*the encounter with the real* [Lacan’s emphasis]” (1977: 53). Because Lacan understands the Real as impossible, this encounter is not a literal meeting of the subject and raw experience, but rather a confrontation with lack -- “it is essentially the missed encounter” (55). For this reason the Real is experienced as trauma (*ibid*).

Lacan’s understanding of the Real might be compared to André Bazin’s understanding of reality as ambiguous. It is not the object world itself which is ambiguous for Bazin.
Rather he recognises that human consciousness can never apprehend the material world in an unambiguous way because our perceptions are always coloured by the associations and desires that we bring to our interpretation of its raw materiality.

In addition, Bazin’s understanding of the relationship between photographic realism, death and absence can be understood in terms of Lacan’s thinking. Within the photographic signifier is the evidence of an absent referent. Thus an encounter with the material world through photography and film is ultimately a confrontation with absence, that is, an encounter with the Real.

Roland Barthes, a thinker whose theories on photography are very similar to those expressed by Bazin, articulates this idea in more directly Lacanian terms. Barthes argues that the accidental and contingent aspects of the photographic image allow certain photographs to stage the traumatic encounter with the Real that Lacan describes as the *tuché* (1993: 4).

> In the photograph the event is never transcended for the sake of something else: the photograph always leads the corpus I need back to the body I see; it is the absolute Particular, the sovereign Contingency, matte and somehow stupid, the *This* (this photograph and not Photography), in short, what Lacan calls the *Tuché*, the Occasion, the Encounter, the Real in its indefatigable expression. *(ibid)*

Barthes makes a very useful distinction between two aspects of the photographic image: the *studium* and the *punctum*. The word *studium* refers to the coded content of the picture (1993: 51). Through the work of the *studium* the photographer communicates his message, or as Barthes puts it, his “myths” by drawing on cultural knowledge and linguistic codes. Barthes finds this element of the photograph less interesting than the operations performed by the *punctum*. The *punctum* is the unintentional detail in the photograph -- “that accident which pricks” (27). The *punctum* is that affective element of the photographic image which cannot be named (51). It appeals, not through language but by means of a phenomenological operation that demands a physical response from the viewer. Barthes describes the photograph in physical terms relating how “[a] sort of umbilical chord links the body of the photographed thing back to my gaze: light though
impalpable is here a carnal medium, a skin I share with anyone who has been photographed" (81). Thus Barthes, like Bazin, recognizes contingency and affectivity as the primary expressive tools of the photographic medium. More importantly, Barthes sees how this indexical and physical appeal of the photograph cultivates a stirring confrontation with the absences produced by representation. Like Bazin, Barthes associates the photographic process with death. “Photography may correspond to the intrusion, in our modern society, of an asymbolic Death, outside of religion, outside of ritual, a kind of abrupt dive into literal Death” (92).

Barthes centres his discussion on a photograph of his then recently deceased mother and, as Margaret Iversen points out, Barthes’ punctum is “is a close encounter with the Real or lost mother” (1989: 32). The punctum is that feature of the photographic image that solicits the viewer with an almost magical sense of presence but which ultimately confronts one with the loss of the referent and thus absence and death.

Roland Barthes did not think that cinema could have the same effect as photography in this regard. He argued that the constant movement granted to the cinematic signifier allows a focus on the future as one image ceaselessly supersedes the next. In contrast the stillness of the photograph secures its connection to pastness and draws attention to what is lost (2000: 89 – 90). The possibility of accident that Barthes posits as the founding condition of the punctum is, however, just as possible in cinema as it is in photography. Bazin showed how neorealist filmmakers allowed chance to play a role in shaping their films (1971: 68). In addition, Laura Marks’ discussion of perceptual blocks and video decay reveals how cinema can also bear testament to the loss of the referent. To gloss Bazin’s phrase “change mummified” yet further -- not only does cinema represent subjectivity, it also, poignantly, reveals to us the process of time passing.

It is indeed the case that traditional fiction films offer far less potential to induce an encounter with the Real than photographs do. As Metz has noted, along with other psychoanalytic film theorists like Jean Baudry and Alan Williams, classical Hollywood cinema is organized around a set of principles designed to minimize a confrontation with
lack that marks every act of representation (Baudry and Williams 1974, Metz 1983). Metz follows a number of thinkers in aligning the cinema with Lacan’s Imaginary and in comparing the cinematic experience to the mirror stage (1983: 3 -4). However, Metz recognizes a crucial difference between the mirror and the cinema: the child in the mirror stage identifies with an image of himself. In the cinema, the viewer identifies, not with his own image, but with his own act of seeing. Thus an identification is made with the visual mastery of the cinematic apparatus (48 - 49). The cinematic spectator, according to Metz, derives pleasure from the experience of himself as an “all-perceiving” (48) subject.

In order to produce this pleasurable identification it is necessary for the film to hide the devices of its own construction and appear as an unmediated experience of “pure perception” (ibid). Metz explains how conventional cinema masks its work as representation: “The fiction film is the film in which the cinematic signifier does not work on its own account but is employed to remove entirely the traces of its own steps” (40). For the film to reveal itself as an enunciation would be for it to make visible the lack at the heart of cinematic production.

Two processes play a key role in the concealment that allows for pleasure in the cinema. Firstly, the technical devices of the cinema themselves become fetishized in order both to cover over and deny the lack underlying the image -- hence, the emphasis on cinema as “a technical performance, as prowess, as an exploit” (Metz 1983: 74). Pleasure is created not through the emphasis on style for its own sake but on the film’s capacity to make the viewer believe in its artifice. By sweeping the viewer away through its technical mastery the film presents itself as a “good object” in the Kleinian sense (75).

Secondly, traditional narrative structure plays an important role in covering over the gaps which structure the text. Metz recognises a powerful affinity between fiction film and fantasy (110). In order to make invisible its own mediatory role the cinematic apparatus “masquerades as story” (1983: 91). In classical cinema pleasure depends on the story; “it is the ‘story’ which exhibits itself, the story which reigns supreme” (97). Of the classical Hollywood film he writes that the “the narrative plenitude and transparency of this type
of film is based on a refusal to admit that anything is lacking or that anything is to be sought for; it shows us only the other side of the lack..."(91 - 92).

At the other end of the spectrum Metz explains that unpleasure in the cinema is derived from the film’s relation to reality. Cinematic unpleasure is produced when the film makes the viewer aware of its role as recording and as mediation (113). Metz also makes an interesting connection between cinematic pleasure and the role of affect. The classical cinema aims toward producing as far as possible a sense of “affective fulfillment” (110). However he also notes that certain films create “affective irritation” (ibid). Such films produce an aggressive reaction in the subject and are aligned with unpleasure.

I have outlined these features of the classical Hollywood film that cover over lack in order to set up a comparison between the classic system and the operations at play in julien donkey-boy. I want to explore julien donkey-boy as an example of cinematic unpleasure which parades its role as mediation, abandons traditional narrative storytelling and emphasizes instead its relation to partiality. Importantly, it does so by making use of the realist restrictions demanded by Dogma 95.

I have also explored Metz’s argument to highlight the way in which a sense of visual mastery and the creation of an illusory sense of realist transparency is not a condition of cinema but a system designed to compensate for the separation between viewer and referent that really characterizes cinematic expression.

Many applications of phenomenology to cinema have emphasized immediacy and sensual abundance over the gaps and fissures that also constitute part of the cinematic experience. Kaja Silverman argues that the arguments of major film theorists are driven by the same deficiencies that plague the psychoanalytic subject. She writes: “Film theory has been haunted since its inception by the specter of a loss or absence at the centre of cinematic production, a loss which both threatens and secures the viewing subject” (Silverman, 1988: 2). She finds that the arguments of theorists like Comolli, Metz, Mulvey, Bazin and others, are troubled by a fundamental fear of castration. But this
castration is not one linked directly to the moment in which the subject realizes sexual difference. Rather, it is an essential problem with the concept of absence (1988:1). Indeed, as my analysis of Bazin has shown, his allusions to death emerge like symptoms, from the margins of the text, buried in footnotes and encoded as metaphors. Bazin himself does not carry his argument about realism to its daunting logical conclusion.3

Following Silverman’s example, I would like to suggest that Sobchack’s writing is characterised by a similar problem with absence. Her understanding of the non-linguistic elements of cinematic experience, of cinema as a medium without distinctions between subject and object, viewer and screen, reveals a desire to escape language through the phenomenological effects of cinema. But Sobchack does not acknowledge, as Barthes does, that these ‘immediate’ elements of the filmic experience bring us ultimately to an encounter with cinematic reproduction as language -- in its false aura of immediacy the cinematic image gives us the very essence of the absence that marks the subject’s engagement with language. Sobchack does not acknowledge the potentially disruptive effects of a sensual appeal in cinema, perhaps, because she is concerned primarily with traditional narrative cinema. As I have suggested in earlier chapters, traditional cinema puts a number of complex operations into play in order to diffuse the threat of the Real that lurks behind the photographic image.

As much as indexical realism and an emphasis on sensuality may work in mainstream cinema partially to cover over their central structuring absences, I would like to argue that in avant-garde films, where a strong narrative drive is absent, a certain indexical realism can be paired with an interest in tactility as a way of foregrounding more general questions about partiality, perception, transience and the relationship between sense and meaning. Dogma 95 films have this potential partly because of their link to the question of absence and partly because of their phenomenological relationship to the viewer. Because filmic images are both representation and the presentation of experience, they offer the potential for explorations of the very nature of language and meaning. In the

3 See the ‘The Myth of Total Cinema’ in which Bazin argues that the ultimate aim behind the invention of cinema was the creation of “a perfect illusion of the outside world in sound, colour, and relief” (1967: 20).
following chapter I will show that it is such an exploration that we are presented with in
*julien donkey-boy*.
5.

*Julien donkey-boy:*

*Sense, Absence and Dogma 95*

*Julien donkey-boy* (2000) is the first American film to bear the Dogma 95 certificate. In this, his second feature, Harmony Korine performs a double assault on viewer expectations by presenting the point of view of a schizophrenic subject through the devices of the Dogma 95 movement. The result is a disorienting viewing experience. *Julien donkey-boy* breaks almost entirely with the conventions of classical narrative structure. While storytelling takes a backseat, sensory perception is foregrounded both on a thematic and a stylistic level. Korine renders the material world as immanent to the senses but at the same time this ‘real’ world is made difficult to understand for the viewer by the unorthodox system of narration.

In this chapter I wish to discuss the way in which an interest in tactility and sense perception intersects with the concerns of Dogma 95. I will argue that these two elements are linked through the way they relate to language and cinematic conventions. I will apply phenomenological ideas about tactility to *julien donkey-boy* in order to explore how the realist demands of Dogma 95 complement a particularly subversive and complex use of tactility and affect. I will also examine this film’s radical break with conventional narration and thematic concerns, by suggesting that the film foregrounds a battle between language and sense experience. Rather than presenting an easy interface with the real world, tactile cues and realist elements are used to complicate the relationship between language, perception and meaning.
**Dogma 95, Realism and Bazin**

There has been much debate about the true aims of the Dogma 95 movement. Dogma 95 has been seen as a rebellion against auteurship, as a clever marketing tool, and as a reaction to globalisation (Hjort and MacKenzie 2003). But the founders of this movement, Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg, claim that Dogma 95 is much more than this. The Dogma manifesto locates Dogma filmmaking in opposition to “the superficial movie” or “the film of illusion” (Vinterberg and von Trier 1995). The precise meaning of these terms is unclear in von Trier and Vinterberg’s enigmatic statements. However, from the conditions prescribed in the ‘Vow of Chastity’ and from later comments by filmmakers it seems that the question of realism is centrally at stake here. A comment on the FAQ page of the Dogma 95 website brings more clarity: “The essence of Dogma 95 is to challenge the conventional film language — in order to make authentic films, in search of the truth” (Dogma 95 website FAQ section; 1995). According to this statement the defining features of Dogma 95 are, firstly, an opposition to the traditional language of cinema, and secondly, a quest for truth. This is a bold undertaking, particularly in a cultural environment in which a general sense prevails that ‘reality’ is unrepresentable and there is no such thing as a single truth.

There are, of course, many ways in which the concept of truth can be understood. The word can be used to refer to empirical ‘facts’ or it could refer to the metaphorical truth embodied in myth. The most melodramatic and excessive of classical Hollywood films may well articulate certain poetic truths about human nature. Jacques Lacan suggests that such things as truth and reality do exist but they can never be fully accessed through language because language necessarily abstracts and fictionalizes the material it represents. Lacan writes “There is no truth that in passing through awareness does not lie. But one runs after it all the same” (1977: vii). To speak the truth in its wholeness is thus impossible because the concept of truth derives its force from its connection with reality. As Lacan comments: “it’s through this very impossibility that the truth holds on to the real” (1987: 6). As I indicated earlier in this thesis, Lacan defines the Real as that which exists but lies outside of the mediation of language. For Lacan the Real is not non-existent but “impossible” (1977: ix). This term is not interchangeable with terms I have
been using frequently in this thesis like “reality,” “the phenomenal world” or “the real world”. It is rather a term used to affirm the existence of reality at the same time as expressing the impossibility of representing it in its fullness. Lacan nevertheless contends that truth is worth pursuing.

It is important to note that von Trier and Vinterberg define their films as operating “in search of the truth” [my emphasis], not as representing the truth unproblematically. We might better understand certain Dogma films as dramatizing this search. As such we might understand “authenticity” in this context as an honest search for an ever-elusive truth, for the ever-receding ground of the Real. Anne Jerslev argues that Lars von Trier’s *The Idiots* (1998) can be seen as “a reflection upon film language and its relation to reality” (2002: 45). This chapter will explore how another Dogma 95 film, *julien donkey-boy*, presents a complex investigation of the relationship between meaning and reality. I will show that the film is ultimately an account of the very impossibility of representing reality in its fullness.

Throughout this thesis I have been comparing two ways of using the word realism in relation to cinema. The first kind of realism can be understood as an effect producing the illusion of transparency. In this conception of the term, realism disguises its own devices and appears to produce an unmediated view of the world it represents. André Bazin would call this approach to realism a “pseudorealism” as it is “a deception aimed at fooling the eye” and “content...with illusory appearances” (1967: 12). It is this kind of realism that Von Trier and Vinterberg have in mind when they decry the “superficial movie” and the “film of illusion.”

The second type of realism is an approach I have been calling, after Bazin, “phenomenological realism” and is characterized by attempts to draw close to the ground of the real and open one’s filmmaking up to the accidents and complexities of reality. I will argue that the realism that is encouraged by Dogma 95 may fit into this second category of realism -- a realism concerned with a search for the ‘truth,’ however impossible such a search may be. Bazin notes that realism “can only occupy in art a
dialectical position -- it is more a reaction than a truth” (1971: 48). Dogma 95 can be seen as such a reaction to the stylistic excess of contemporary cinema and accordingly their search for truth involves a restrained approach to filmmaking.

The use of handheld cameras, digital footage and natural lighting, amongst other features of the Dogma 95 approach, certainly emphasizes the documentary “look” of films executed within this movement. Such devices create a sense of immediacy and authenticity in opposition to the polished storytelling of mainstream cinema. One might argue that Dogma 95 achieves only a pseudorealism -- an illusory aesthetic attempt at verisimilitude. Many films influenced by the innovations of Dogma 95 and the availability of digital technology have used its stylistic elements as a way of creating a greater appearance of realism without much regard for the movement’s pronounced interest in “truth” and “authenticity.” Reality television is a key example of this trend. It would be easy to read the Dogma movement as a rhetorical method aimed at creating a sense of authenticity and transparency through documentary-style shooting. However, I aim to show that the Dogma 95 principles are aimed at much more than simply an attempt at presenting the impression of realism. The best examples of Dogma filmmaking take on the tremendous task of grappling with reality.

In the first part of this thesis I used André Bazin’s ideas to explore the way in which a commitment to phenomenological realism could produce semantic ambiguity and even, in the case Gummo, a degree of semantic indeterminacy and contradiction. In this chapter I want to extend Bazin’s recognition of the relationship between realism and semantic ambiguity in order to show how the rigorous commitment to realist principles adhered to under the auspices of Dogma 95 can lead to a productive confrontation with questions of representation and meaning. Firstly, I consider the question of indexicality and, secondly, the primacy of physical phenomena and sensory perception.
Restraint and Indexicality

Anne Jerslev makes an important connection between the requirements of the Dogma 95 rules and Bazinian indexicality:

The interesting thing to me seems to be that Dogma 95 dictates a set of minimalistic technical and narrative rules to which the profilmic has to subjugate itself thereby formulating a broader film aesthetics founded in a notion of realism and the real. This specific Dogma version of realism is directed toward the accentuation of a certain aspect of the ontology of the moving image, namely the photographic presence, the indexical aspect of the image. (2002: 48)

The Dogma manifesto requires Dogma 95 films to adhere to a stringent set of restrictions. Von Trier and Vinterberg argue that these limitations are conceived in opposition to the excesses of mainstream cinema (Hjort and Mackenzie 2003:8). The Dogma 95 rules can be seen as encouraging indexicality because they limit intervention and highlight the relationship between the camera and the subjects before it. The use of the handheld camera, natural lighting and found locations create the sense of an immediate documentary-like interface between world and camera.

In addition, a sense of documentary or cinéma vérité style liveness is created by a number of the Dogma rules. The manifesto requires the use of handheld camerawork. In addition, the action cannot be staged for the actors but instead the camera must react to the action. Conscious framing must be avoided. In such a cinema “camera movement and (im)balance suggest an immediate attachment to events” (2002: 49).

Jerslev also makes a very pertinent point about sound in Dogma 95 films. Rule number two requires that sound and image be connected – a sound may only be used if its source was on the set. Thus sound, in Dogma films, has the same indexical link to reality as the image. It too must bear testimony to the presence of its source in the real world (Jerslev, 2002:48). Almost everything that contributes to the making of the film must be provided by elements of the material world as it exists before the filmmaker’s intervention. No sets are constructed, no extra-diegetic music is composed. Dogma 95 films construct their fiction out of the immediate environment.
cherslev points out that Dogma films emphasise immediacy and proximity. The rules require that the films are set in the present and she writes “they must come close to the spectator and actions, must take place in a kind of temporal immediacy as if they were transmitted the very moment they take place” (48).

cherslev insists that this emphasis on the indexical function of film in Dogma 95 cinema is not just an unsophisticated attempt to represent the real. It functions to create reflexivity by emphasizing the construction of the film:

What is interesting about Dogma 95 is that the rules, even though they favour indexicality, also call attention to the fact that indexicality must necessarily be performed. Indexicality is an aesthetic effort. (ibid)

Dogma 95 films do not usually grant us easy access to the world presented on screen. Rather, they parade the difficulties in producing a representation of the world. Viewing is made difficult. The unstable, pixelated or ugly image that Dogma films often give to us -- instead of easing us into the narrative world -- make us aware of how resistant reality is to clear understanding as will be seen in my analysis of julien donkey-boy.

I would like to contend, as Anne cherslev does, that the Dogma 95 claim to cinematic ‘truth’ is complex and that in julien donkey-boy, as in The Idiots, the signifiers of the documentary mode are not indicators of transparency. They perform the opposite function. That ‘documentary look’ works to highlight the act of mediation without denying the existence of the phenomena before the camera.

cherslev interprets Bazin’s comments about indexicality as primarily emphasising presence and does not acknowledge the extent to which indexicality highlights the absence of the referent. She writes of Bazin’s “insistence on understanding that photography is more than a sign system and cinema is more than a language” (2002: 51), and continues: “This more, or visual presence, is what Bazin is trying to theorize in his discussion of the ontology of the image which he connects to questions of time” (ibid). cherslev describes
the notion of “time embalmed” as “the impression that what once was, is simultaneously here and now…” (ibid). The more Bazin refers to is not simply visual presence. Cinema expresses the complex ways in which the subject interfaces with the material world. This more refers to the reproduction of subjective experience which involves a grappling with both presence and absence.

Bazin understands filmmaking as a dialectic between allowing the real to be communicated by the film and making the choices that are necessary for the film to be considered an art work. In this process some elements of the material referent are always lost. He writes:

Every form of aesthetic must necessarily choose between what is worth preserving and what should be discarded, and what should not even be considered. But when this aesthetic aims in essence at creating the illusion of reality, as does the cinema, this choice sets up a fundamental contradiction which is at once unacceptable and necessary: necessary because art can only exist when a choice is made. Without it, supposing total cinema was here and now technically possible, we would go back purely to reality. Unacceptable because it would be done at the expense of that reality which cinema proposes to restore integrally. (1971: 26)

One might see Dogma 95 as engaging with this problem in cinema. Jerslev points out that questions of artistic control are important to Dogma 95. The rules restrict the number of choices directors can make. They must first restrain themselves from controlling the profilmic and then react to what material is provided on the set by adjusting the camera (2002:48). Dogma 95 can be linked to Bazin in its play with the capacity of cinema for both language and a more direct representation of experience. The ten rules of the movement are conceived in opposition to much conventional film practice. They certainly limit the excess and spectacle of mainstream cinema but they also serve to limit the power of film as language. By requiring that the camera be handheld, by limiting shooting to found sets and forbidding genre movies and the use of extra-diegetic music, the Dogma manifesto makes it much more difficult for directors to use conventional stylistic and iconographic cues to viewer expectations (von Trier and Vinterberg, 1995).

While it is possible to create somewhat conventional camerawork using a handheld camera -- as in Mifune’s last song (1999) -- this requirement has generally had the effect,
in Dogma films, of allowing a fresh approach to camera movement and framing. Mette Hjort writes of camerawork in Dogma 95:

there has been a tendency to interpret the rules as a license to set aside a number of norms related to clarity and relevance of images, and to gravitate instead towards an aesthetics of the image that privileges instability, obscurity and even, at times, apparent irrelevance, in the sense that it is a matter of including within the frame what would normally be excluded, of excluding what would normally be included. (2003: 41)

In addition, the manifesto asks that the camera move according to the drama that unfolds before it, rather than allowing the camera to dictate how action is staged. The emphasis here is on a direct relationship between camera and profilmic field rather than on the conventional meaning ascribed to certain kinds of shots.

The assumption underlying the attempts of Dogma filmmakers would appear to be that if one reduces the use of conventional and symbolic communication in cinema, one will achieve a more direct and less mediated relationship with the ‘real’ than is established in conventional filmmaking. This idea may seem unsophisticated, but when considered in the light of Bazin’s opposition between respect and manipulation it makes more sense. The iconoclasm of Dogma 95 allows these films to be a fertile playing ground for questions around fiction and “truth,” documentation and storytelling.

As Jerslev points out, The Idiots celebrates non-verbal communication as much more pure than linguistic communication. I will later explore how julien donkey-boy features a similar opposition between two modes of communication: semantic (operating through the use of signs, symbols or conventions) and phenomenological (facilitating an immediate sensual and indexical relationship between the object represented and the viewer). The Dogma brand of realism is particularly powerful as a form of phenomenological bracketing. The pared down visual strategy allows for a contrast between “the experiential” and the “symbolic” within the world of the film.

In Dogma 95 films, eschewing convention gives films the power to present experience without the mediation involved in the linguistic processes by which we usually come to
understand cinematic representation. This makes Dogma 95 an interesting mode of filmmaking in which to discuss signification and language because ‘direct’ experience can be mobilized in opposition to linguistic communication.

Sense and Absence

Anne Jerslev (2002) highlights the “immediacy” of Dogma 95 by noting the important position given to sense perception, touch and physicality in *The Idiots*. As I will show, *julien donkey-boy* also displays a special interest in tactility and bodies. These textural and sensual qualities of the Dogma 95 film have been seen as operating in a similar way to the indexical features of the image. Appeals to the body are seen as a way of connecting the viewer in a direct relationship to the referent. I would like to argue that, like the index, texture and sensory imagery in Dogma 95 films are as much about absence as they are about presence. Like the complex indexicality displayed in Dogma 95, tactility and sense perception are foregrounded in the Dogma Films under analysis to explore the complex interface between the screen and the viewer’s body. In *julien donkey-boy*, the viewer’s own struggles in accessing the onscreen world come to stand metaphorically for more universal questions about the problems of perception and subjectivity.

Jerslev argues that, while the reflexivity created by indexicality in *The Idiots* disrupts narrative engagement, it cannot be considered strictly as a distancing device because it is achieved through a medium encouraging an increased immediacy and proximity:

Furthermore what is really interesting about *The Idiots* is that the film’s highly reflexive discourse negates the distance usually built into reflexivity. Instead distance is replaced by immediate transmissions of affect. (Jerslev, 2002: 48)

Here Jerslev draws on ideas similar to those of Vivian Sobchack. For both Jerslev and Sobchack, the evocation of tactile and extra-sensory responses in the viewer is seen as potentially able to disrupt the distinctions between subject and object, viewer and image that have long characterised understandings of cinema (Sobchack, 2004).
**julien donkey-boy**

America's first Dogma 95 film takes on a particularly formidable challenge in its attempts to relay the experiences of a person suffering from schizophrenia. Dogma 95, as a realist movement, may initially appear to be a strange choice of filmic approach through which to examine a disorder characterised by difficulty in perceiving and interfacing with the real world. Sue E. Estroff writes that “Disagreement and contestation about meaning, reality and identity may represent the quintessence of schizophrenia” (2004: 285).

Janis Hunter Jenkins argues, however, that schizophrenia should not be disregarded as completely aberrant from “normal” human behaviour. Rather, schizophrenia can shed light on human experience in general. She writes: “People who suffer from this disorder can offer insights into human processes that are fundamental to living in a world shared with others. This is the case because the construction of shared meaning, usually taken for granted, can become fraught in schizophrenia” (2004: 30).

In *julien donkey-boy*, Korine takes a similar approach to the disorder. He uses Julien’s difficulties in perceiving and making sense of the material world as a way of dramatizing universal difficulties in the perception and representation of the Real. Korine foregrounds other perceptual difficulties such as blindness and alcoholism to a similar end. He mobilises Julien’s schizophrenia as a device through which to problematise the gaps between “direct” sense perception, meaning and communication. The realist impulse present in the Dogma 95 movement may initially seem incongruous with any attempt to discuss the complex interior problems of schizophrenia. However, I will show that *julien donkey-boy* employs the Dogma approach in such a way that Korine is able to investigate the fundamental difficulty in accessing and interpreting reality that characterizes schizophrenia. In the process Korine poses daunting questions about the way in which all human subjects construct meaning from their interface with the material world.
A Principle of Restraint

In line with the requirements of Dogma 95, *julien donkey-boy* was shot according to a set of minimalist rules. The shooting was confined to found locations like Korine’s grandmother’s house, the streets of Queens and a home for the disabled. The score is composed of diegetic sounds and tapes of classical music found on location. Korine relies on natural lighting throughout; the camerawork is handheld and the film relies very little on the conventions of any notable filmic genres. Following these principles of restraint, Korine produces a highly unusual viewing experience. The visual style of the film is bleak and austere, stripped of the excess, clarity and visual pleasure of conventional cinema. *Julien donkey-boy* does, however, provide visual interest through its unpredictable use of framing and editing.

Some directors in the Dogma movement have used the rules merely to pare down the excesses of their style and produce quite conventional films that are more focused on performance and storytelling. For example Lone Scherfig’s film *Italian for Beginners* (2001) employs the Dogma 95 principles to produce a charming, humble and surprising version of the romantic comedy.¹ Korine pushes the Dogma rules to the limit. In fact his submission of *julien donkey-boy* encouraged a change to the rules by which Dogma 95 films receive certificates (Hjort, 2003: 36). The film follows the principle of restraint at the heart of the Dogma manifesto beyond the requirements laid down in the rule book to produce a radical break with conventional film language.

A very Bazinian restraint from orchestration penetrates, not only the style of *julien donkey-boy*, but its narrative structure. Korine does not allow the everyday lives of the characters in his film to bend to a reassuring classic narrative structure. Like *Gummo*, the film is constructed out of a series of dramatic tableaux. It consists of episodes which are not always chronologically or causally related. The viewer is made witness to the daily struggles of the schizophrenic Julien and his family. If the film shows any real narrative progression at all it reveals Julien’s situation going from bad to worse.

¹ I owe this observation to Emma van der Vliet’s lectures on Dogma 95 filmmaking at the University of Cape Town 2006.
The film introduces us to a troubled family. Julien’s father is a verbally abusive alcoholic. His sister, Pearl, is pregnant (it is later revealed that the child is fathered by Julien) and Julien’s younger brother, Chris, is tormented by the pressure his father puts on him to be a champion wrestler. In the course of the film the viewer is made witness to many family squabbles and to the father’s constant verbal abuse of his children. We are also shown Julien’s struggles with his own psyche and his longing for his lost mother as it is expressed by his attachment to a number of female figures in the story. Through the course of the film Julien is subject to increasing feelings of guilt and self hatred. This manifests itself in a growing obsession with religion. Julien attends confession and has sexual fantasies about a nun. He and his family attend a gospel church where Julien experiences moments of religious ecstasy. At the climax of the film Pearl takes a fall while ice-skating -- fatally injuring her (and Julien’s) child. The film closes with Julien desperately cradling the corpse of his dead baby.

This very open narrative trajectory makes it difficult to read a coherent meaning from the action in the film. Thus the film stands in opposition to conventional cinema in which narrative resolution secures meaning and gives the story events obvious significance. As I have explained in my previous chapters, Bazin admired the loose structure of neorealist narrative because he recognized that a tightly structured narrative subjects reality to the abstract functions of symbolism and diminishes ambiguity, while a loose narrative structure gives the viewer an experience more aligned with the banal but complicated reality of everyday life. While the neorealists dramatized the relationship between meaning and reality as complex and ambiguous, julien donkey-boy goes beyond the narrative restraint pioneered by the neorealists to produce a film in which it is almost impossible to determine a conclusive sense of the meaning of the film.

Because it does not have a powerful narrative drive, the phenomenological elements of julien donkey-boy are more important in the film’s communicative strategy. As Eagleton has argued (see above), conventional cinema uses sensual cues to support the abstract meanings communicated by the film and to create the sense of verisimilitude that makes
classical Hollywood cinema such a powerful vehicle for ideology. However, in *julien donkey-boy*, operations of tactility and indexicality are freed from service to abstract meaning and become powerful tools in an important opposition that defines *julien donkey-boy’s* address. In the analysis that follows I will explore how the narrative and stylistic iconoclasm of *julien donkey-boy* allows for a productive meeting between the phenomenological aspect of the filmic address and the tendency toward linguistic abstractions.

I will start by focusing attention on the pivotal opening image of *julien donkey-boy* in order to explain the film’s break with conventional storytelling. Korine begins his film with the grainy and distorted image of a figure-skater twirling to the soaring Puccini aria, ‘*O Mia Bambino Caro.*’ The video footage skips frames and the skater’s form blurs with the speed of her motion. As she moves she leaves traces of blown-out colour behind her.

This opening shot presents an interesting example of Korine’s creative interpretation of the Dogma 95 rules. The image appears to be derived by filming the television found on set while it plays a videotape of a figure-skating competition. This figure skater has no direct connection to the lives of the film’s main characters but she emerges repeatedly as a central motif in *julien donkey-boy*. In the middle of the film Julien’s father and his armless friend are shown watching the same figure skater on the family television in the lounge. She appears again to mark Julien’s trauma at the end of the film. In the first appearance of the figure skater, forms are already difficult to distinguish. When she is shown at the end of the film, the image is so warped that it is almost entirely abstract in character. The increasing deterioration of this image is perhaps the closest approximation to a narrative process in the film.

In the figure-skater image the pleasure in visual mastery that defines conventional cinema is replaced with difficulty. The figure skater comes to us in a compromised form as if the tape she was recorded on has been overplayed and ravaged by time. This distortion alerts the viewer to the partiality of their viewing experience. As much as the image is distorted, it is characterized by a great sense of indexical reference. The photographic nature of the
image is emphasized so that it links us in an indexical, Bazinian sense to an actual point in time and an actual subject. But the pixelation and blurring also foreground the painful inadequacy of this approximation of the event. The image of the dancer comes to us through the mediation of technology. The distortion at once attests to the "real-ness" of the event and highlights the mediation that separates the viewer from ever fully inhabiting the experience of that figure skater. It makes us aware of a "camera presence" and of the skating show as an orchestrated media event. The distortion of the image actually enforces the sense that this image is a record rather than a work of fiction or symbolic image. It also lures the viewer with the sense that somewhere beyond the video decay is the real event in all its visual clarity and physical fullness. However, the blurring and distortion also make obvious the act of mediation to the point where the viewer is forced to realize that the moment -- the reality of the skater's dance -- is already lost to the ruins of time. We have in this image Lacan's tuche -- a sense of direct contact with the referent paired with an awareness that this referent is already lost. This simultaneous sense of directness and loss pervades almost every image in julien donkey-boy.

There is a sensual dimension to this process. We are presented here with a very physical and embodied activity -- figure skating. The image invites sensual longing by invoking the cold of the ice-rink and the embodied whirling motion of the figure's movements. This is one of many images in the film that plays with warmth and coldness. The image also has a fascinating musical and kinaesthetic appeal. The figure-skater's stretching and reaching gestures paired with the swelling and tumbling notes of the opera evoke a powerful sense of yearning. When viewing this image I can imagine the cold air against the skater's skin as she glides, the joy of speed, the enviable fluidity of her movements but I can never know what it feels like to execute such feats and I am made aware that I can never really access her individual sensory experience. This is indeed a highly affective image but one that left my skin tingling with longing not, as Sobchack might suggest, with sensory fullness. While the image makes an appeal to our sensual faculties it also frustrates our ability to perceive and identify with the sensual cues offered.
The distortion of the image at once frustrates sensual identification with the skater and encourages another sensory response to the image, for the distortion itself has a texture. This image is what Laura Marks would call a haptic image. The difficulties in looking at the figure skater as an object encourage an appraisal of the textures of the image. The damage done to this image makes it easy to become immersed in the near-hypnotic display of texture and motion instead of identifying the figure skater as a distinct form. The objectifying visual mastery common to optical visuality is replaced with an erotic sensual engagement with the image. However, this relationship is not without a degree of trauma. By making our visual approach to the image difficult and forcing us to access it through another sense, haptic images reveal the difficulties involved in human attempts to apprehend the real. To recall Marks’s deft description: through such images a film “points to its own asymptotic, caressing relationship to the real and to the same relation between perception and image” (Marks 2000: 192).

Aside from the notable primacy of touch and indexicality in the figure-skating image, the opening alerts us to another central tendency in julien donkey-boy. Devices such as unconventional cinematography, indexicality and haptics may demand a response to the image that is non-generalising and physically felt in the body of the viewer – one that does not regard the figure skater simply as an “object or a symbol” as Bazin would put it. However, despite the pixelation and decay, it is difficult to ignore the symbolic resonance of this image of female beauty and physical mastery. The choice of music and the balletic choreography of the performance connote classical harmony. The image is informed by the traditional alignment of femininity with the body and with grace. For Julien’s father the figure skater becomes an example of the control and discipline that he admires. She also has a key place amongst a number of female dancers who operate as the objects of Julien’s longing for love. The reaching impulse in the skater’s gestures certainly mirror Julien’s longing, but of course they are also merely choreographed steps in a carefully planned athletic performance.

The film that follows deals with the ways in which people invest limited, material and contingent moments, like the skater’s performance, with transcendental meaning. As
much as the film emphasizes chance, indexicality and the deathly threat of the Real, *julien donkey-boy* cannot deny the power and the lure of the symbols. However, because of its break with classical style and its obvious indexicality, the film can avoid the operations of fetishism and fantasy that protect the cinemagoer from the threat of the Real. Instead, *julien donkey-boy* explores the way in which its characters try to construct meaning and seek wholeness while constantly faced with the lack that structures their existence.

This opening image is followed by a dramatic scene that presents further experimentation with film style. This is also where we encounter the film’s first obvious play with mythic and religious themes. We are introduced to Julien as he walks through a cold and muddy park toward camera. Julien’s mouth hangs open and his warm breath makes clouds of steam against the cold air. The camera work is unsteady and Julien’s figure moves in and out of focus. There is no accompanying music or extra-diegetic sound. We do hear Julien’s heavy breath and brittle grass crunching under his feet. This shot is followed by a series of jump-cuts, each one bringing Julien closer to the camera until he is framed in close-up. Only when Julien says “Hey Brian watya got?” do we realise he is walking toward another person. This shot is followed by an awkwardly framed image of Brian with his back to the camera. An unsteady pan to the right, reveals Julien standing next to him. In the exchange that follows over a turtle that Julien wants, Brian is largely off screen or on the margins of the frame.

Already, this scene breaks quite dramatically with the fluidity, ease and clear exposition of standard film language. The use of camera work, sound and editing is highly unconventional. Mette Hjort argues that this sequence takes the rules of Dogma 95 to their most iconoclastic extreme as it involves “a dissolution of the most basic narrative principles allowing viewers to make sense of stories” (Hjort 2003: 41-42). The scene relies very little on the communicative role of generic expectations or coded meanings. As a consequence it is quite difficult to follow. This abandonment of conventional film language draws attention to the mediating role of the camera. In this way the film makes
it difficult for the viewer to experience the onscreen world as reassuring fantasy. We are instead confronted with difficulties in perception and representation.

As the scene continues something even more disruptive happens; we see Julien’s hands digging in the mud and his body cut off at the head as he asks Brian for a turtle. When Brian refuses, Julien rushes toward the camera and pushes it as if the camera were Brian. A series of indistinct images of frenetic movement follow. These are paired with the sound of heavy pummeling and Brian gagging and gasping for breath. Julien is revealed looking into camera from above, again, as though the camera were occupying Brian’s perspective on the ground. Julien covers the lens with his hand to smother it (or Brian). Brian is suddenly silent. Julien withdraws his hand and looks intently into camera. It seems that Brian has just been knocked unconscious or killed. However we still seem to be looking at Julien from Brian’s perspective. The edge of the hood of Brian’s jacket is visible in frame, suggesting that we are accessing this image of Julien through the consciousness of someone who is unconscious or dead.

In this instance Korine creates an extremely disorienting play with subject positions. It is difficult to tell who is under attack: Brian, the viewer or the camera presence. Most Hollywood cinema carefully disguises the tear it makes in the fabric of “reality” to allow us our peep in. From the very opening, *julien donkey-boy* makes patently visible the viewing position that mainstream cinema carefully works to make invisible. This violent assault on vision can be compared to other avant-garde moments -- such as the slicing of the eye in *Un Chien Andalou* (1929). As in the surrealist film, Korine is introducing the threat that his film poses to conventional ways of seeing. But even more than this, Korine is disturbing the comfortable position of visual mastery generally afforded to the cinematic spectator.

What happens next further complicates the film’s address to the viewer. As Julien looks at the now-dead Brian, his expression changes from aggression to dismay. Realising what he has done, Julien swiftly draws back and begins chanting a prayer. Dry winter trees make a vein-like halo around Julien’s head. He leans into the camera again and a string of snot drips from his nose and dangles dangerously close to camera. An abrupt cut takes us
to a much darker shot in which Julien appears to be patting damp soil around Brian’s newly buried body. Julien continues repeating his prayer.

The halo-like frame around Julien’s head tempts the viewer to read the image in terms of mythic notions of divinity but the halo can also be read as merely the effect of trees around Julien’s head. In this instance the image has a dual character – it is real and specific as well as ideal and symbolic. Julien’s snotty nose works to diffuse any sense of divinity that his halo may have provided. The rough documentary-style camerawork, disorienting framing and visceral use of texture undercut the viewer’s ability to consider the image in its symbolic dimensions. This ambivalent image is one of many in the film that vacillate between an abstract and a concrete reading. While the film’s style may be iconoclastic and all the dramatic material for each scene is derived from everyday life, *julien donkey-boy* is replete with highly symbolic imagery.

**The Real and the Ideal**

Why does Korine marry this austere stylistic approach, stripped as it is of conventional film language and grounded in everyday event, with references to the supernatural and divine? I would like to contend that Korine uses mythic structures in counterpoint to the phenomenological appeal of Dogma 95 cinema. His concern is, once again, with the relationship between abstract meaning and brute materiality.

Throughout this thesis I have been charting the way in which filmic texts negotiate between actual, material conditions and abstract or universal ideas. In the first chapter I explained the marriage of verisimilitude and structuration in the classical Hollywood paradigm using Terry Eagleton’s understanding of the role of the aesthetic in social life. Eagleton argues that aesthetic production naturalises the relationship “between things and thoughts” (1992: 17) in a way that favours the interests of the dominant order.

Through the course of history, this aesthetic negotiation described by Eagleton has been carried out in the realm of the arts. Such a negotiation between material conditions and abstract concepts comes into more obvious focus in the mythic stories of so-called
‘primitive’ peoples. Theodor H. Gaster describes myth as "any presentation of the actual in terms of the ideal" ([original emphasis] 1984: 112-113). He continues: “[Myth] is an expression of the concept that all things can be viewed at once under two aspects - on the one hand, temporal and immediate; on the other, eternal and transcendental” (ibid). Myth can be seen as an extreme manifestation of the tendency within aesthetic production to ascribe material objects and events with higher meaning. In the case of ancient or ‘primitive’ mythological stories, material objects and everyday experiences are granted divine significance. Mircea Eliade defines myths as stories of origin that make reference to supernatural forces in order to explain and give meaning to human life: "...the foremost function of myth is to reveal the exemplary models for all human rites and all significant human activities" (1964: 8).

Roland Barthes extends the analysis of myth from ancient and primitive stories to certain operations in more recent popular culture. What unites his definition of myth with theories about ancient myth is his understanding of myth as a process of abstraction. Barthes defines myth as operating on a second level of signification. According to Barthes, “[m]ythical speech is made of material which has already been worked on so as to make it suitable for communication” (2000: 110). This makes it “a second-order semiological system” ([original emphasis]: 114). Mythic discourse adopts signifiers, emptying them out of their contingent, historic or specific meanings and making them simply the signifiers of the myth itself (117).

Barthes offers an image of a Francophone African soldier saluting the French flag as an example to explain his reasoning. Barthes contends that this image constitutes a mythic justification for French Imperialism. It suggests that the French Empire is so great and just that even those whom the imperial system has been accused of oppressing support the empire with enthusiasm (115). In the mythic process, the history and context of the soldier himself are lost to make way for the mythic meaning that his image supports. Barthes argues that the soldier’s “presence is tamed, put at a distance, made almost transparent; it recedes a little, it becomes the accomplice of a concept which comes to it fully armed, French imperality: once made use of, it becomes artificial” (118). In the
process of myth-making the signifier loses some of its referential force and passes through a second level of abstraction, while the myth still relies on the contingency and historical reference points provided by the first-order signifier. Through this oscillating between the original meaning of the adopted signifier and the abstract meaning myth “transforms history into nature” (129). Thus mythic processes, whether ancient or contemporary, come to support and justify social arrangements. Myth operates as an obscuring filter through which reality must pass. Myth, for Barthes, is ultimately a working form of ideology.

Barthes, following Freud, compares the processes of myth to the work of the unconscious. Mythic symbols, like dream symbols, are constituted by a double process of abstraction. Dream images are produced by the same “abnormal regression from meaning [the first order of signification] to form [the second order of signification]” (177) in which the latent meaning of the dream takes hold of and deforms linguistic signifiers (119). This is why Freud aligned myth with the unconscious. Like dreams, myths displace material not immediately acceptable to consciousness into a highly coded and condensed form of expression (1991: 200).

But Freud also notices another important element of myth that is missing from Barthes’ explanation of myth as ideology. In Freud’s understanding myths can be compared to the work of dreams because both feature processes of symbolisation that produce pleasure in relation to wish fulfilment (1953 IX: 152). Freud writes “…it is extremely probable that myths…are distorted vestiges of the wishful phantasies of whole nations, the secular dreams of youthful humanity” (ibid). Myth fictionalises and distorts the material of brute reality in a way that harmonizes our most basic human desires with the restrictions and collective social understandings that make civilization possible.

If myth is a process of doubled abstraction that empties signs of their link to contingency and specificity then one might see phenomenological realism as the opposite of myth in terms of the relationship to reality. *Julien donkey-boy* averts linguistic structures and cinematic conventions in its stylistic system in order to draw closer to material reality as a
ground of reference. However, the film presents mythic images and scenarios -- a secondary level of abstraction -- as infiltrating the everyday environments where the film’s action is staged in ambivalent and contradictory ways. By so doing Korine complicates the realism of his film and at the same time throws myth into dramatic contrast with his minimalistic film style. In this manoeuvre Korine critiques both the naïve idea of a “pure” realism and any appeals to the naturalness of the mythmaking process.

Barthes contends that it is very difficult to challenge the naturalizing force of myth because myth can adopt and distort the signifiers of any protest against it into second-order signifiers of myth itself (1993: 131). In addition, if we regard myth as a pleasurable activity driven by basic human desires, it becomes clear how strong a hold mythic thinking has on human consciousness. For Barthes, the best way to challenge mythic structures is to “rob myth” (135) in the way that it robs from language. By reproducing myth in a critical way it is possible to reveal the naïvety of the original myth (136).

In *julien donkey-boy*, Harmony Korine undertakes a wholesale robbery of a number of mythic structures. The film makes reference to important elements of Christian and Judaic mythology and it also draws on pagan myth through references to the story of Oedipus.

The title of the film relates Julien to a donkey, a figure that appears frequently in Judaic, Christian and Pagan myth. While no direct mention is made of the name within the film, Julien is probably labelled a donkey-boy by other people for his large, toothy mouth, his hee-hawing laugh and his mental difficulties. The donkey has been seen as an object of scorn and it has also been related to godliness. The term “ass” is a popular insult and Shakespeare gives his comic hero, Bottom in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* an ass’s head to show his stupidity. However, the donkey has also been aligned with the word of God. In the Old Testament story of Balaam and his ass (Numbers 22: 22-41), God speaks to Balaam through the mouth of his donkey. The name Julien means son of Jove -- a name which is in turn derived from Jupiter, the most supreme of Roman gods. The title, *julien*
*donkey-boy*, effectively sums up Julien’s ambiguous position as a holy fool. Julien is a person with mental and psychological difficulties who sees himself as the mouthpiece of God.

Religious symbolism abounds in *julien donkey-boy*. Julien frequently incants lines from the Bible and announces that he is God or "Lord Julien." He goes to confession and he attends a gospel church with his father and sister. Here Julien appears especially moved by the religious music. Julien’s pregnant sister, Pearl, is frequently portrayed in the role of the Virgin Mother. In almost every scene, Pearl is shot with warm light radiating from her hair and she performs such celestial tasks as harp playing and hymn-singing. She also ‘plays mother’ to Julien in the absence of his real mother. This is most obvious when Pearl pretends to be Julien’s mother while talking to him over the telephone. By choosing the name, Pearl, for his central female character, Korine invokes a host of biblical references. In many instances the pearl has often directly associated with a woman’s virtue, for example, St. Jerome describes virginity as “the pearl from the oyster” in his 22nd letter (Jerome 20.1 1946: 94). The pearl is an object generally associated with great value and purity in Christian Mythology. The Parable of the Pearl (Matthew 13: 45 – 46) is a key example of such a tendency. This parable relates the kingdom of heaven to a pearl so valuable, that a fisherman is willing to sell all he owns in order to obtain it (*ibid*). Thus the pearl suggests a transcendental impulse away from worldly things toward a place “where no moth comes to eat and no worm destroys” (Apocryphal Gospel of St.Thomas saying 76: 154). As my analysis will show, Pearl embodies a similar transcendental promise for Julien.

Julien’s incestuous relationship with Pearl, who acts as both a mother and a sister to him, also draws on the myth of Oedipus. Both Julien and his father are traumatized by the absence of Julien’s mother. The father longs so much for his deceased wife that he forces Julien’s brother, Chris, to dress up in her clothes. This moment also draws on the androgyny of the blind Tiresias figure in the Oedipal legend. Julien responds to his mother’s death by forming an obsessive emotional and sexual attachment to his sister. Like the young Oedipus, Julien (thinking of himself as Godlike) overestimates his own
power to determine his destiny. Though Julien never kills his father, the relationship between father and son is characterized by hostility. Themes of blindness (an essential feature of the Oedipal story) abound in *julien donkey-boy*. Julien works as a janitor at a home for the blind and he also has a blind girlfriend, the figure skater, Chrissy. Julien’s own perceptual difficulties could be described as a certain kind of blindness.

Korine does not reserve experimentation with myth for ancient structures. He also plays with the mythic element of many enduring contemporary stereotypes. He thus uncovers the very regressive workings of myth that Barthes is interested in critiquing. *Julienn donkey-boy* foregrounds a number of racial and cultural stereotypes. It also foregrounds problematic and essentialist images of women. Julien’s German father often behaves like a stereotypical ‘Nazi’ in his ruthless interest in discipline and control. Pearl embodies a startlingly regressive image of the ‘good woman’ as natural, pure, motherly and passive.

The film does not reproduce these mythic and ideological structures faithfully or without criticism. While it is never clear whether the mythic images in the film are real or imagined, in *julien donkey-boy* mythic operations and religious ideas are generally aligned with the fantasies of the film’s schizophrenic protagonist and are thus treated as somewhat pathological. In this film myths are not reproduced in a structured or easily comprehensible way. Different mythic systems overlap and become confused with one another. For example, when Chrissy and Julien wash each other’s feet one could interpret the scene as a reference to Christ washing the feet of his disciples in a display of divine humility or one could see it as a reference to Oedipus whose name mean’s “swollen” foot. Similarly Pearl comes to embody the Virgin Mother in Christian mythology, Jocasta in Pagan mythology and perhaps even Eve, the figure of temptation in Judaic Myth. In this muddled arrangement, myth loses its sense of naturalness as an explanatory power and is revealed as a strange and contradictory play of symbols.

The film blends mythic symbolism with the most mundane of events so that it is difficult to determine what is significant from what is ordinary. The mythic resonances themselves
are built from everyday phenomena. We are never allowed to believe fully in the images of divinity it reveals. All of them can be explained in relation to mundane everyday conditions. What we are given is not the magical revelation of the supernatural in everyday phenomena but a realization of the way in which the mind imposes meaning on essentially meaningless material things and creatures. Korine implicates the viewer in this process by a cunning use of symbolic cues that tempt the viewer into recognizing the divine elements of the image but that eventually disappoint any aspirations toward the transcendental.

In the course of the film, the transcendental impulse behind Christian and Judaic myth is ultimately undercut by the darker and more tragic trajectory of the Oedipal legend. Julien, as much as he may think of himself as Godlike, cannot reproduce himself through Pearl. His baby dies rather than living to grant others eternal divine life as would the Christ child. And far from being an immaculate conception, we discover that Pearl’s baby was the product of incest. The film dramatizes the material limits of earthly experience as opposed to the divinity towards which it aspires.

Most importantly, the abstracting impulse within myths is undercut by the very nature of Korine’s stylistic system. In this film indexicality and sensuality are foregrounded in such a way that these elements come to complicate the abstracting processes of myth. In *julien donkey-boy*, the distortion of the digital images and the tactile nature of many of the shots are used to complicate the symbolic resonance of the image – but also to make us realize that the “pure” phenomenological experience is itself corrupted by the operations of language and haunted by absence. In order to demonstrate this process it would be useful to explore the way in which Pearl, the foremost object of Julien’s longing, is represented in the film.

**Borrowed Objects**

In a startling image of heavenly innocence, Pearl wanders through a honey-coloured field of high grass, singing a hymn. Her mop of curly blonde hair is dramatically blacklit by the sun. One could easily read her glowing mass of curls as a halo. But of course it is
simply hair lit from behind by the sun. Pearl has a rather unflattering hairstyle and she is not an Angel or the Virgin Mother. Any hopes we may have of this are thrown into strong relief by the next scene in which Pearl visits a dingy charity shop to buy second-hand clothes for her baby. This is not the only way in which the sense of divinity in this image is complicated.

As in the rest of the film, this scene is handheld and the footage grainy; Pearl moves in and out of focus. Cinematic time is interrupted by jump-cuts. Thus the mediation of the photographic apparatus is made very present. By foregrounding the indexical feature of the image, the film draws attention to the specificity and contingency of this particular cinematic moment.

Elements of the image appear as the effects of chance. Pearl’s halo is not painted by the brush of a master or provided by skilful manipulation of lighting or special effects. It is instead granted by nature and relies upon the particular alignment of the sun at a particular time of day for its effect. The golden reeds that surround Pearl were not planted by the director and Pearl appears to have wandered into this configuration of divine imagery unwittingly. Of course Korine has planned the filming of this moment carefully but the image still retains a sense of accident or at least the mark of Korine’s restraint from orchestration.

The warmth suggested by the sunlight in this image of Pearl suggests divinity, but it also invokes an immediate sensual response that is not abstract but embodied. Thus this image of Pearl becomes, not only a symbolic image, but a physical experience for the viewer. This sunlit image, like many images of golden sunlight in the film, evokes a feeling of warmth. Pearl’s warmth is juxtaposed in the film with many images that suggest coldness. For example, in a particularly harrowing scene, Julien’s father sprays a shivering and half-naked Chris with a hose in the driveway of their house. Korine uses the chilliness of the ice-rink to underscore the tragic climax of the film. The use of warmth and coldness in these instances is not only thematic but affective. It appeals to our senses.
Korine takes hold of the ambivalence involved in the encounter with a realist image and plays with it so that Pearl’s glowing hair is both sensuous and symbolic at the same time. The mise-en-scène constructs Pearl as both earthly and divine, real and textual. Because of the indexical quality of the photographic image and the affective appeal of the images, we get the sense that Pearl is somehow real – we are linked to an actual moment and to a living body but we are also made aware, by means of the video decay, that time has passed and we are witnessing a ghost of that moment and a representation.

In this image of Pearl, we can see the way in which Korine produces a fruitful relationship between the studium and the punctum, the coded and the phenomenological aspects of the image. In julien donkey-boy, the Dogma95 rules ensure that elements of chance invade the mise-en-scène of the film. As is the case elsewhere in the film’s digital distortion, jump-cuts and unsteady camerawork emphasise the indexical, photographic features of the image. These elements of the image can be ascribed to the work of the punctum. At the same time, these everyday images are infused with lofty mythic associations, the work of the studium.\(^2\) Of course the studium and punctum are not simply organic features of the cinematic image but the effect of certain filmic choices. Many of the coded meanings of the studium are cultivated by the director. This is clearly the case in Korine’s highly intertextual film. At the same time, by consciously adhering to the principals of restraint demanded by Dogma 95, Korine willfully opens his film up to the chance, contingency and, ultimately, the confrontation with absence that are the operations of the punctum.

Because of the contingency foregrounded in the image of Pearl, we cannot read her glowing hair simply as a symbol or simply as the imaginary projection of desire. We must instead recognize the process by which the symbolic and the imaginary need to bend reality to their devices. The studium of any photographic image must draw its codes from very specific everyday objects. As much as the mythic operations of the studium

\(^2\) It is important to note, however, that the distinction between the studium and the punctum is not clear cut - our reaction to the shaky camera, for example, relies to some degree on a coded understanding of the connection between handheld cameras and amateur filmmaking.
may encourage a generalized or universal reading of the image, the elements of the photograph that belong to the *punctum* will always stand as a reminder of the specificity and contingency of the material objects that are used in building the photograph’s coded address. This tension between *studium* and *punctum* has a phenomenological effect of its own. The poignancy of the photograph (and the cinematic image) is produced not only through the relationship to pastness and lack implied by the photograph’s specificity but in the pull between grand mythic notions and the profane reality of everyday life. As Yvette Biro puts it:

> ... myth always tries to bestow a drop of eternity on its stolen or borrowed objects. With the pathos of unalterability it wants to gild the figures and situations of everyday existence. (1982: 87) 

She explains the relationship between myth and everyday phenomena in similar terms used by Barthes, as a form of robbery. Korine’s film stages the way in which this theft takes place and his images are infused with the pathos described by Biro.

It is important to note that affect and symbol are not necessarily at odds or on either side of a binary opposition. Rather, *julien donkey-boy* introduces a play of different relationships between the experiential nature of an image and its symbolic meanings. Sometimes these two elements of cinematic expression are in harmony and sometimes Korine makes use of their dissonance. But, always, we are made aware of the doubled symbolic and affective appeal of the cinematic image. I would suggest, however, that sobering realism ultimately wins out over the mythic in *julien donkey-boy*. Fantasy is never allowed to supersede the real. Pearl’s halo is simply, to borrow Biro’s term, a ‘borrowed object,’ tragically unalterable and chained to the real.

**Longing and Sensory Difficulty**

Korine’s treatment of Pearl foregrounds the gap between the world as it is and the way in which we see it. Myth is connected, not only to ideological operations, but to people’s unconscious desires. We invest objects with our desires, argues Lacan, as a way of disavowing the absence that haunts us in the form of the Real (1977: ix). In particular,
human beings invest other people with their desire as a way of finding imaginary fulfillment for the absence that marks their existence. Julien’s relationship to Pearl is an almost textbook example of this scenario. Because of his schizophrenia, Julien has even more difficulty than most people in positioning himself within the symbolic order and protecting himself from the Real. Julien donkey-boy is pervaded by a longing for intersubjectivity and immediate mutual understanding. As much as Korine presents the other as the image of desire he also shows how true union with the other is forever beyond grasp. In julien donkey-boy, this effect is achieved by foregrounding blocks to perception.

One of the most important ways in which this film uses the devices of Dogma 95 is by complicating the viewer and Julien’s perception of Pearl, using the textures and the difficulties of a documentary style to construct and record what Laura Marks calls “perceptual blocks.” The very cinematic devices that should encourage immediacy are used to emphasize distance and pastness. These stylistic features demonstrate the impossibility of ever truly accessing the object of desire, in this case Pearl.

From the very beginning of the film there is an emphasis on isolation and separateness within Julien’s family. This is most eloquently conveyed through the use of dance. We are introduced to the family through a sequence of scenes in which each family member is performing their own sort of solitary dance. A jarring cut between atmospheric night sounds and a piece of classical music introduces Pearl. The view of her is blocked by a banister and a number of shadows but we can sneak glimpses of Pearl as she flits past the camera in a ballet tutu. The camera, zoomed in tight, moves from her pointed toe up her body to her glowing mass of curls. Her hair is backlit by a bedroom light. Pearl’s movements create sweeping blurs in the digital image. Next we are shown Julien’s father, alone in his room, dancing on his lonesome to a hillbilly song. He is framed in medium long-shot, unlike Pearl whom we saw in an intimate close-up. The wider framing enhances the comic element of this scene as well as the pathos of the father’s lonely dance. It also sets up Julien’s emotional distance from his father.
Julien’s granny is revealed in long-shot, lying on a sofa and singing to her Maltese poodle. The pair performs a kind of recumbent, motionless dance. Korine cuts abruptly to a close image of Chris’s feet, moving away from the camera as he drags them frantically up the stairs as he trains for wrestling. When he reaches the top he quickly runs down and begins his battle with the stairs once more. Korine cuts back to Pearl, this time framed in a long-shot that reveals her pregnant belly. The light from the overhead lamp flares on the lens creating crystalline patterns above her head.

After a series of repeated cuts between the different family members, Korine reveals Julien to us, with his head perched at the top of the stairwell leaning on a pole of the banister as he looks at Pearl. He appears decapitated as his sister performs the very embodied act of dance. Her feet flitter past him, obscuring his face with a steady pattern of blurred shapes. In this sequence the motif of dance is used to highlight themes of loneliness and separation. This sequence is particularly powerful in displaying Julien’s feelings of love and longing for his sister. Julien’s desire for Pearl is related to his inadequacy as he stands, staring at Pearl, dismembered by the stairwell and dissected by the swift movements of her feet in front of his face.

In this sequence the signifying practices of Dogma are ever present -- grainy footage, jarring cutting, poor lighting, lens flare, the abrupt cutting of sound between scenes and difficult framing. What we find here is a masterful use of the stylistic elements of dogma to expressive purpose. The difficult images of the sequence parallel the troubled relationships within Julien’s family. The most peculiar and fraught images are those of Pearl. While the other family members are largely handled in long-shot, the images of Pearl are often so close that it is difficult see her as she moves swiftly back and forth in front of the lens. Julien’s longing to be near Pearl, or one with her, makes it impossible for him to see her. This sequence marks a nice parallel between Julien’s relationship to Pearl and the aesthetic paradox of the Dogma movement. While the Dogma devices bring a greater sense of intimacy and immediacy, they also reveal the impossibility of ever fully grasping the referent.
Julien donkey-boy features several sequences in which distorted cinematography is used to explore problems with perception. An enduring area of interest for Korine seems to be the fundamentally different way in which blind people experience the world. Korine uses a sequence of still frames to introduce Julien’s blind friends at the institution where he works as a janitor. While the film does not try to reproduce the experience of blindness exactly, it gives the viewer some sense of what it is like to experience vision partially. Importantly, in a voice-over accompanying these images Julien tries to describe the view from the window to his friend using words. In the still images he provides, Korine blocks the view of the window with the characters’ bodies so that the viewer’s apprehension of the window is also frustrated. In so doing Korine reveals the inadequacy of words and language to express individual perceptual experiences.

Language is always problematic for Julien whose schizophrenia makes it difficult to marry meaning with experience. Julien’s language problems are most clearly expressed through his relationship with his father, who constantly talks and tells war stories but never communicates adequately with his children. He asserts his patriarchal power largely through verbal abuse. In an early scene he demands that Pearl (who is pregnant) sit straight at the dinner table and then turns his attention to Chris, saying, “Look at your brother. He thinks he’s a wrestler. Look at the guy -- it doesn’t make sense to me.” Later, while hosing Chris with cold water in their driveway, he calls him a coward and demands that he “be a man.” As the film progresses, the father’s abuse worsens. He describes a poem Julien recites at the dinner table as “arty-fartsy” and says that he hates it. He encourages his children to wrestle each other. When Julien cannot bring himself to fight his brother and says to Chris “I love you,” the father scolds him and tells them both that their performance was “quite shitty.” At the end of the film, in perhaps the worst case of abuse, Julien’s father tells him to call Pearl “a dilettante and a slut.” He then tells Julien that he “is just so stupid” and harasses his son with words until Julien goes into a psychotic fit.

An early scene explicitly links Julien’s mental difficulties to his father’s domineering use of language. Julien and his father walk down the street toward camera, framed in extreme
long-shot. The image is paired with a tinny-sounding voice over in which Julien’s father narrates a story about the Spanish conquest of Peru. As the story progresses, the shot darkens and starts to dissolve into a close-up image of the father’s head. The pair walks closer and closer to camera but as they walk the image gets darker. Just before the end of the scene Julien bends down in a gesture of subservience to tie his father’s shoelace. As he does this the father finishes narrating a story about a Spanish nobleman who, in the face of death, sings out to his enemies “Little mother, two by two, wafts the wind in my hair”. Julien’s father finishes his tale by commenting “I truly like that.” Like many of the father’s stories, this one is difficult to follow, concerned with war, and relates to an obscure historical scenario. This line of dialogue is also a direct reference to Herzog’s own film, Aguirre, The Wrath of God (1972) and the scene draws on Herzog’s own fascination with South America.

Korine wilfully allows aspects of Werner Herzog’s personality to infuse his role. All of Herzog’s rambling dialogue is improvised, as Herzog himself has revealed in interviews. He says “I always had to invent it” (Herzog, cited in Renaud et al. 2004: par26). He also suggest that the ruthless and dictatorial persona of the father is not very far from his own: when he says that he is good at comic acting “as long as I can be someone vile, base, intimidating and dysfunctional” (Herzog, cited in Hill 2007: par13). In the production of Aguirre, the “vile” aspects of Herzog’s personality were brought to the fore as he was rumoured to have held Klaus Kinski at gunpoint while directing him (O’ Mahoney 2002: par 10).

These intertextual references aside, Korine has included this particular piece of Herzog’s dialogue for the difficulties in meaning and interpretation that it provides. It is difficult to read the significance of the nobleman’s rather nonsensical declaration. The statement describes the wind as something divisible, while the wind is an ephemeral movement of endless multiple particles of air. The statement thus seeks to understand the wind according to the rules of differentiation and classification that characterise language. What the statement reveals, above all, is that the wind cannot be understood this way. It is
something that we can experience through its effects (as it blows through our hair) but that we have difficulty ‘grasping’ as an object of perception.

In a later scene, Julien makes a similarly peculiar statement about the wind: “Why is the wind blind? The wind is blind. The wind is actually blind...winds a breeze; a breeze is a zephyr; a zephyr is a yarn; a yarn’s a tale...” The schizophrenic Julien mutters this statement to a street sweeper and other passers-by as he paces up and down an urban road. This is one of many instances in which Korine shows us Julien’s nonsensical ramblings. In this particular statement Julien follows a chain of association, linking words that share the same connotations so that he ends up with the conclusion that “The wind is blind.” However, there is a serious flaw in his reasoning. While it may be true that the words ‘breeze’ and ‘zephyr’ share the same meaning insofar as they refer to a movement of air, and the words zephyr and yarn can indeed both be taken to refer to a light twine, it does not follow that a yarn and a breeze are the same thing. Julien fails to recognize that the multiple meaning of words can refer to very different phenomena in the object world.

While many poets and writers have interpreted the wind metaphorically, it is clear from the handling of the scene that Julien’s problematic associations are the result of his psychological difficulties. Julien is not repeating a poem, as he does later in the film. Rather he is shown as visibly puzzled about the meanings of the words he recites to passers-by. He scratches his head, stammers and furrows his brow in thought. Most schizophrenics suffer from a disorder called formal thought disorder which results in a “loosening of associations” evidenced by jumbled and illogical speech (Noll, 2007: 173). While Julien’s ramblings are nonsensical, they have a peculiar and somewhat appealing logic of their own3. Julien has constructed a clever chain of association but his thoughts strike one as nonsense because is so caught up in the labyrinthine chains of signification that he is an unable to relate the meaning of words he uses to objects and phenomena in the real world.

3 See Elizabeth Sewell’s (1952) arguments about the structure and patterns to be found within apparently nonsensical arrangements in the work of Lewis Carroll.
Julien’s difficulty in relating to the world outside of himself and to other people is made most evident through the figure of Julien’s missing mother. While Julien’s father’s statement is highly ambivalent, it might be possible to argue that he also reduces the “little mother” that he mentions to a breeze in the hair. For both Julien and his father, the mother figure represents an intangible absence that fuels their mental suffering. As much as the scene of Julien and his father walking down the road reveals the father’s oppression of Julien, it also shows us how similar the two men are. In *julien donkey-boy*, Julien’s difficulties with meaning are indeed related here to his father’s use of language. But both Julien and his father seem to be obliterated by the giant patriarchal head that is transposed over them, suggesting that both Julien and his father are dominated by an image of patriarchal power that they can never really achieve themselves. This fatherly presence is in turn related to language and language as a tool of dominance.

**Language, Race and the Other**

Differentiation, the process that plays a key role in language, also relates in important ways to the question of race. Lacan relates the acquisition of language in the mirror stage to the recognition of difference. As I pointed out earlier, this realization of the other is attended by both desire and aggressiveness and racism is one of the forms which this aggressive self-differentiation takes. Language is the principal means by which people communicate with each other but it can also be an instrument of division and a barrier to the possibility of true communion with other people. In a fascinating scene at the home for the blind, *julien donkey-boy* poses a number of questions about the relationship between perception, language and racial difference. In this scene, Julien joins a group of the residents as they discuss spiritual ideas and then perform a rap. Aside from Julien, the all-male group consists of a black, an Hispanic, a Native American, a white and a black albino. Each of these men is blind, but through their conversation Korine reveals that they have different experiences, even of blindness.

At the beginning of the scene one of the men in the circle describes his experience of the sight in his left eye by asking the others to imagine “looking through a Food Town plastic bag.” This is a confusing request because most of the people he is addressing are also
blind and would probably not see the inside of a plastic bag in the same way that fully sighted people would. The absurdity of the man’s attempts to explain his experience highlights the problem of subjectivity and the inadequacy of language; we can never really occupy another person’s perspective or understand their internal experiences.

However, this scene is perhaps the most optimistic of all the scenes in the film when it comes to representing interpersonal communication and a sense of unity. Although the people in the scene come from different racial and cultural backgrounds they are bound together in this scene by three things – varying perceptual difficulties, spiritual belief and music. A discussion of the different problems and sufferings of various members of the group leads to a religious conversation and ultimately to song.

A blind albino man leads the group in repeating the lyrics, “I’m a Black Albino, Straight from Alabama.” A surface reading of this event would reveal it as a problematic, perhaps racist or exploitative, moment. The viewer must watch a set of disabled people of different races performing a song about race. The main rapper is a black albino man and in his performance he identifies himself by his racial label. Korine is drawing on a traditionally black musical form and exploring connotations associated with the South. In addition, the scene puts into play the stereotype of black man as ‘entertainer.’ One might argue that Korine is creating a sort of freakshow out of a group of performing blind people of different racial backgrounds. Freakshows often played with racial difference as much as with deformity. The scene could be compared to Todd Browning’s *Freaks* (1932). It is particularly similar to the famous wedding scene in Browning’s film in which the circus freaks welcome Hans’s new bride, Cleo, into their ranks through a diabolical chanting of the words “Gooble gobble, gooble gobble, we accept her, we accept her, one of us, one of us!”

However, unlike Cleo in *Freaks*, Julien joins in with the rap and happily identifies with the other members of the group. In addition, the treatment of the scene encourages a sense of warmth and intimacy that makes the emphasis on racial difference seem out of place. This is because Julien is himself a sort of ‘freak.’ As in *Kids* and *Gummo*, in *julien*
**donkey-boy** Korine undermines notions of white male normativity and locates his white male protagonists amongst a number of America's social and racial "others."

A phenomenological reading of the scene reveals much more about it than an analysis of the play of types and stereotypes. The spatial relations, music and camerawork serve to emphasize a startling sense of unity in a film that generally foregrounds failures in communication. The camera is mobile, revealing each participant in the rap as he sings or claps along. Camera movement is often used instead of cutting. In this way the relationship between the people in the room (both spatial and emotional) is emphasized. The camera lingers on Julien as he hugs the young Native American man after his solo performance, and then moves up to Julien's jubilant fist moving in time to the music. The camera then travels around the circle to reveal each person in the circle as they join in. Korine harnesses the libidinal and rhythmic structures of music in this scene to further enforce a sense of togetherness. Music is an art form less concerned with symbolism and representation than other arts. The rhythms of music, even if not felt in entirely the same way by different people, can be experienced simultaneously with others. This is perhaps why music is effective in facilitating communal activities like dancing with a partner or a group.

He also uses blindness in an interesting way here. While initially blindness highlights how different each individual's perception of the world is, by the end of the scene blindness is a force for unity. Amongst this group of blind people at least the visual signifiers of racial difference are rendered less potent. The signifiers of race that are associated with culture on the other hand are shared by the group as they join in with the song.

It is important that all these people can identify with racial "otherness" or the extreme otherness of the black albino figure. The particular piece of music chosen for this scene works well because it binds all of these marginal people together through a form of representation specific to a marginal group. The black albino man in this scene creates a degree of potentially subversive racial ambiguity. He occupies an indefinite space
between racial groups. He is black in terms of culture and heritage and in terms of certain physical features but he does not have the most obvious signifier of blackness – a dark skin. In addition he is blind and thus does not make racial distinctions on the basis of visual appearances. I do not mean to say that Korine seeks to separate race from the body and reduce it to the level of culture. He is not posing a simple solution to the problem of otherness. However, Korine is using the subversive potential of the black albino figure and the trope of blindness to disrupt processes of classification connected to skin colour as a signifier of race.

From the start, *julien donkey-boy* frustrates the viewer's desire for clarity of perception. This longing for a sense of visual mastery is very much in line with the yearnings of the film's schizophrenic protagonist. However, from the scene described above onwards the film valorizes a state of minimal or reduced visual and aural perception. As the real world becomes increasingly difficult to bear, and as the 'uncontaminated' sensual perception Julien craves increasingly supports the linguistic differentiation that he longs to escape, thwarted perception is offered as the only reprieve for a tortured experience of consciousness and from the oppression of language.

**Towards blindness**

Throughout *julien donkey-Boy*, Korine toys with obstructions to vision and hearing as well as uncomfortable and disorienting framing. The tragic climax of the film, however, features even greater distortion to the clarity of the image. In this highly unconventional piece of cinema, the diegetic death of Julien's child is underscored by an exaggerated emphasis on the decay of the visual image. While, in early scenes of the film, spiritual and transcendental yearnings were frustrated and undercut by its visually difficult style, in this scene the unorthodox cinematography works to give a spiritual character to the images. In this way a difficulty in seeing and accessing the referent becomes a platform for creating haunting and ethereal images. Where the early mythic symbols that appeared in the film were suggestive of life and fertility (Pearl as the glowing virgin mother),
however, the images in this scene relate much more to death. In this way, the sense of lack revealed by impoverished visual images comes to express absence as death.

The scene opens with a close-up shot of dark forms gliding and spinning in and out of frame as they move across the ice rink in different directions. The image is over-exposed so that the white negative space created by the ice overpowers and obscures the shapes of the human figures as they move. A high angle long-shot reveals the moving bodies on the ice rink sliding past one another in aimless circles. They look like lost and searching spirits. Absence is emphasised by the salience of the negative space in these images. The background begins to swallow the positive forms in the picture. It is as if the skating figures are being eaten up by the very boundary that defines them as distinct beings.

In the sequence that follows, Korine presents his characters in conversation behind the reflective glass that borders the ice-rink. While Julien tries to sell the young Hasidic Jew, Ricky, a makeshift pair of ice-skates, Chrissy relates to Pearl her experience of blindness. This scene continues the film’s play with images of warmth and coldness. The stark, white atmosphere of the ice rink grants a sense of otherworldly purity to the scene, but the coldness also underscores the tragic events that are to play out in this setting. Pearl, who has been crowned in warm light throughout the film, has now lost her halo. She is, instead, lit in cold blue tones. The use of coldness in this scene also brings us back to the issue of lack. Korine plays with the associative and affective dimensions of coldness as a negative sensory experience, a longing for warmth.

Both the conversation between Julien and Ricky and that between Chrissy and Pearl are shot from across the ice-rink so that the reflective barrier surrounding the rink distorts our view of them. As they talk, semi-transparent reflections of figure skaters float over the characters like wandering ghosts. Korine uses the echoes and strange droning sound of the ice rink to create a peculiar, unearthly sense of space.

In this scene, Korine displays his skill for creating a sense of the surreal and supernatural, using a mundane real-life situation. The highly pixelated texture of the digital image, in
combination with the blurring that takes place as figures move past the camera in the foreground, grants all the humans in the scene an eerie transparency. Their image is half lost in the moment that it is captured by the camera. Such images underscore the themes of death and loss that play out in this scene when Pearl ultimately falls onto the ice, fatally injuring the unborn child that Julien has fathered. Through the use of video distortion, the real loss of life is compared to the deathly impulse involved in all attempts at representation and communication.

Korine uses everyday phenomena to draw on mythic themes. As I have already suggested, Chrissy, in her blindness and her comments upon the future, suggests the figure of Tiresias who was so central to the Oedipus myth. In this scene, Pearl asks Chrissy what the future for the baby will be like and she responds, "Bright..." and later "brighter than the sun." In a much earlier scene, Chrissy tells Julien that he will die as all her past boyfriends have and she also foresees her own death. Ricky lends an eerie presence to the scene in his somewhat otherworldly Hasidic dress. This figure also suggests a connection to the founder of Hasidism, Besht. Like Tiresias, Besht was believed to have prophetic abilities. One might see Chrissy and Ricky as male and female sides of the androgynous Tiresias figure. The presence of these two Tiresias figures brings a damming sense of fatalism to the scene.

The reference to Hasidism is significant because the concerns of Hasidism speak to the central conflict between the material and the spiritual that defines *julien donkey-boy*. Hasidic Jews believe that God exists in all material objects. They do not recognise the distinction between the physical and the spiritual. In this scene, the material world takes on an ethereal quality that creates a divine or otherworldly atmosphere— not because of any clever special effects or fantastic props but through the difficulties in seeing and access that the Dogma 95 devices encourage.

Of course, as always, Korine also undercuts the sacred echoes that he bestows on his characters. Ricky’s voice is clear and confident in opposition to the softness of his image and he is hardly saintly as he describes Julien’s makeshift ice-skates as “little pieces of
Korine also puts some more problematic contemporary myths into play through the figure of Ricky. The boy enacts powerful stereotypes of Jews as stingy as he "heckles" with Julien over the ice skates, saying things like "I wouldn't even pay a dime for those!"

In contrast, the conversation between Chrissy and Pearl is particularly warm and amicable. They discuss Pearl's baby and Chrissy asks typical childlike questions about childbirth. One particular part of their exchange cuts right to the heart of the concern with language and intersubjectivity that characterises *julien donkey-boy*:

Chrissy: You know what I used to think?

Pearl: What?

Chrissy: I used to think I could see a lot. But I found out that I couldn't see very much, that my vision was almost slim to none.

Pearl: Really

Chrissy: I thought I could almost see totally.

Pearl: So if nobody has told you then maybe you would never have known.

Chrissy: No, I thought I could really see like normal sight. But I found out that I'm not even close.

As the pair conducts this conversation they are shot from an awkward angle by a highly unsteady camera. This frustrating lack of clarity puts the viewer in a position somewhere near Chrissy's own experience of partial-sightedness but at the same time Chrissy's words force us to realise that we can never understand her particular experience of vision, that, in Diane Arbus's words: "[I]t's impossible to get out of your skin into somebody else's ...somebody else's tragedy is not the same as your own" (1995: 2).

We are quite alone in our own individual consciousness and while we may make gestures toward intersubjectivity through language, it is quite impossible fully to comprehend the emotional or perceptual experience of another person. While cinema takes us somewhere toward this goal, the cinematic image is also caught in the bind of language, partial and
inadequate. This inadequacy is displayed by Korine’s use of digital images so impoverished by disturbance and decay that they become ghostly.

However, as I have suggested, these difficult images also provide a somewhat desirable escape from the world. The people who are to suffer the most in this scene, Julien and Pearl, are fully sighted. Pearl makes a revealing comment to Chrissy when she says “Sometimes I wish I was deaf” because “the world is just too loud.” Pearl recognises that having sight and hearing means having to grapple with more sensory input. Hearing, in particular, opens one up to a constant barrage of language.

While Pearl longs to be deaf and Chrissy cannot see, both characters are compared in their love of dance. Pearl’s dancing and Chrissy’s skating are both ways of enjoying sensory experience at a remove from the burden of representation. It is significant that Pearl’s fall takes place as she begins to enjoy the pure physical pleasure of ice-skating.

As Chrissy and Pearl take to the ice, a sense of tension and fatalism is encouraged by intercutting between images of this unlikely pair upon the ice and shots of other skaters. In these shots the frame rate has been altered to speed up the images. The droning sound of the ice-rink increases in volume and the sharp strokes of skates grating against the ice are also used to encourage tension. It is difficult not to feel some anxiety for the fragility of both these skaters -- the blind Chrissy and her pregnant companion. Chrissy wants to go faster and do tricks while Pearl, moving her huge form awkwardly across the ice, repeatedly asks her to slow down. The pair enacts a variation of the old adage that speaks of “the lame leading the blind.” Chrissy is literally blind while Pearl’s movements are encumbered by her pregnancy.

Pearl is eventually free to skate at her own pace when she deposits Chrissy with some young girls who are willing skate with her. However, it is when she leaves Chrissy and tries to skate on her own that Pearl loses her balance. Before her fall she experiences a moment of euphoria. This is signalled by a wide angle close-up on her face as she moves across the ice. The camera tracks back with her movement, creating the sense that she is
floating. A similar technique is often used in films to illustrate drug use or altered consciousness (Darren Arnofsky uses this effect frequently in *Requiem for a Dream*, 2000). Flashes of blue light move past Pearl’s face. She seems hypnotised as she moves across the rink. The sequence is punctuated by jump-cuts which create a sense of her psychological instability and ensuing danger. This device is repeated as Chrissy experiences a similar sense of euphoric excitement through her skating.

Korine foregrounds the dangers of the temptation to get lost in pure sensory pleasure, for associated with the contingency of raw physical experience is the material dissolution of death. This threat is made literal by Pearl’s devastating fall. The moment is revealed in long-shot from Julien’s perspective. Pearl lets out a horrible cry of pain. Julien runs across the ice toward her. Still the skating figures flit past our view. The camera moves in slowly toward Pearl as she gasps and yelps in agony. In the corner of the frame Chrissy is still spinning around, somehow unaware of what has happened.

Korine cuts to a close-up of Ricky singing a mournful Yiddish prayer. When Korine cuts back to a long-shot of the ice-rink all the figures have vanished as if they were never there. Only Chrissy remains embroiled in her own private ecstasy as she spins in the centre of the rink. But Pearl and Julien’s agonised screams can still be heard on the sound track. While Julien and Pearl are experiencing extreme emotional trauma, Chrissy remains spinning on the rink as the embodiment of the remove from reality that both of them desire.

At the close of the film, Julien clutches the corpse of his unborn child. Significantly, he covers himself and his dead infant with a blanket, shutting out sight and sound. The camera reveals Julien staring into the dark ahead of him. The image fades to black. At the end of the film, Julien’s actions resemble the self-blinding of Oedipus upon receiving knowledge that was too much for him to bear. Julien’s desire to blind himself is provoked by his inability to blot out an awareness of the pervasiveness of absence, lack and death beyond the fictions we construct through language and fantasy.
Harmony Korine has used the realist limits set by Dogma 95 to produce a film that expresses the material world as essentially profane and resistant to transcendental meaning. Most importantly, the film presents the world as ultimately inaccessible to the subject. The immediacy and physicality of the filmic medium is used to highlight the abstracting work of language and myth. At the same time the Dogma 95 style is used to reveal the cinema as an inadequate means of accessing the Real. At the end of the film Korine transforms gaps and discontinuities in perception into a space for a peculiar kind of flight from the world -- a movement toward the inertia and silence of death.
Conclusion: On the Other Side of Things

Bazin proposed that a profound commitment to the principles of a phenomenological realism, particularly to a realist emphasis on physical reality, could allow a filmmaker to reach “the boundaries of realism” and venture beyond them to “the other side of things” (1971: 88). For Bazin, the filmmaker who achieves this aim is Fellini. Bazin argues that Fellini’s films, focussed as they are on outward appearance, ultimately reveal a “hidden accord which things maintain with an invisible counterpoint of which they are, so to speak, merely the adumbration” (ibid). I raise this argument not so much to offer a comparison between Korine and Fellini but rather to propose that Korine too pushes his realism to an extreme place. I argue, however, that Korine’s realism reaches a different destination. Bazin’s reading of Fellini is informed by his Catholic world view. He sees the world as ambiguous, but ultimately meaningful. Harmony Korine, a more contemporary and secular filmmaker finds “on the other side of things” a crisis in meaning and a confrontation with lack. Korine takes us much more toward what Laura Mulvey describes as “Barthes’ dive into death” (2006: 65).

I noted in my introduction that this thesis has a double agenda. My aims have been firstly, to defend Korine against claims of naïve realism and secondly, to revisit André Bazin’s realist film theory in order to illustrate how realism can be a powerful critical tool. Bazin’s thinking about the “ambiguity of reality” provided a starting point for my central argument: that Korine’s films, far from displaying an unsophisticated realism, employ a restraint from structuration in order to capitalise on the way in which the referential relationship between camera and world can complicate meaning. Certainly, Korine’s use of realism is complex and subversive. The body of work under examination in this thesis progresses from a loosening of narrative structure and an emphasis on the material world in *Kids*, toward a cinema that uses realist indeterminacy to problematise systems of signification evidenced in *Gummo* and finally, to *julien donkey-boy’s* application of realist principals to stage a confrontation with the absence and lack that undergirds both verbal language and the apparent immediacy of realist cinema.
Bazin's realist film criticism has proved invaluable for my explication of the realist operations at play in Korine's work. Bazin's definition of a "phenomenological realism," in opposition to traditional realist verisimilitude, allowed me to draw crucial distinctions between Korine's realist restraint and the much-maligned realism of classical Hollywood cinema. A key set of critical concepts derived from Bazin have informed my analysis of Korine throughout this thesis: an awareness of the indexical relationship between the camera and the referent; a recognition of both the phenomenological and the linguistic aspects of cinematic communication; and an understanding of phenomenological realism as defined by a principle of restraint on the part of the director. These three related ideas have opened important avenues for analysis. However the most crucial of Bazin's insights for this thesis is his articulation of the relationship between realist restraint and ambiguity. This thesis has extended Bazin's celebration of the ambiguity produced by the realism of Italian neorealist and French "poetic realists," to show how this realist indeterminacy might both complicate and foreground questions of signification.

My analyses have charted certain major features of Bazinian realism that play a pivotal role in introducing a productive indefiniteness of meaning into Kids, Gummo and julien donkey-boy. I have been concerned with the productive confluence of documentary-style realist aesthetics, unconventional narrative structures and a heightened emphasis on the sensual and physical capacities of the cinematic apparatus in Korine's cinema.

My chapter on Kids, explored Bazin's recognition that the loosening of narrative structure in neorealist cinema is a function of these films' restrained realist approach. This device is also a way which neorealist films allow the "ambiguity of reality" to become a part of their appeal to viewers. I used this complex idea to explain the difference between classical Hollywood narrative structure and the meandering narrative of Kids.

My discussion of Kids revealed that the opening up of the narrative to chance, contingency and observations of daily life, in line with phenomenological realist aesthetics, not only creates a different relationship to meaning, but also allows the
physical dimensions of the object world before the camera to play a more important role in the way that the film communicates. In *Kids*, displays of teenaged bodies and sex are not merely stylistic overindulgence but an important means by which the film presents its critique of dominant representation. The powerful sensual appeal of *Kids* and the relationship that the film constructs between the kids' bodies and the New York cityscape called for an analysis that considers both the material focus of phenomenological realism and the carnivalesque and grotesque elements of the film's appeal. I argued that, while the film presents features of carnivalesque decentring and rebellion, it is also pervaded by a particularly negative and fatalistic version of the grotesque which serves as a condemnation of the society and the urban environment in which the drama plays out.

Korine's experimental directorial debut, *Gummo*, features both a more unconventional narrative structure and a more obvious display of Korine's preoccupation with the grotesque. *Gummo* eschews traditional narrative organisation in favour of an emphasis on the material bodies and environments of its characters. I have suggested that such an approach is a function of Korine's use of phenomenological realism. This film provides an excellent case study for testing the relationship between phenomenological realism and the grotesque. My arguments about *Gummo* show how the inclination of cinematic realism toward specificity and contingency can work hand in hand with a grotesque tendency toward the material base of experience. *Gummo* draws on particularly American manifestations of the grotesque like slapstick comedy, popular constructions of the hillbilly and early American freakshows to present a portrait of America that is constituted by strangeness. At the heart of *Gummo*'s address is the recognition that the material world is itself ambiguous. In this film grotesque sensual excesses are used not only to produce an alternative vision of American social life, but also as a way of foregrounding and denaturalising the sign systems by which the American Nation is generally understood.

In *Kids* realist restraint allowed for an openness with respect to meaning and a resistance to traditional representations of teenagers, particularly white, male adolescents. In *Gummo* and later in *julien donkey-boy*, realist indeterminacy becomes a more radical tool
for destabilising ways of thinking about signification and meaning. *Gummo* goes beyond the ambiguity cultivated by the use of phenomenological realism in Italian neorealist cinema. Korine introduces further uncertainty, firstly, by enacting a playful confusion of boundaries between documentary and fiction and, secondly, by arousing confusion between immediate sensual experience and symbolic generalisation. In images like those of the Bunny Boy, Korine employs all of these devices to produce an extremely unsettling and ambivalent viewing experience. He makes use of both the sensual elements of the cinematic image and a documentary appeal to problematise abstract and transcendental sign systems, particularly those involved in the construction of dominant American identity.

*Julien donkey-boy* goes a step further in Korine’s assault on signification and makes the restraint privileged by phenomenological realism a tool for exploring the limits of verbal language and cinematic representation. In the second part of my thesis I took up Bazin’s allusions to the deathly absence that lies behind the apparent fullness of the cinematic image. In *julien donkey-boy* the texture and quality of the digital image plays a crucial role in highlighting the indexical features of the cinematic medium and in foregrounding both the immediacy of the medium and the absence of the original referent. In this section *julien donkey-boy* is a sensually evocative film both in its emphasis on kinetic and tactile experiences such as dance and wrestling and in the film’s play with the texture of the video image. The film does not, however, provide sensory satisfaction and immediacy. Rather, it foregrounds perceptual difficulties and sensory blocks in order to draw attention to our ever-frustrated grasp of the cinematic referent. *Julien donkey-boy*, thus, serves to illustrate a counterargument to Vivian Sobchack’s emphasis on immediacy and sensory fullness in our sensual engagements with the cinema. In addition, this film makes use of the distinction between our sensual and linguistic engagements with cinema to dramatise difficulties in drawing transcendental meaning from brute reality. In *julien donkey-boy* an emphasis on the senses combined with the austere realist approach of Dogma 95 encourages a difficult encounter with the limits of verbal language and cinematic communication.
Korine’s daring cinema has allowed me to argue that the use of realism is not always merely a means of producing a sense of authenticity and immediacy, but rather, a phenomenological realism can operate as a disruptive critical tool. Korine has a highly distinctive approach to filmmaking and the ideas that I have developed could be applied to a growing number of contemporary films which employ the creative use of a realism defined by directorial restraint and ambiguity. Certain filmmakers working within the Dogma 95 tradition (especially Lars von Trier), and American independents such as Larry Clarke and Gus van Sant would fall into this category of filmmaking.

While I have applied a broad range of theoretical lenses to Korine’s work, including theories of affect and psychoanalytic approaches, there is still space for future studies to take up Korine’s self-reflexive, intertextual and subversive use of realism from the perspective of postmodern theory. In addition, we have yet to see what new vistas for analysis will be opened by Korine’s most recent film, *Mister Lonely*.

In my introduction, I compared Korine to the figure of a fool or jester. Korine’s realism may initially strike one as primitive and naïve, but once we recognize the role of his realism as a productive clowning, we can see how this feature of Korine’s aesthetic, “readmits the magical power of chaos” (Willeford 1969: 114) into representation, as Willeford argues, did fools of old. By so doing Korine’s cinema draws attention to the abstractions and falsehoods out of which we have constructed a sense of order from the complexity of experience. Korine, indeed, holds up a mirror to the norms of society and representation but, as I have suggested, he confronts us with a strange and disconcerting reflection: an ambiguous image that ultimately forces an uncomfortable but illuminating confrontation with the problematic way in which we usually consider our relationship to reality.
Filmography

Primary Films


Secondary Films


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Bicycle Thieves (1948) dir. Vittorio De Sica, Produzioni De Sica.


Freaks (1932) dir. Tod Browning, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.


Strike (1925) dir. Sergei M. Eisenstein, Goskino.


The Wizard of Oz (1939) dir. Victor Fleming, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer


Umberto D (1952) dir. Vittorio de Sica, Amato Film.


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Other Media

Television


Music video


Music

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