

The copyright of this thesis vests in the author. No quotation from it or information derived from it is to be published without full acknowledgement of the source. The thesis is to be used for private study or non-commercial research purposes only.

Published by the University of Cape Town (UCT) in terms of the non-exclusive license granted to UCT by the author.

Between the Norm and a Hard Place:
Representing Marginality in Harmony Korine's
Gummo

Jacques de Villiers DVLJAC015

A dissertation submitted in *fulfilment* of the requirements for the award of the
degree of Masters of Arts in Film Studies

Faculty of the Humanities

University of Cape Town

2013

COMPULSORY DECLARATION

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Acknowledgements

Over the two years it has taken to research and write this thesis, a number of people have entered, left, remained in and touched my life. With the exception of a handful of individuals who deserve special praise, it would be a guilty exercise prioritising them. Here then, in no particular order, is a list of my own personal movers and shakers: Georgia, Simone, Helen, Ashley, Joachim, Katie, Nicky, Tessa, Jess, Sven, Jenny, Achita, Sebastian, Naomi, Sigrid and the Scandinavians.

As for the exceptions: I must thank my parents, to whom I owe everything. Mom and Paps, my gratitude to you is endless. Thank you Pierre and Michele, my dear siblings: together we grow from the same tree, each stretching upward in our own exciting and creative directions. I also want to thank Lesley Marx, Ian Rijdsdijk, Martin Botha and the rest of the UCT Film and Media department. You have made the University feel like a second home to this orphan of the film industry.

Last but certainly not least, I owe a huge debt of thanks to my supervisor, Alexia Smit, who has been both the most encouraging of safety nets and the most demanding of sounding boards. Your dedication, care, enthusiasm and selflessness have been deeply comforting and inspiring. Thank you so very much.

+ + + + + + + + + + +

This thesis is dedicated to Jenna Bass, with whom I first watched *Gummo* and who told me never to look a gift horse in the mouth. And for Amy, to whom I can never stop apologising.

Abstract

This dissertation centres on an examination of *Gummo*, the provocative directorial debut by filmmaking *enfant terrible*, Harmony Korine. While largely dismissed by critics who were put off by the film's visceral intensity, unconventional narrative structure and unsentimental depictions of marginality, I want to counter such criticism by arguing that *Gummo* in fact offers a refreshingly new approach to cinematic representations of white poverty in the United States. While U.S. cinema has often furnished us with representations of poverty, the majority of these films have tended to focus on characters' economic hardships. By contrast, *Gummo* is almost unique in privileging the *cultural* and *ideological* dimensions – concerns with weight and sporting success, attaining and retaining certain norms of masculine strength and appearance, repeated references to celebrity culture, to name but a few examples – while locating such normative dimensions within the bleak *material* realities that mark life on the breadline. In so doing, *Gummo* draws attention to the paradoxical cultural question of poverty in the so-called First World: How does one engage with the daily barrage of ideologically imposed social and cultural norms when one's basic living conditions are diametrically opposed to such norms? While most films tend to treat the poor as always *outside* and in binary opposition to the normative order, I want to propose that we re-think poverty and marginality's cultural identity as always hybrid and in-between the margin and the norm. Such an interstitial position is articulated by *Gummo*'s highlighting of two very different representational approaches: one based on an abject materiality that is often framed in an almost tactile and disconcertingly *visceral* manner, the other relying on the maintenance of a plastic or surface aesthetic through which symbolic cultural norms and ideals are *semiotically* conveyed. Rather than seeking to resolve such approaches' contradictions to one another, *Gummo* gives cinematic expression to the ambivalent position that results when one occupies both spaces simultaneously. This encourages us to think of marginality

interstitially, rather than conceiving of it as merely 'other' to what is considered normative or mainstream.

In theorising *Gummo's* representation of white marginality as an interstitial phenomenon, I have drawn primarily on the work of three quite different thinkers: post-colonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha, gender theorist Judith Butler and film theorist Vivian Sobchack.

Chapter one engages with Bhabha's ideas about cultural hybridity, seeking to demonstrate how *Gummo* represents marginality as a decidedly heterogeneous affair, one that blurs all clear notions of centre and margin.

Chapter two explores this breaking down of binary value further by investigating how, through subversive acts of re-signification, the norm or centre can become 'contaminated' by the margin. Here I employ Butler's notion of performativity and citation, which demonstrates how norms can be materialised and cited in non-normative circumstances that challenge the validity of the dominant discourse. Such 'non-normative' materialisation blurs the boundary between that which is normative and that which is 'other'.

Chapter three expands this notion of re-signification and hybridity still further. Drawing upon the phenomenology-based theory of Vivian Sobchack, I explore those aspects of Korine's film that – like Sobchack's theory – privilege materiality and the body as sites of experience. I then proceed to read Sobchack in relation to Butler and Bhabha, arguing that the manner in which Korine almost tactically frames the harsh, abject materiality of *Gummo's* setting plays off and meshes with the presence of symbolic norms and ideals. *Gummo* and its characters are thus firmly lodged in a hybrid Third Space; in-between the cultural signs of 'normalcy' and a materialised space of messy abjection. It is between these two seemingly incompatible dimensions that the film and its characters make meaning and forge a sense of cultural identity

Contents

| | |
|--|-----|
| Acknowledgements | i |
| Abstract | ii |
| Introduction | 1 |
|
 | |
| PART ONE | |
| 1. Beyond Binaries: rethinking cultural identity in <i>Gummo</i> | 18 |
| 1.1 Binaries, Boundaries and Blurring | 21 |
| 1.2 Cultural Heteroglossia in <i>Gummo</i> | 29 |
| 1.3 'Normal' Concerns | 44 |
|
 | |
| 2. Idolisation, Emulation, Subversion: materialising the Symbolic | 51 |
| 2.1 The Material Reinforcement of Ideology | 59 |
| 2.2 Performance/Citation/Subversion | 61 |
| 2.3 Working the Norm in <i>Gummo</i> | 65 |
| 2.4 Decentred American Myths | 70 |
| 2.5 Celebrities for Celebrities' Sake | 76 |
| 2.6 Famous In Their Spare Time | 83 |
| 2.7 Crying | 86 |
|
 | |
| PART TWO | |
| 3. Flinching at Materiality: the harsh matter of poverty | 93 |
| 3.1 Between the Symbolic and the Material Real | 95 |
| 3.2 Theorising Corporeality | 102 |
| 3.3 A Body That Betrays | 107 |
| 3.4 Poverty as Pollution | 110 |
| 3.5 Environmental Indifference | 113 |

| | |
|--|-----|
| 3.6 Child's Play | 118 |
| 3.7 Crying and Dreaming | 124 |
|
 | |
| Conclusion: Negotiating Marginality Elsewhere | 130 |
|
 | |
| Filmography | 143 |
| Other Media | 146 |
| Works Cited | 147 |

University of Cape Town

INTRODUCTION

Though [Korine's] films are not for the fainthearted and can be willfully frustrating in their disregard for narrative, they do delineate an America that is utterly unexplored by mainstream and, indeed, independent filmmakers – Sean O'Hagen (2003: ¶27)

[*Gummo*] is a total mix of history and pop, a making sense of pop. To me, that is what is always lacking in film – there's never a relationship to pop culture. America – and I'm not talking about New York and L.A. – is all about this recycling, this interpretation of pop – Harmony Korine (in Kelley 1997: ¶65)

My first encounter with Korine's work came late; a good ten years after his initial feature film provocations had run their course. It was only in 2007, three years deep into a disastrous film-school experience, that some film-school friends and I took out *Gummo* (1997) from a local video store. Having never watched any of Korine's work before, we had little notion of what awaited us. And even after the film's 89 minutes had run their anarchic course and we sat staring at the end credits, overcome by the black metal stylings of Bethlehem, we would have been hard-pressed to describe exactly what we had just seen and what it all meant. All we knew was that it had affected and inspired us in a way that few, if any, previous films had.

Looking back on the experience, I think our particular reactions had a lot to do with our own geographical, cultural and socio-economic circumstances; our great distance as white, middle-class South Africans from issues facing the majority of our country's citizens. As aspirant fiction filmmakers, a great uncertainty weighed down upon us – and this uncertainty still lingers – about how to capture the experience of a country in which daily poverty is the norm, but a norm that our privileged upbringings always kept at a distance, barring us from experiencing it as anything other than outsiders. If *Gummo* did not offer up an easy solution to our dilemma – the film's setting and focus was poor, white, middle America after all – it nevertheless showed us *new, alternative ways* to

think the representation of life on the margins. Crucially, *Gummo* raised the complex question of how to frame white poverty onscreen as not merely an economic phenomenon, which so many films still tend to do – one thinks here of the recently acclaimed U.S. film, *Winter's Bone* (2010), whose underlying concern is, characteristically, the *monetary* dilemma of a poor family's inability to own and retain their private property. Rather, *Gummo* suggested to us, why not think about poverty's *cultural* dimension? For implicit in *Gummo* is this question: How does one cinematically capture the cultural experience of poor, white Americans, pulled between an ideological, middle-class hegemony that signifies as 'white' (and therefore seems to include them) and a day-to-day life lived in dilapidated material conditions that simultaneously distances them from the norm and makes them appear 'other'? This is a question that few of the film's largely derisive critics have noted. But I want to argue that such a question is vital to understanding the importance of *Gummo* to a politics of identity and class, however apolitical the film and its maker might seem. Although Korine has on numerous occasions emphasised his disinclination towards making political statements in or about his work – indeed, conveying *any* sort of 'message' (Hack 1998: ¶28; Hays 1998: ¶7; Korine 1998: ¶4) – this does not exclude *Gummo* from the politics of representation. Rather, as I intend to show, the film's framing of white poverty as a phenomenon of interstitial identity – where one does not fully identify with *either* the middle-class norm of the white 'American Dream' nor the harsh material environment that informs one's day-to-day life – offers a refreshingly refined and complex perspective from which to think about marginality.

To begin asking questions of identity, we should perhaps first offer up the filmmaker himself for analysis. Born in 1973, Harmony Korine grew up in Nashville, Tennessee, but moved to New York City while still in his teens. As a consequence, his upbringing was shaped by the hybrid blurring of two very different cultural and geographical experiences of the United States. On the one hand, growing up in Nashville and its surrounding areas lent him insight into life in a Southern, relatively small city, at least in comparison to far removed cultural metropolises like New York City or Los Angeles. Korine has repeatedly

stated his preference for this smaller milieu over and above the big cities' normative and 'hip' cultural pull (Ramos 1997: ¶9; Kelley 1997: ¶65), often lamenting what he sees as Hollywood's false and "romanticized version" of southern and middle American life (Cunha 1997: ¶9; Van Sant 1997: ¶22). Indeed, *Gummo*, while purportedly set in Xenia, Ohio, was actually shot in Nashville and featured many of Korine's own childhood friends (not to mention Korine himself), marking it as a very personal project for the first-time director (Huddleston 2008: ¶47).

Korine maintains strong ties to Nashville, a town he moved back to a few years ago and where he now lives with his wife and recently born first child. However, there is no denying that the big cultural hub of New York has equally influenced him – either as a conduit for transnational cultural exposure or as an influence in itself. It was in New York, after all, that Korine would see most of the 'high art' European and classic U.S. cinema that made such an impression on him. Just like one of his chief filmmaking idols, Jean-Luc Godard, Korine's teenage years were marked by obsessive visitations to art house and revival cinemas. Here he was weaned on a cinematic diet that included the European art film auteurs of the day (Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Werner Herzog, Jean-Luc Godard, Alan Clarke, amongst many others) as well as U.S. independent filmmakers – of which John Cassavetes seems to have made the biggest impact.¹ At the same time, he was exposed to the popular U.S. cinematic classics of yore, of which Buster Keaton (Cunha 1997: ¶3) and the Marx Brothers seem to have made the biggest impression. Indeed, *Gummo* is named after the fourth Marx brother, who left the troupe before they became famous. This admiration for by-gone and now obscure forms of U.S. popular entertainment extends into his admiration for tap-dancing (Korine 2002: vii), vaudeville (Kelley 1997: ¶61) and the gothic South (Lyons 1997: ¶10). At the same time, he immersed himself in New York street and skate culture, the latter forming the subcultural milieu of his screenwriting debut, *Kids* (1995), written while Korine was still a precocious teenager. It was

¹ Two of Cassavetes' films, *A Woman Under the Influence* (1974) and *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* (1976), feature on Korine's own personal list of top ten favourite films. Also included are Herzog's *Stroszek* (1977) and Godard's *Hail Mary* (1985) – for the complete list, see Hack 1998: ¶11.

in fact at a skate park that Larry Clark, director of *Kids*, first encountered Korine and gave him his big break by commissioning him to write the screenplay.

Korine's influences and identity are thus split between numerous and heterogeneous subcultures and visions of the United States. As will become more evident as we progress from chapter to chapter, this has had a profound influence on his conception of identity as a hybrid, interstitial and ever-shifting phenomenon – a conception that profoundly complicates an understanding of *Gummo's* characters as simply 'other' or in direct opposition to 'mainstream' values.

In 1997, Fine Line Features released *Gummo* in the United States. Only twenty-four at the time, Korine was able to finance the low-budget indie – costing approximately one million dollars (Hack 1998: ¶5) – on the strength and financial success of *Kids's* screenplay. Set in Xenia, Ohio, a town devastated by a tornado that hit several years prior to the film's events – and based, according to Korine, on a real tornado that struck in the 70s (Korine and Herzog 1999: ¶15) – *Gummo* takes as its exclusive focus the town's poor, mainly white inhabitants and their day-to-day existences within a socially and economically dilapidated small town environment. Shot entirely on location in the poorer areas of Korine's own Nashville, his vision of Xenia is marked by emotional and physical loss, with most of the predominantly teenage cast's parents and loved ones having died in the tornado. Furthermore, the film places an almost tactile emphasis on debris and decay, with numerous scenes set in junkyards, trash dumps and vermin-infested residences, instances of dirt that often finds its way onto characters. This was an aspect that certainly didn't make the film critically endearing, even as it won praise from filmmakers of high critical esteem – Werner Herzog, Bernardo Bertolucci, Lukas Moodysson, amongst others.

One such endorsement, written by Gus van Sant at the time of *Gummo's* release, described the film as “venomous in story; genius in character; victorious in structure; teasingly gentle in epilogue; slapstick in theme; rebellious in nature; honest at heart; inspirational in its creation and with contempt at the tip of its tongue” (1997: ¶1). Such a description indicates the near impossibility of summarising *Gummo* in straightforward narrative terms. The film abandons the

conventional three-act structure, with its attendant singular protagonist and easily discernable goal, an approach Korine has dismissed on numerous occasions as deeply uninteresting (Hirschberg 1997; Metzstein 2000). Instead, *Gummo* opts for an impressionistic approach that Korine has likened to “a collage or a tapestry” (in Cunha 1997: ¶3). Rather than tell a story with a coherent beginning, middle and end, the film is structured around a series of vignettes – some featuring recurrent characters, others briefly spotlighting Xenia’s wider population – as the townsfolk drift aimlessly through their days, occupying themselves with time-killing activities that range from the playfully innocuous to the nihilistically violent.

But more important than the subject matter itself is the way Korine frames his vignettes and draws out certain thematic resonances. As François Truffaut once said, “I believe firmly that a filmmaker’s entire work is contained in his first film; not that it can all be foreseen, but it can afterward be verified” (1980: 316). And indeed, *Gummo* solidifies a number of trademarks and themes that would be evident to greater or lesser degrees in almost everything Korine has subsequently done. These include a highly experimental approach to visual aesthetics, often manipulating or mixing different film and video formats; unconventional and deliberately disjointed narrative structures; numerous and vast intertextual allusions to all forms of cultural heteroglossia, both popular and cult, recent and old; an almost tactile engagement and emphasis on the vulnerability of the body and bodily function, a characteristic further emphasised by the harsh settings that his characters must navigate; and last but certainly not least, unsentimental – indeed, often unsettling – portrayals of marginalised lives.

I would be the first to confess that, upon initial viewing, many of these characteristics passed me by. Instead, like many critics and viewers, I was initially struck by how *Gummo* revealed an exclusively ‘other’ America. A different vision of the States to the one so frequently “portrayed in the mainstream media” (O’Connor 2009: 7) – a vision focused on “the extreme outsider in American society” (O’Hagen 2003: ¶26). While the overwhelming majority of the film’s cast is white – *the* normative racial designation in the States (Dyer 1997: 149) – summary descriptions of *Gummo*’s characters read like a checklist of the various categories of ‘otherness’ that exist in that same country.

The cast includes an albino, a dwarf, a girl afflicted with cancer, homosexuals, transvestites and the physically and mentally disabled, almost all of whom fall under the common economic designation of 'poor' or, to abandon political correctness, so-called 'white trash'. Matching these characters' 'otherness' is an equally unconventional filmmaking style that foregoes the normative of narrative cohesion, the principles of three-act story structure and conventional notions of visual aesthetic 'beauty', opting instead for a kind of visual and narrative heteroglossia: impressionistic vignettes, oblique connections between scenes and characters and a multiplicity of visual styles that range from the glossy to the deliberately fuzzy and lo-fi. Additionally, this sense of 'otherness' is typified by the film's very *setting*. Environments characterised by filth and dilapidation and replete with garbage, human waste and decay stand in stark contradistinction to the normative standards of beauty, taste and decorum that characterise the affluent, middle-class *mise-en-scène* of the American Dream.

This contrary, stylistically striking approach notwithstanding, it isn't enough to just note, as a critic like O'Hagen does, that *Gummo* reveals "an America that is utterly unexplored by mainstream and, indeed, independent filmmakers". Korine's true achievement, I would argue, is in noting how this 'other' America *engages* with normative/middle-class cultural values. To refer back to Korine's own quote at the start of this introduction, *Gummo* is not just about life on the 'outside' of the norms of cultural identity, but about "a making sense of pop[ular]" – that is normative or mainstream – "culture", a "recycling" and "[re]interpretation of pop". While *Gummo's* marginalised characters might *seem* outside of social and cultural conventions, the reality is in fact far more complex and ambivalent. Regarded as 'other' to dominant representational norms and ideals, it is crucial to recognise that these characters are nonetheless *inscribed within* that same normative cultural order, because they only acquire their identity as 'other' in relation to this centre – and vice versa, the centre only defines itself *as* centre in relation to them (Butler 1993: 3). Partly because they lack a strong counter-hegemonic discourse or coordinated plan of action with which to challenge the dominant cultural norms – something like a resistance movement – they are often compelled or coerced into identifying with the demands of normative representation and behaviour, even if these are the same

norms and standards that have ostracised them. From characters who confess their love for Patrick Swayze and Pamela Anderson to women worrying about their weight and trying to improve their physique, *Gummo* is loaded with instances in which characters emphasise a strong identification with popular culture and normative values of bodily representation. This is all the more pertinent given the fact that most of *Gummo*'s characters signify and self-identify as white. Unlike Black Americans, Hispanic Americans or diasporic minorities living in the States, white U.S. Americans actually share a racial commonality with the country's bourgeois image of consumer-capitalist hegemony. However, by virtue of their class, geographical location and/or the numerous signifiers of 'otherness' indicated above, these characters only *partially* match the hegemonic ideal.

Furthermore, while characters might imagine themselves in the guise of the dominant culture, the film repeatedly offers up a sobering reminder of the material conditions underpinning their day-to-day existences. These conditions are at considerable odds with such normative ambitions. In this regard, and contrary to most films that deal with poverty or the working class, *Gummo* substitutes the *monetary* concerns of life on the breadline for an engagement with the *harsh materiality* of poverty. For the purposes of this study, I define 'materiality' as the geographical, tactile, olfactory and corporeal reality that governs characters' existences in the here and now, while the 'harshness' of this material dimension emerges in those frequently affecting instances where the environment or the body acts as a disruptive force upon characters. The tornado that practically eradicates Xenia's adult population, severing the connection between father, mother and child; the heavy rain that often accosts characters' bare, shaking bodies; the frequent olfactory remarks various characters make about off-putting smells and bodily uncleanliness; the prevalent dirt and clutter that seems to invade domestic interiors and in which characters sometimes seem on the verge of drowning. Such factors paint a bracing and uncommonly visceral picture of lives lived in poverty. To quote Korine, they can all be taken as instances of how "reality always seems to trounce the dream" (in Kohn 2008: ¶6).

This brings me to my main point and what I take to be *Gummo*'s true innovation: its cinematic representation of the gap that exists between two very different spheres of experience, drawing attention to the startling disparity between Xenia's damaged, dilapidated, 'un-ideal' *material* spaces and its residents' normative, idealistic *symbolic* aspirations – the tropes of bodily perfection, celebrity identification and pop cultural fantasies that often preoccupy them. These characters are caught and framed by the camera in an interstitial, contradictory space of identification; both 'normal' and 'other', they nonetheless fail to fully embody either. Such a perspective frames their identity as a decidedly *hybrid* phenomenon, not tied to an either/or logic that constructs them according to strictly delimited, separate and fully formed cultural designations. In this way, *Gummo* offers an innovative and complex engagement with the relationship between normativity and marginality, between the popular and the peripheral, that has all too frequently been overlooked in the small body of scholarly writing and popular criticism dedicated to Korine. While Alexia Smit's thesis, *A Strange Mirror: Realism, Ambiguity and Absence in the Work of Harmony Korine* (2007), notes a similarly complex and interstitial "confusion between immediate sensual experience and symbolic generalisation" (156), such an observation does not form the central focus of her work. And with perhaps the sole exception of Tom O'Conner's essay 'Genre-Fucking: Harmony Korine's Cinema of Poetry' (2009), Korine's engagement with cultural norms and ideals has never been the focus of any published critical or scholarly study.

This is at least partially the consequence of the intense negative reaction *Gummo* has drawn amongst critics, crystallised in Janet Maslin's infamous declaration that *Gummo* was "the worst film of the year" (1998: ¶1). Most critics took her lead, dismissing what they saw as the film's infantile and overly excessive tactile engagement with dirt and disgust (Guthmann 1998; Schwarzbaum 1997). Similarly, many criticised what seemed an unwillingness on Korine's part to comment on or explicitly narrativise his depiction of poverty in any moralistic and reassuring way (Levy 1997; Tatara 1997). Throughout this thesis I will seek to show that, contrary to critics who have described the film as merely "contrived pointlessness" (Tatara 1997: ¶8), *Gummo* in fact *does* comment quite profoundly on its subject matter and certainly can be read

politically, though in a manner that many critics are perhaps not conventionally used to. Furthermore, I will seek to address the disgust the film has provoked, arguing that knee-jerk reactions to 'bad taste' have occluded many critics from framing *Gummo's* depictions of dirt, decay and bodily function as a pertinent expression of lives lived in poverty, where hunger, uncleanliness, greater susceptibility to disease and an accentuated exposure to bodily harm must be negotiated, often on a daily basis. That many (not incidentally middle-class) critics either cannot fathom or have refused to draw this connection suggests something about their dislocation and disavowal of the harsh conditions of poverty.

Of the handful of substantial academic articles (at least partially) focused on *Gummo* (Arthur 1997; Feaster 1998-1999; Halligan 2005; McRoy and Crucianelli 2009; Murphy 2004; O'Connor 2009; Sconce 2007), few if any have articulated my own stance. I have therefore sought out theoretical forbears off the familiar or expected path. Central among these is the post-colonial theory of Homi K. Bhabha. For those acquainted with his description of individuals caught in an interstitial 'location of culture', neither at the cultural 'centre' nor the cultural 'margin', my description of characters that occupy hybrid positions of identity will not sound unfamiliar. Indeed, recourse to Bhabha's notion of the 'Third Space' serves as a useful theoretical base for my analysis of *Gummo*. What is the Third Space? Bhabha refers to it as an "*inbetween* space" (2004: 56), created in the act of re-signifying dominant norms in order to align them with one's own particular geographical, material and cultural concerns. This is an apt description for *Gummo's* characters, caught between the promise of the symbolic norm and a day-to-day material reality that is decidedly 'other' to that norm. In this manner, the Third Space is a "contradictory and ambivalent space of enunciation" (55), because the norm is engaged with, even wholeheartedly embraced, but also rendered unmistakably different by the specific, dissimilar context in which it is received. Such a notion ties in more broadly with Bhabha's theories on culture, identity and subject formation. All of these categories, he argues, tend to escape the neat categorisation offered by binary oppositions, turning instead along lines of *ambivalence* and *hybridity* – to use two terms that

have become closely associated with his work. Such a theory finds pertinent application in *Gummo*, which demonstrates this process of hybrid and interstitial cultural identification through characters and an aesthetic caught in the interstices *between* clearly discernable cultural formations. 'Ambivalence' is a term that thoroughly permeates *Gummo*, often complicating and refuting our desire to pin down scenes and images to particular, exclusive meanings. Bhabha's theory therefore represents a good way of thinking in the interstitial, pluralistic terms that *Gummo's* form and subject necessitate.

Similar to this notion of the Third Space, Richard Dyer has pointed out how "cultural codes do not have single determinate meanings – people make sense of them in different ways, according to the cultural (including sub-cultural) codes available to them" (1993: 2). Such a conception of agency raises the question: by 'recycling' such cultural codes, can *Gummo* and its characters potentially re-appropriate and thereby subvert these codes to their own ends? In addressing this question, I align Bhabha's theory with Judith Butler's work on gender performativity and citation. For Butler, the norms that lead us to socially signify our gender to other people are not pre-given and fully formed in advance but are rather "socially instituted and *maintained* norms of intelligibility" (2007: 23, my emphasis). One cannot escape these norms, Butler argues. Indeed, one is *constituted* by them (2). However, one can also *negotiate* and ultimately challenge them through a 'failure' to accurately cite the norm. For instance, as someone who signifies as 'male', I could complicate this status by donning a skirt, wearing high heels and dressing in drag. In so doing, I cannot get 'outside' of gender by abandoning certain norms of intelligibility, but I can complicate those norms by using them 'inappropriately', appropriating what is normatively reserved for women and thereby blurring the boundary between 'male' and 'female'. In a process Butler refers to as "working the norm" (2006: 286), subjects can use the signifiers of a mainstream, normative discourse to re-signify that discourse to different and unexpected ends – significations that are not entirely new, but nevertheless depart quite noticeably from the entrenched norm or relocate that norm to a new, subversive context.

We can draw a link here between the ways in which Butler 'troubles' gender and Bhabha's conception of the Third Space, because they both present

theoretical paradigms for understanding how marginalised groups and individuals can engage with mainstream cultural norms without merely mimicking the terms and conditions that keep them on the margins. Applied to *Gummo*, such theories allow us to rethink the ways in which characters' engagements with norms can result not only in imitation, but also in a subversion and re-signification of those norms. Furthermore, Butler and Bhabha's work allows us to read *Gummo* politically, without sacrificing its high degree of representational complexity and political ambivalence. Consider, for instance, Butler's argument that engaging with the norm constitutes conformity *and* subversion simultaneously. This frees us from a restricted and oversimplified understanding of 'political' that only encompasses explicit positions of *opposition* to the status quo. Instead, we can view it through the lens of a double-voiced ambivalence in which characters are "simultaneously conforming to *and* restaging that doctrine" (Butler 2006: 285, my emphasis) – a subversive and double-voiced approach that can attack a reified discourse on its own terms.

Butler and Bhabha thus serve as my two key theorists in analysing *Gummo's* representation of identity as hybrid and ambivalent, turning around a double-voiced and interstitial position that simultaneously conforms and subverts. In theorising this position, they offer invaluable insight into the *semiotic* nature of this process, stressing how the signs of what Jacques Lacan calls the 'Symbolic Order' structure our existence and sense of self. But it is worth pointing out that they have both been criticised for selling short the *material* aspect of this process, merely reducing cultural identity or gender to the dictates of semiotic meaning and signification – in short, language (for this critique of Bhabha, see Moore-Gilbert 1997: 138-139 and Parry 1994; for Butler, see Bordo 1993: 289-295). While I address these criticisms in chapter three, I first want to argue here that their work does indeed need to be supplemented with a greater foregrounding of matter and materiality. This is in light of the tremendous stress *Gummo* places on visceral, tactile representations of the environment and the body. In theorising this material dimension, which impinges, disrupts and complicates characters' engagement with received cultural signs of normativity, I

have turned to film theorist Vivian Sobchack's notions of embodied experience and the "lived body" (2004: 1). Sobchack's work on embodiment represents an intervention into a theoretical domain that, she argues, has tended to ignore the fleshy, material presence of the body and the key role it plays in mediating our subjective experience of the world. The body, Sobchack argues, is far too often treated as an object *separate* from its owner; a body to be studied and observed 'from a distance', as it were, or even disavowed (for the latter instance, see Sobchack 2004: 165-178). Her contention is that this mode of thinking does not account for how our material existence actually informs the way we think and conceive of the world. Rather than viewing the material reality of our bodies as an irritating side effect of existence, Sobchack argues that we accord the body its rightful place as the foundation upon which experience and existence is predicated. One function of semiotics, language and the imagination is to take us beyond what our own fixed bodily limitations permit us to experience, allowing us to imagine ourselves from others' points of view (Holquist 2002: 28) and fantasise what it might be like to inhabit another body and be another person. In such instances we briefly disregard our immediate material context. But Sobchack draws attention to the way in which these imaginary aspects of our psychic lives are constantly being disrupted by the material limitations that our body and our environment place on us (2004: 86). Rather than disavowing the body through psychic fantasy, Sobchack urges us to reckon with the body as a material entity. This can be a humbling and (sometimes quite literally) painful acknowledgement, but it also invites us to recognise our bodies as a site of play and pleasure, even if such pleasure is of the subversive sort frequently unsanctioned by norms of order, cleanliness or what generally constitutes 'proper' behaviour.

As I shall seek to demonstrate, *Gummo* presents both these negative and positive aspects of the body. Indeed, to foreshadow a comment I make in a later chapter, Sobchack's ideas seem almost uncannily well suited to analysing Korine's work. Consider, for instance, how Alexia Smit, in her own thesis on Korine, also drew upon Sobchack's work, but applied it to completely different ends. Whereas Smit explored what Sobchack's tactile approach might mean for a spectatorial engagement with Korine's images and the question of realism, I am

concerned here with how Sobchack's theories of material embodiment can contribute to an understanding of *Gummo's* interstitial representation of poverty. This stems, as I have suggested, from the tension between the fantasy of normative, middle-class ideals and the visceral, painful experience of poverty. While Sobchack rarely writes in an explicitly class context, the gap between symbolic fantasy and embodied reality is one that she has theorised at length. As such, her work can help us understand how *Gummo's* material environment, together with its representation of the 'lived body', emphasises a gap that subverts and re-signifies symbolic norms and ideals. Bhabha and Butler also stress this engagement and subversion of the cultural symbolic, but in a manner that foregrounds the play of semiotics and signification. Sobchack counters this emphasis by privileging a certain tactile aspect of perception and experience. There is thus a convenient similarity between these theorists, and I use all three to conceptualise the same interstitial cultural framing of poverty. More to the point, the advantage of employing both the semiotic and the phenomenological approach is that each emphasises what the other overlooks, thus providing a synthesised theoretical framework for unpacking *Gummo's* representation of life on the margins.

Before moving on to the chapters themselves, I need to first qualify a question of methodology that might have given some readers cause for reservation: what might seem a highly unorthodox appropriation of Butler and Bhabha's ideas. The former is generally categorised as belonging to the fields of gender studies and queer theory, a context I am clearly not working in, even though gender often enters my discussions. Nevertheless, I would argue that there is much in Butler's work that serves as a useful theoretical model for exploring wider instances of parody and subversion, even if these instances don't always fall within the strict confines of 'gender'. One should after all remember that Butler's own theory of citation was derived from Jacques Derrida's (1988) radical critique and reworking of speech theorist J.L. Austin, thus representing a cross-field theoretical appropriation similar to mine. Furthermore, one cannot simply translate Butler's theory to the specific requirements of film studies without certain dislocations and elaborations taking place. My interest is in combining

her focus on performativity with a more expanded notion of citationality that also takes into account elements such as genre, *mise-en-scène*, editing, choice of framing and the way the film appropriates and re-contextualises popular culture. And all of this staged in a context where onscreen subjects/actors *and* the filmmakers behind the screen partake in subversive citational practice. While such instances might exceed the specifics of the *gender* performance that Butler has in mind, this dislocated application of performativity certainly falls in line with wider reappropriations of queer theory, particularly the concept of 'queering' as a strategy for challenging the status quo in contexts that exceed GLBT-specific concerns (Kavka 2008, Garcia 2010). Indeed, I am in a sense taking Butler's own lead when she argues that "one writes into a field of writing that is invariably and promisingly larger and less masterable than the one over which one maintains a provisional authority, and that the unanticipated reappropriations of a given work in areas for which it was never consciously intended are some of the most useful" (1993: 19).

A similar qualification needs to be made with Bhabha's work, which belongs to the field of post-colonial studies. Here it might be useful to first evoke my personal connection to his theory, which stems from my own position as a film theorist in the developing world who is writing to the developed one. Such a position, like Bhabha's, represents an outsider's perspective on the United States, a country that has exerted a global hegemonic influence. As such, it seems to represent an instance of the periphery writing back to the centre. But, in a characteristically Bhabhian manner, such a description does not do justice to the complexity of my own cultural position. As a white South African with mixed English/Afrikaans parentage, I am a typically interstitial subject – a racial minority who came of age in the post-Apartheid environment, simultaneously influenced and shaped by a South African colonial history, its diverse cultural present and the global influence of Western Europe and the United States. While, as a *privileged* benefactor of a colonial legacy and a neocolonial present, I might not be the typical subject of Bhabha's discourse, I have nonetheless found his theory to be a particularly apt explication of my own cultural hybridity. To apply this unorthodoxy to *Gummo*: while Bhabha usually formulates his ideas about the 'location of culture' (to borrow the title of his seminal collection of essays) from

the context of both the postcolony and the diaspora of the so-called ‘First World’, I want to argue that *Gummo*’s depiction of white poverty paints a quintessentially Bhabhian portrait of the subject, just as it so aptly characterises my own identity. Caught between promises of white hegemony, the cultural heteroglossia of consumer capitalism and their own dilapidated environments, *Gummo*’s characters exemplify the kind of hybrid, non-essentialist subject Bhabha has in mind when he places such an emphasis on “the *inbetween* space”, that “cutting edge of translation and negotiation”, which “carries the burden of culture” (2004: 56). The re-appropriation of Bhabha’s theory is thus most relevant and useful to an understanding of how *Gummo* articulates cultural identity.

Finally, there is the choice of *Gummo* itself – or rather, the choice to restrict myself to *just Gummo*. While I occasionally make passing reference to Korine’s other written and film work, and use the conclusion as a space to consider interstitial identity and ambivalence in his later films, it needs to be stressed that this thesis is not an *auteur* study. *It is the analysis of a particular film and how that film frames the cultural question of poverty*. While one could argue that such a question deserves a broader application than what the confines of one text allows, it is my contention that *Gummo* – in addition to being the key progenitor for so much of Korine’s subsequent output – is a text rich and complex enough to warrant a thesis-length study of its own.

+ + + + + + + + + +

This dissertation is divided into three chapters. Generally speaking, each chapter emphasises a different theorist. The first two chapters constitute Part I, as they share a common, semiotically rooted focus. Part II, consisting solely of chapter three, draws on Sobchack’s more phenomenological ideas, exploring representations of materiality and embodied experience.

Chapter one begins with an overview of a structuralist trend that has emerged in film production and film studies, one heavily reliant on oppositional binary values. I then go on to show how such a binary approach is insufficient to understanding *Gummo*’s complex engagement with a wide range of cultural

heteroglossia. To ground a theoretical understanding of *Gummo's* engagement with cultural norms and ideals, I instead draw on Bhabha's *post*-structuralist ideas of interstitial subject formation and cultural hybridity, using his theory to argue that *Gummo* represents marginalised white identity as a thoroughly *hybrid* affair, one that blurs all clear notions of centre and margin.

Chapter two looks at how certain heteronormative, middle class norms and ideals are materialised by *Gummo's* characters and the filmmaking apparatus, only to be blocked, framed and positioned in ways that often have a subversive effect. Here I draw on Lacan's theory of the symbolic order and Butler's theory of performativity and citation in order to analyse the exact nature and manner in which subversion and re-signification takes place.

While the first two chapters analyse the relationship between the symbolic and the material from a predominantly semiotic standpoint, chapter three foregrounds Sobchack's notion of lived experience, using it as a theoretical base from which to assess how *Gummo's* foregrounding of materiality complicates and rethinks questions of cultural identity. This is not a question of rejecting the semiotic aspect of analysis, but rather to understand and read how the two dimensions of sign and matter frequently combine and overlap throughout *Gummo*, and how this interaction gives shape to a cultural Third Space. The tension between these two factors is indicative of how *Gummo* as a whole seems to rest on an almost maddening ambivalence; an endless deferral of mood and meaning that rejects any real sense of narrative or thematic resolution. This deferral mirrors a notion of cultural identity that is hybrid and fluid – a matter that is always in the flux of negotiation, never conclusively settled.

PART ONE

University of Cape Town

CHAPTER ONE

Beyond Binaries: rethinking cultural identity in *Gummo*

Xenia, Ohio. Xenia, Ohio. A few years ago, a tornado hit this place. It killed people left and right. Dogs died. Cats died. Houses were split open and you could see necklaces hanging from branches of trees. People's legs and neck bones were sticking out. Oliver found a leg on his roof. A lot of people's fathers died and were killed by the great tornado. I saw a girl fly through the sky and I looked up her skirt. The school was smashed and some kids died. My neighbour was killed in half. He used to ride dirt bikes and three-wheelers. They never found his head. I always thought that was funny. People died in Xenia. Before Dad died, he had a bad case of the diabetes.

So whispers Solomon in eerie voiceover during *Gummo's* opening minutes, giving his own highly impressionistic account of the tornado that struck his small town. One of the striking aspects of his description is the way it verbally conjures and juxtaposes typically horrific images of natural destruction ("It killed people left and right. Dogs died. Cats died. Houses were split open") with disarmingly quixotic observations ("Necklaces hanging from branches of trees", seeing "a girl fly through the sky and look[ing] up her skirt"). Similarly, images of destruction are interposed with more mundane and unrelated details ("He used to ride dirt bikes and three-wheelers", "Before Dad died, he had a bad case of the diabetes"). The speaker's emotional reaction to the natural disaster is decidedly ambivalent – the tone of his voice both deadpan and quietly menacing, his descriptions drawing out disturbing subjective responses ("They never found his head. I always thought that was funny"). Equally bemusing are the visuals that accompany this voiceover. Saturated, lo-fi, digitally re-photographed home videos of kids riding bikes, families sitting on their porches, people smiling and posing for the camera flash by in a disorientating, rapid-fire montage style. There are also close-ups of destruction – the looming tornado, a dog lying on telephone wires, brief images of a rooftop being pulled apart – but the spoken descriptions are more often matched (or mismatched) with these mundane scenes of small-town life.

This opening – highly ambiguous in both its moral register and the associations it creates between the visual and the verbal – sets the tone and approach for the rest of the film. On the one hand, it is bracing in its violent attention to the harsh *material* realities that confront *Gummo's* characters, whose poverty-stricken circumstances leave them more vulnerable than most to the severe indifference of the environment – a point I return to and expand on more fully in chapter three. On the other hand, it typifies *Gummo's* subversive engagement with *signs*, represented in this opening by an approach to storytelling and visual communication that challenges the structures by which we conventionally make cinematic meaning. Consider the voiceover: rather than introduce us to the characters or at least hint at the film's central story arc – two frequent functions of voiceover early in a film – the juxtaposition of candid home video footage and Solomon's apocalyptic words seem to complicate rather than clarify understanding. Indeed, it has often been remarked that "*Gummo* is a movie structured by the tornado" (Jamie and Hainley 1998), and this is true to the extent that the film, in its very setting, narrative structure, filmmaking approach and characterisation, comes to exemplify a kind of radical, often bewildering, fragmentation.

Such fragmentation is characteristic of a semantically dense style of filmmaking, one that frequently complicates and decentres meaning, particularly our attempts to structure that meaning into binary formations. Here I am deliberately referring back to my introduction, where I suggested that analysing *Gummo* through the underlying binary of normative/other or centre/margin (characteristic of a structuralist analysis) ultimately represents an inadequate and inappropriate theoretical approach to take. This is because *Gummo* doesn't frame identity as essentialist, pre-given and clearly delineable into opposing binary terms. Rather, the film cinematically portrays identity (both its own and its characters') as rooted in *ambivalence* and *hybridity*. This approach is particularly pertinent in a film about poor, white, mid-U.S. individuals' engagement with and within the cultural sphere. Rather than understanding their identities (and by extension *all* identities) as formed and made up in advance – thereby rendering them somehow 'outside' of mainstream culture by

essentialising them as culturally 'marginal' – one needs to recognise to what extent their sense of identity is *presently* constituted by an engagement with, and enmeshment in, numerous cultural signs. Instead of exclusively occupying one or the other value, *Gummo* encourages us to rethink identity as an *unsettled, constant movement between* binary notions such as margin and centre; an interstitial approach that conceives of identity as caught *in-between* different, even opposing, influences that span the trajectory from 'normative' to 'other'.

This concern with *Gummo* and its characters' interstitial and hybrid identity forms the focus of the present chapter. In finding an adequate theoretical framework to investigate and challenge binary notions of identity and culture in *Gummo*, the film requires the abandonment of a structuralist preoccupation with binary values for a *post*-structuralist approach. It is difficult to fully understand the import of the latter, particularly to film studies, without having a firm grasp of the former. As such, I start by providing a brief overview of how a structuralist notion of oppositional binary values has functioned as a privileged tool in the construction and analysis of film texts. I then highlight the ideas of post-structuralist thinkers who have argued that one needs to be attentive to the presuppositions that underlie and structure binary oppositions and not simply take those oppositions for granted. Such an approach questions the manner in which structuralist thought tends to give binary relationships an essentialist and transcendently prior status, thereby calcifying such terms as fixed and unchanging. By contrast, post-structuralism urges a move beyond thinking value in terms of a series of oppositions, working instead with a paradigm grounded in theories of hybridity and deferral. These ideas are particularly pertinent to analysing *Gummo*, a film whose fragmentary, elliptical and decentred form and content is ideally suited to a post-structuralist paradigm. As such, this chapter introduces the work of post-structuralist thinker Homi K. Bhabha, particularly his theories of cultural hybridity, interstitial subject formation and the Third Space, which I then apply to an analysis of *Gummo*.

Binaries, Boundaries and Blurring

Binary values have often been privileged as key tools in both the creation and explication of film texts, useful for both embedding and examining the themes and ideologies that are latently or manifestly at work within them. This popularity has a lot to do with the fact that, as Graeme Turner has asserted, binaries are a key component in how we structure and make sense of the world. They allow us to divide the world up “into sets of mutually exclusive categories”, so that meaning becomes “a product of the construction of differences and similarities; in this case, placing an object on one side of an opposition rather than on the other” (Turner 1988: 73). A strong argument for this sort of theory’s privileged position within film analysis can be made upon consulting the advice of influential screenwriting guru Robert McKee, whose book *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting* and attendant seminars are considered something of a primer for any writer trying to ‘make it’ in the mainstream U.S. film industry. In *Story*, McKee argues that the art of the storyteller is in expressing “to the world a perception of values” (1999: 33-34) – values that help us to structure an understanding of that world. Here he urges an adherence to a *binary* conception of value, defining “story values” as “the universal qualities of human experience that may shift from positive to negative, or negative to positive, from one moment to the next. For example: alive/dead (positive/negative) is a story value, as are love/hate, freedom/slavery, truth/lie, courage/cowardice, loyalty/betrayal, wisdom/stupidity, strength/weakness, excitement/boredom and so on” (34).

Read together, McKee and Turner exemplify how binary formulations are prevalent both in the encoding and decoding of film texts, the one reinforcing and validating the other. But if a binary conception of value is undoubtedly popular, how does this mode of meaning-making function? Arranged around two mutually exclusive poles, binary equations thrive on oppositional values and notions of difference. They are “logically supported by the fact that we define things not only in terms of what they *are*, but also in terms of what they are *not*. ‘Man’ means ‘not woman’, ‘not boy’, and so on” (Turner 1988: 73). This oppositional kind of thinking has its theoretical roots in the claims of the linguist

Ferdinand de Saussure, who argued that we could only know things negatively. By this he meant that words and concepts could only be understood when placed in relation to one another and read via their differences. For example, 'good' only makes sense if we have a concept of its opposite: 'evil'. Similarly, as Claude Lévi-Strauss famously demonstrated in his *The Raw and the Cooked* (1970), the concept of 'raw' only makes sense with the invention of fire and the ability to cook food. It only comes into circulation when we have an idea of 'cooked', and vice versa. For societies and eras that had yet to discover fire with which to cook their food, the concept 'raw' either did not exist or had a radically different meaning to how we understand it today. This is because a word's value, as Saussure points out, is "not determined merely by that concept or meaning of which it is a token. It must also be assessed against comparable values, by contrast with other words" (2005: 114). As he famously stated, "*in the language itself, there are only differences*" (118).

Binary formulations and notions of difference have played an inestimable role in some of the key ideas and debates of the 20th and 21st centuries. Whether challenging binary formations or validating their legitimacy, much has been written about the way in which each term reinforces its opposite.¹ Central amongst these is the formation of a movement known as Structuralism, spearheaded by Lévi-Strauss' work in anthropology, which launched the field of structural anthropology. As the name suggests, Lévi-Strauss was concerned with identifying the social and cultural characteristics that structured a society, seeking to find common features across cultures that could be said to fundamentally govern *all* societies. Central to this pursuit was, as Harold W. Scheffler puts it, "the principle of binary opposition" (1970: 65) and what he identified as Lévi-Strauss' attempt to search out "all binary oppositions relevant to one another in a particular cultural system or sub-system of norms, ideas, ideals (and actions)" (*ibid.*). This preoccupation with binary oppositions informed the work of a number of film theorists, including Will Wright (1975)

¹ Such influence has been felt, to name only a few fields and seminal texts, in the study of anthropology (Levi-Strauss 1969, 1970; Douglas 1970), post-structural theory (Derrida 2003), postcolonial theory (Said 2003), gender studies (de Beauvoir 2010; Butler 1993), disability studies (Thomson 1997) and cultural studies more broadly (Dyer 1997).

and Jim Kitses (1969), who both used Levi-Strauss' structural approach to exploring how binary values informed particular film genres, most notably the Western. While their approach was primarily concerned with how themes and *narrative* content reflect deep, underlying structures, theorists such as Christian Metz (1974) and Raymond Bellour (2000) utilised structural binary oppositions to try and understand how the actual film apparatus – comprised of shot sizes, camera movements, editing and so forth – actually functioned. But Levi-Strauss' influence runs more deeply than such specific applications. As Stam, Burgoyne and Flitterman-Lewis have pointed out, "the methods of structural analysis were often adopted by writers who simply employed binary oppositions as a formal tool" (1992: 77-78), even if they had no direct knowledge of how Levi-Strauss had put them to anthropological use.

Despite the success and recognition of much of Lévi-Strauss' work and the ongoing usefulness of binary formulations for film production and its study, this does not mean that reliance upon a binary conception of values – particularly *cultural* values – is without its shortcomings. Simply asked: When we rely on binary language, what do we take for granted? And what do we unwittingly reinforce by such assumptions? Certainly, the notion of knowing something via its opposite is a concept that very usefully illuminates how power and ideology function. We now recognise that concepts such as 'marginality' can only be understood as such if there is a 'centre' to differentiate itself from that margin, and vice versa. Similarly, any notion of 'normal' can only ever have meaning if there are examples of non-normative ('other') behaviour to define 'normal' against. In short, when it comes to defining either value, both terms are *dependent* on one other. This has enormous consequences for an understanding of how groups and individuals are marginalised, for it reveals an ideological agenda behind their separation from 'normal' society. Writing in the context of subject formation and querying the necessary conditions and prerequisites under which an individual can be recognised as 'human' – and therefore eligible for subjecthood – Judith Butler argues that "the exclusionary matrix" that constitutes the field of the norm "by which subjects are formed...requires the simultaneous production of a domain of abject beings". These 'abject beings' "form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject" (1993: 3) by

reinforcing 'normal' individuals (those deemed worthy of being 'subjects') as *not* abject. In this way, 'abject' individuals and groups, which constitute the 'marginal other' of our binary formation, are indispensable to the 'centre', to the norms that govern subjecthood. 'Normative centre' and 'marginalised other' are in fact bound up with one another, such that the "abject outside" in which the other seems to be constituted is in fact "'inside' the subject as its own founding repudiation" (*ibid.*). In this way the discourse of the 'abject outside' or the 'other' is a discursive fiction created by the 'centre' and tends to mask the far more complex ways in which marginalised subjects are in fact interpolated within, and interact with, the full spectrum of cultural signifiers and received norms.

This is precisely the shortcoming of theorising marginality in structuralist, binary terms. Butler's quote typifies the case of a post-structuralist theorist who draws on the notions of the oppositional "difference" that Saussure pioneered, not merely to utilise binary concepts (as McKee, Lévi-Strauss and structuralism more generally does), but to deconstruct and *critique* them. Post-structuralism might draw on binary formations, but this is more often than not to reveal the power structures that validate and reify those same concepts, such as Butler's investigation of how margin/centre is constituted. By extension, post-structuralism implicitly challenges the validity and breadth of McKee's claim that binary values constitute "universal qualities of human experience" by questioning what hidden ideological assumptions allow courage/cowardice, strength/weakness, wisdom/stupidity or truth/lie (to use a handful of McKee's aforementioned examples) to function as clear-cut, wholly separable terms in any given situation. For instance, a typical post-structuralist argument would contend that an entrenched binary like courage/cowardice masks the fact that this reflects *specific* and *dominant* notions of 'courage' and 'cowardice' within a particular society at a particular historical moment – one that does not necessarily hold from culture to culture, era to era or even one person to another.² The same would hold for 'truth', the criteria for which would be vastly

² For an example of the unstable nature of this particular relationship, consider the debate around the denunciation of the September 11th suicide attacks in the U.S. and U.K. press as 'cowardly'. Susan Sontag's controversial but considered response was that it seemed unreasonable, regardless of the outrage, to label a suicide attack 'cowardly': "If the word 'cowardly' is to be used, it might be more aptly applied to those who kill from

different in a religious society that believed in miracles, visions and the legitimacy of certain rituals, as opposed to a more secular society that reserved 'truth' for scientific discovery and empirical investigation. In both cases, there is a pressure from the party who represents 'truth', be it religious or scientific, to constantly legitimate their discipline's claim to representing that 'truth' (Foucault 2004: 9-10). Whatever does not accord with this notion of 'truth' is relegated to the binary opposite of 'falsehood', 'superstition' or similar synonym. Such terms are not neutral or self-evident significations, but rather are embedded in power structures in which meaning will often be shifted to fit the purposes of the powerful (Derrida 1988: 21). Turner provides a clear illustration of this in his analysis of the male/female binary. From our prior elucidation, we now understand that to be 'female' is to be what 'male' is *not*. But what *does* that make 'female'? Turner provides a brief list:

| | |
|----------|------------|
| male | female |
| strong | weak |
| rational | emotional |
| reliable | unreliable |

In short, "to continue with the chain is to end up with good (male) versus bad (female)" (1988: 73-74). The point is that binary values, when their ideological significance is not properly interrogated, can be used as a justification for the status quo, in this instance to reify patriarchal social configurations by subordinating the concept of 'female' under that of 'male'.

So how does one understand this hierarchisation of binary structures within the context of *Gummo*? As I mentioned in the introduction, even though Korine gives marginality pride of place onscreen, this by no means occludes the presence of various normative signifiers and discourses from also manifesting. Be it the

beyond the range of retaliation, high in the sky, than to those willing to die themselves in order to kill others. In the matter of courage (a morally neutral virtue): whatever may be said of the perpetrators of Tuesday's slaughter, they were not cowards" (2001: ¶1). Ironically, her own point demonstrates that such a term is not a morally neutral or self-evident signification, but is rather embedded in power structures that will often shift the meaning to fit the purposes of the powerful – in this case, labelling the terrorists' acts of self-sacrifice 'cowardly' in order to positively contrast the United States' outraged (and later militant) response in the face of such tragedy.

name-dropping and idolisation of celebrities, the imitation of certain popular cultural tropes or a concern over bodily insecurity and striving for bodily perfection; throughout the film the presence of normativity is felt in numerous ways. Considered from a standpoint sympathetic to binary formulations, it might be tempting to reduce such a relationship between marginality and normativity to a neatly divisible centre/margin or normative/other separation. However, what needs to be questioned is precisely the suitability of this binary theoretical framework as a tool for understanding and analysing cultural identity in *Gummo*. Indeed, one of the great strengths of the film is its ability to bring into question the degree to which terms such as 'margin' and 'centre' are in fact stable, unchanging and separable concepts. Therefore, rather than trying to isolate 'centre' from 'margin', I have instead opted to pick apart and deconstruct the boundary itself, observing how in *Gummo* a certain kind of slippage takes place. This is achieved via a cultural hybridity that blurs any clear notion of centre *or* margin, giving rise to a far more complex notion of cultural identity.

In making this claim, it does not follow that I am denying the very real logistical and material separations between the groups and locations that are popularly identified with 'centre' and 'margin'. After all, Xenia is a long way from New York City or L.A.; geographically distant from much of the fame and celebrity culture that the characters allude to throughout the film. There are also very real economic class differences, and one cannot simply theorise these material separations away. But this is precisely my point: the presence of such economic and material destitution *does not* preclude cultural norms and values – commonly associated with middle-class prosperity – from registering within these areas. This is something globalisation has amply attested to. Just because a material or logistical separation from middle-class norms exists, a *cultural* or *ideological* separation does not automatically follow. The two should not be conflated as one in the same but rather perceived as functioning in a tense relationship with one another that lends *Gummo's* its particular brand of cultural hybridity. This is the encounter between what I have called the *symbolic*, which constitutes Xenia's cultural and ideological dimensions, and the *material*, which constitutes the physical dimension of the world in which the characters exist. The encounter between these disparate forms of experience produces something

akin to Homi Bhabha's notion of the 'Third Space' – that is, an “*inbetween space*” (2004: 56) – which exists in the convergence of Xenia's *specific* locale with more generally conceived social and cultural norms. This encounter produces a hybridity of identity that shatters any neat division between centre/margin, because the ideology associated with a 'centre' and the geographical reality of what is referred to as the 'margin' melds and blurs so thoroughly. So while *Gummo*'s characters reside far from the big cities that stand as signs and hubs of the cultural status quo, to deliberately or inadvertently insist that their sense of identity is always already *ideologically* shaped outside of the dominant order – rather than shaped and often altered *through contact with* the dominant order – is to perpetuate a falsehood and agenda that seeks to keep the 'margin' and the 'centre' separate and their meanings fixed in opposition.

To elaborate and clarify this point, I want to draw on one of the most innovative and significant recent challenges to the classic binary formulation of cultural difference. This is Homi Bhabha's notion of cultural hybridity. As he so crucially argues in the introduction to his seminal *The Location of Culture*, rather than working within the age-old boundaries and paying respect to coherent, fully separable and essentialist definitions of black/white, male/female, inside/outside and so on, we need a theoretical project that would instead engage an analysis of the *blurring* of boundaries and the ontological inbetweenness (the *hybridity* of identity) experienced in such a blurring:

What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These 'in-between' spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular, or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself. It is in the emergence of the interstices – the overlap and displacement of domains of difference – that the intersubjective and collective experiences of *nationness*, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated (2004: 2).

For Bhabha, it is the hybrid convergences of disparate influence (“the emergence of the interstices”) that shape and mould societies and cultures, not the enforced separation of influence along binary divisions. Such a binary model always lags

behind “a disorderly reality that won’t be pigeonholed or strapped down as easily as all that” (Said 2004: 121), to quote a no less influential fellow postcolonial traveller. I draw on this introductory extract from *The Location of Culture* – portions of which I will return to throughout this chapter – in order to evoke my contention that *Gummo*, in its highly complex layers of ambivalence and ambiguity, offers just such a site at which to rethink “signs of identity” by looking at the “overlap and displacement” inherent in the decentred meeting between the signifying locale of ‘marginality’ and signs of ‘normativity’. The conception and subsequent portrayal of *Gummo*’s characters, not to mention Korine’s entire filmmaking aesthetic, are permeated with just the sort of “overlap and displacement of domains of difference” of which Bhabha speaks – differences and ambivalence that annihilate the very idea of a founding origin from which a subject or cultural ‘group’ could be said to emerge prior to some sort of cultural ‘contamination’. Rather, as I have already suggested, *Gummo* and its characters’ sense of identity is conceived *interstitially*, as a negotiation *between* a specific materiality of place (Xenia’s environment, its dirt, its dilapidation) and more generally conceived array of norms and cultural signifiers. Yet even just focusing on how the latter category manifests in *Gummo*, one finds a commingling of heterogeneous cultural elements so diverse that even if one were to exclude the specific material circumstances that characterise the film, one is left with an incredible hybridity of cultural signification.

To further demonstrate this point, I would like to make an inventory emphasising the numerous and disparate cultural signifiers that *Gummo* utilises, bearing in mind that we will return to a more detailed discussion of them in the next chapter. For the time being, the important thing to bear in mind is that the cultural elements Korine refers to are themselves drawn from a very miscellaneous and diverse pool that more or less collapses any simple mainstream/marginal binary opposition. What one finds instead is an overwhelming cultural heteroglossia, a term whose use I owe to Mikhail Bakhtin. Bakhtin theorised everyday existence as a subjective encounter with a world overflowing with signs. For Bakhtin, such an encounter is “fraught with dialogue” (2011: 291), whose ever-changing concatenation of elements defies any singular, transcendental meaning. Such “dialogism”, Bakhtin argued, “cannot

fundamentally be...brought to an authentic end” (289). As the Bakhtin scholar and frequent translator Michael Holquist puts it, “the world is a vast congeries of contesting meanings, a heteroglossia so varied that no single term capable of unifying its diversifying energies is possible” (2002: 24). This is worth bearing in mind when considering how *Gummo*’s characters interact with the cultural signifiers I elaborate below. Likewise, by virtue of this heteroglossia, *Gummo*’s own cinematic identity can similarly be considered “always remain[ing] ‘open’, unfinished, on account of it being made up from a network of voices whose interactions never stabilise” (Cazeaux 2011: 270).

Cultural Heteroglossia in *Gummo*

There are so many influences running through Gummo...that a chainsaw couldn't cut it – Gus van Sant (1997: ¶2)

Throughout *Gummo*, one encounters numerous, heterogeneous signifiers of ‘culture’. These constitute something of a temporal blurring, evoking signs of pop culture both past and present. Consider, for instance, how Buddy Holly’s golden oldie, ‘Everyday’, is employed as a soundtrack to accompany Dot, Helen and Darby as they jump up and down on their beds, a sort of mock paean to golden teenage nostalgia and girl bonding (fig. 1). Or how Tumbler’s singing of Roy Orbison’s ‘Crying’ similarly harkens back to an earlier, nostalgic time. By contrast, more recent musical figures are also evoked, such as Madonna and her 80s hit, ‘Like a Prayer’, which plays on the stereo while Solomon exercises in his basement. Similarly, the hip-hop group Flesh ‘n Bone’s ‘Nothin’ But the Bone In Me’ is audible on the stereo in Dot, Helen and Darby’s living room.

Visually, the film is similarly rife with this sort of pop cultural signification. For instance, at one point Dot can be seen wearing a t-shirt of the 80s hair metal band, Poison (fig. 2), while Darby holds a poster of movie star Burt Reynolds over her face and professes to wanting a moustache just like his (fig. 3). Such references to celebrity are similarly evoked when an albino girl candidly shares her love of Patrick Swayze and Pamela Anderson with the camera. Similarly, one finds a reference to the Marx brothers in the film’s very

title. Gummo was the name of the fourth brother, who left the troupe before they became famous.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

These are some examples (the list is by no means conclusive) of the traces of pop culture, both past and present, which crop up throughout *Gummo*. But pop culture is not the film's only point of reference. One also finds regional or 'cult' signifiers appearing: a reference to the 60s so-bad-they're-good all-girl band The Shaggs (Helen and Dot are named after two of the members) and their song 'My Friend Foot-Foot', which happens to be the name of Helen, Dot and Darby's cat (like their pet, the titular character of the song goes missing). Similarly, *Gummo's* opening credits are accompanied by Almeda Riddle's folk rendition of 'My Little Rooster', evoking the film's Southern influence and feel. At another point, the film features video footage of someone carving the name of the thrash metal band Slayer onto his or her wrist (fig. 4).

One also finds cases of cultural associations that have been ‘mismatched’ along national and cultural lines, such as an African-American dwarf wearing an Israel t-shirt (fig. 5); or the use made of Scandinavian black metal (represented by groups such as *Mystifier*, *Bathory*, *Brighter Death Now*, *Burzum*) and German black metal (*Bethlehem*)³ within the context of a mid-West U.S. small town setting.



Fig. 4



Fig. 5

Interestingly, this latter juxtaposition of sound and setting is, from a certain perspective, not really all that jarring. Metal (particularly the Scandinavian form *Korine* draws on), much like country music, is a genre that has strong connections to a conservative and nationalist “discourse that often crossed into overt racism” (Harris 2000: 20). While country music more rarely makes the kind of radical ideological statements found in Scandinavian black metal, both it and heavy metal are recognised as two of the four genres “most strongly associated with low education” and hence linked, in a U.S. context, to the poorer white classes (Bryson 1996: 895). As such, both musical forms are closely connected to the image of the impoverished small-town milieu. This connection is borne out by how the sonically divergent but geographically common genres often merge musically. One need but look at the various rockabilly genres, which include designations like *thrashabilly*, *punkabilly*, *psychobilly* and *gothabilly*, or the career of someone like *Hank Williams III* – grandson of the country legend, who plays both country music in the tradition of his grandfather as well as punk-

³ For a humorous discussion with *Korine* about his admiration and appropriation of black metal, see the interview ‘And the Ass Saw the Angel’ (McLean 2000).

metal, psychobilly and hardcore punk – to see an intersection of country music with ‘heavier’ musical genres. *Gummo* is very much attuned to these sorts of hybrid connections, something Jeffrey Sconce picks up on when he poses a question implicitly raised by *Gummo*: “What exactly is the historical relationship between whiteness, Satanism, masculinity, and heavy metal? *Gummo* may not answer the question—but in the image of Solomon and Tumbler weaving down a hill on their bicycles looking for cats to exterminate for glue money, all to the strains of German death-metal, there is at least an opening to consider such alliances as more than simply ‘bad taste’ and/or ‘bad judgment’” (2007: 114).

In this manner, *Gummo* indulges a play of different cultural signifiers, frequently hybridising and re-signifying them in new and unexpected ways, regardless of the apparent ‘suitability’ of such inclusions and juxtapositions. Indeed, the very meta-textual difficulty of *Gummo*’s divisive critical appraisal mirrors this same hybridity, particularly the manner in which the film seems to defy any singular classification by aspiring to both ‘high art’ and ‘trash’. Again, Sconce sums up this ambivalence well when he questions whether *Gummo* is “an exploitation film or art cinema, a voyeuristic mocking of Red State otherness or the sympathetic intervention of a consecrated avant-gardist? Drawing on both evaluative traditions, *Gummo* resists any attempt to classify it as either ‘art’ or ‘trash’” (2007: 114). Rather, as I have suggested, Korine’s aesthetic of non-commitment is both and neither, occupying that in-between proximity that characterises the interstitial, hybrid Third Space suggested in so much of Bhabha’s cultural theory (2004). This, I would argue, is a *complication* of (cultural) meaning rather than a disavowal or unwillingness to explicitly ‘comment’ on what is being depicted, as some of *Gummo*’s critics have assumed (Guthmann 1998; Maslin 1997). Rather than pairing down the film’s divergent influences and cultural heteroglossia in order to ‘make sense’, Korine recognises the sheer complexity of the interstitial cultural experience, where one is constantly bombarded by a cultural heteroglossia that complicates identity and meaning more generally.

In *Gummo*, this complication is not just the result of a density of cultural allusion, but a complication of *temporality*. “Every age”, as Achille Mbembe has pointed out, “is in reality a combination of several temporalities” (2001: 15), a

concept keenly stressed by *Gummo*'s cultural heteroglossia. Throughout, the film and its characters incorporate influences that are both popular/normative, such as the diegetic appearance of Madonna and Flesh 'n Bone's music, or characters making verbal reference to Patrick Swayze and Pamela Anderson. But the film also makes reference to that which was *once* popular/normative but is now distinctly cult or known only in specific circles of appreciation and knowledge (Poison, Roy Orbison, Buddy Holly, the Marx Brothers). There are also signifiers that are 'other', like many of *Gummo*'s characters and settings, but are tied to a different place – here the various European strains of black metal come to mind – or *were* once 'other' and are still considered as such, but have now risen from complete obscurity to attain a particular cult status, such as The Shaggs. These are immensely diverse temporal and geographical orientations and their scattered originary contexts further muddy any attempts to reduce the film to a mainstream/marginal cultural binary. In so far as they all evoke numerous historical eras and transnational contexts, these heteroglossia put such simple binary distinctions under strain. Such a limited distinction does not take into account the pluralistic temporalities that are evoked and coalesced together by *Gummo*'s blurring in time as well as space any illusion of a fixed cultural origin.

To elaborate this point, consider how temporality is complicated by vaudeville and dance. At various points in the film, characters engage in amateurish dance routines – most memorably demonstrated in *Gummo* when Solomon's Mother spontaneously breaks into a scattershot, decidedly improvisatory tap-dance routine. The closest cinematic genre equivalent to this would be the U.S. musical, a form whose popularity had already begun to wane in the 60s, about thirty years before *Gummo* was made. In an interview with Korine, Andy Battaglia stressed the genre's 'old-fashioned' status, suggesting how "dance at this point seems to signify old movies, or at least bygone forms of entertainment, from eras you've expressed a liking for". To which Korine replies, "I guess I just like that form of show people. That's an element of showmanship that you don't see too much today" (in Battaglia 2008: ¶9). This "element of showmanship" is also reflected in Korine's love for vaudeville – an art form very popular in early 20th century U.S.A. – which he cites as one of his chief inspirations, particularly, though not restricted to, narrative structure: "I always

wanted my movies to have images falling from all directions in a vaudevillian way” (¶11). Elements of vaudeville proper also inform specific scenes, such as when Tumbler leaps up on a table after having slept with a prostitute and delivers an old Henny Youngman joke.⁴

As such, characters’ identities are constituted by a disparate range of cultural heteroglossia that makes any notion of an originary, fixed and prior cultural starting point or starting time seem highly simplistic. Rather, identity is shown to take form through hybridity and the cultural interstices, and shaped by a temporality that is pluralistic, never settled, ceaselessly being negotiated.

This pluralistic incorporation of a range of signifiers that blur temporal, regional and national boundaries, and that skewer the simplistic binary logic of high art/low art, culturally mainstream/cult, socially mainstream/‘other’ or even then/now bespeaks Korine’s refusal to comment or strip down his subject matter to the level of clearly discernable binary values. In *Gummo* he instead opts to embrace a cultural hybridity and heteroglossia, allowing for the near-simultaneous expression of multiple positions, moods and diverse cultural signifiers and temporalities. This seriously invalidates the neat and simplistic division of value into oppositional binary terms, instead seeing the film cycle through a vast and diverse barrage of cultural signs. In such a process, the underlying meaning is never arrived at, never conclusively settled, but stays instead in a circular and constant state of flux.

Furthermore, Korine’s aesthetic of non-commitment is not simply restricted to the cultural signifiers present in the form of *mise-en-scène* (that which is put in front of the camera). This non-commitment is just as apparent in certain stylistic and aesthetic considerations concerning the camera itself. One of the most prominent examples of the latter is the choice of an energetically pluralistic visual style with which to detail the action. In addition to Jean-Yves Escoffier’s striking, colourful 35mm cinematography (fig. 6-7), *Gummo* also mixes in Polaroid stills (fig. 8-9), improvised home movies shot on video (fig. 10-11) and footage that has been re-photographed off TV screens (fig. 12-13). To enhance this eclecticism, Korine and editor Christopher Tellefsen transition

⁴ Tumbler’s vaudeville outburst is discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

between all of these different formats with straight, often rapid, cuts and sudden changes in audio (both in terms of content and fidelity). Rather than ease the viewer from one situation, image and format to the other, this approach highlights the very incongruity of their collective heterogeneity, affecting an aesthetic destabilisation that eschews any sense of one style subordinating the others.



Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Fig. 9



Fig. 10



Fig. 11



Fig. 12



Fig. 13

Korine's visual approach thus claims no allegiance to a single cinematic tradition, "no loyalty to any technology" (Korine 2008b: ¶6). He is just as likely to work in lush, carefully composed, saturated 35mm – as is evident in later work like *Mister Lonely* (2007) (fig. 14-15) and the aforementioned sections of *Gummo* – experiment with complex post-production colour correction and handheld digital filmmaking in *Julien Donkey-Boy* (1999) (fig. 16-17), or retreat into old-school homemade video with *Trash Humpers* (2009) (fig. 18-19).



Fig. 14



Fig. 15



Fig. 16



Fig. 17



Fig. 18



Fig. 19

Having looked at the presence of both cultural heteroglossia and *Gummo's* pluralistic visual aesthetic, I would now like to turn to the question of how these phenomena relate to character behaviour and what can be called the characters' identity formation – a question that in turn prepares us for an examination of how these characters' behaviour engages and subverts cultural norms, which will form the next chapter's focus. Here I want to return to the assertion I made earlier, namely that Korine's approach is a non-essentialist one. What this means is that he does not put pride of place in an originating core – formed exclusively within the social and cultural margins, away from the influence of 'mainstream' culture – from which character motivation and a sense of identity subsequently springs. Instead, I have been arguing that Korine's approach recognises the hybridisation of influence. Here one reads a connection to Henry Louis Gates' observation about African-American writer Ishmael Reed's fiction. Reed, Gates argues, recognises that the conditions inscribing 'African-American-ness' are not pre-formed or constituted in advance. Rather, such a constitution is the *present and ongoing* result of certain regimes of representation and power that seek to depict African American identity (either for positive or negative ends) in the problematic singular – always already fully constituted and outside current cultural conditions of influence and change. This skewed representation depicts an "Afro-American idealism" fixated on "a transcendent black subject, integral and whole, self-sufficient and plentiful, the 'always already' black signified" (1987: 251). Such a critique is similarly articulated by Bhabha when he argues that "the representation of difference must not be hastily read as the reflection of *pre-given* ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet of [a normative] tradition" (2004: 3). Like Gates' urging to recognise the complexity

of African American identity or Bhabha's culturally interstitial positioning of the diaspora, in his representation of poor, white, middle-U.S. America Korine rejects the notion of marginal social figures as pre-formed outside of the dominant ideological order – a pre-formation that would therefore occur prior to an engagement with that order. In contradistinction to a centre/margin binary formulation, an observation of the behaviour of Korine's characters reveals that there not some sort of inner 'marginalised' essence that is being presented – and in the case of non-actors playing themselves, represented. Not a 'true inner self' on top of which his characters layer a performative disguise that would hide the 'essence' of a 'pure' marginalised subjecthood.⁵ While in interviews Korine has extolled the virtue of “a cinema of isolation, of loneliness”, of individuals who “go outside the system and create their own society” (in Battaglia 2008: ¶33), his own film in fact presents a far more complex picture. Characters do not disappear out of the system because, according to a post-structuralist stance, they are always caught *within* the system, grounded in certain norms of representation (Butler 2004: 28) – norms they can never be outside of.

While *Gummo*'s characters' sense of identity is therefore caught up within this system, by deliberately failing to adhere to a stable position of representation they are nonetheless able to challenge that system's core stability. From scene to scene – even within a *single* scene – characters frequently occupy ambiguous and contradictory social positions, enacting a slippage that blurs any discernable or stable boundary between 'marginal' and 'mainstream'. This questions such a boundary's validity, as well as the system of representation that the binary props up. Consider, for instance, how *Gummo* is subversively structured by restless shifts in character performance. Building on my earlier discussion of vaudeville and dance, one common representational strategy is to have characters that have displayed no prior extroverted behaviour

⁵ I borrow this non-essentialist rejection of a 'layered' personality that somehow contains a 'core' of truth from Slavoj Žižek, particularly as articulated in a lecture he gave at Boston University (2008). To quote from that lecture: “The automatic presupposition which we should abandon is that the story we are telling ourselves about ourselves – our 'inner', 'authentic' self experience – is the point of truth. As if, if you humanise the Other, if you get him at his or her or their innermost, then you can say 'this is what they truly are'...This precisely is what we should radically abandon”. This same notion is obviously just as problematic when we *do* try to distance ourselves from the Other and claim that they have a *different* inner nature from us.

suddenly “reveal unmotivated and unlikely talents for public performance” (Smith 1998: ¶6). A telling example in this regard is Tumbler, an individual who usually responds to events and the world around him with a near-catatonic, deadpan calm. This makes a sudden, extroverted performative outburst all the more uncharacteristic and surprising. Together with Solomon, Tumbler visits Cassidey, a prostitute. Settling a deal with her pimp, Tumbler disappears off-screen into Cassidey’s bedroom. When he returns, presumably having slept with her, he appears just as calm, a faint smile the only sign of his satisfaction. Solomon goes into the bedroom next and this time the camera follows. However, midway through a tender scene between him and Cassidey, we cut back to the living room, revealing Tumbler standing upon a chair. Usually reserved, quiet and awkward in his social interactions, here Tumbler blazes through the aforementioned Henny Youngman vaudeville joke, watched by the prostitute’s brother, who responds with hysterical laughter. The shift in character behaviour appears all the more incongruous because Korine and Tellefsen introduce the scene after Tumbler has already begun his performance, when he is at the peak of his energy.⁶ In relation to my earlier discussion regarding the influence of disparate cultural signifiers, what is perhaps most significant in Tumbler’s outburst is that the words and sentiment do not belong to him, but have rather been borrowed from a prior source – Youngman. One could reasonably read this as symptomatic of how our identity and behaviour is deeply influenced by the cultural signifiers that surround us all. All the more strangely, though in keeping with *Gummo*’s characteristic fragmentation, Tumbler at no point before or after the outburst mentions Youngman as the routine’s progenitor or even vaudeville more generally. Such sudden shifts in character behaviour complicate and fragment any clear sense of identification with what we might falsely regard as the characters’ ‘true’ selves.

Similarly, just prior to the Youngman scene, one finds Tumbler’s partner in crime, Solomon, in a room with Cassidey. Entering her bedroom, we discover Cassidey’s appearance is that of someone with Down’s syndrome. Moreover, she seems surprisingly shy, her behaviour a match for Solomon’s own adolescent

⁶ This is confirmed by Korine’s screenplay, which cites cut dialogue that would have been delivered earlier in the scene (Korine 2002: 123).

bashfulness. In their own ways, the child-like aspects of both characters are fully on display here, their respective emotional vulnerabilities captured in an extended scene in which they tentatively touch each other's hands and faces, exchange chaste kisses and hesitantly converse. Touchingly, Solomon asks her in all genuineness whether she loves him and it becomes clear he holds strong feelings for her. Despite the immensely problematic and distressing context, which involves a mentally challenged girl who has been pimped to a significantly underage boy, the scene resonates as a rare moment of emotional warmth, transmitting a feeling of love between the characters that transcends the context of the exchange and the cruelty of the surrounding scenes' subject matter. Indeed, when we see Solomon less than a minute later, his behaviour and the emotional tenor he projects could not be more different. Having suddenly transitioned – without any narrative motivation – from Cassidey's house to an outdoor forest, we see Solomon and Tumbler engaged in an intense act of senseless cruelty, relentlessly lashing a strung up dead cat as black metal floods the soundtrack. Here, Solomon wears a determined expression on his face and sports an incongruous cigar and fireman's hat (fig. 20) that, together with his actions, positions him as the complete opposite of the deeply sensitive and vulnerable boy we saw mere moments before (fig. 21).



Fig. 20



Fig. 21

Such scenes perfectly demonstrate how, in *Gummo*, a wild, almost unhinged, gravitation in mood and behaviour replaces more conventional notions of narrative and character development. Here we seem to have abandoned any conception of stability, either in terms of genre, character identity or narrative

progression. Gone is the “unifying, idealised narrative-arc” of the traditional three-act structure, replaced by a “narrative logic” that “foregrounds many disparate and disconnected events” (O’Connor 2009: 11). Such a destabilization seems to lend evidence to Ryan Deussing’s assertion that “*Gummo* succeeds in creating a world that is completely arbitrary, in which events are only loosely related and characters seem to have been invented moments before the camera begins to roll” (1997: ¶6). I would argue, however, that the effect goes beyond a sense of the ‘arbitrary’ – despite Korine’s own self-professed fascination with ‘randomness’ (Hays 1998: ¶7). Instead, what is presented is an exaggerated look at how identity formation takes place. In interviews, Korine has often opined that film “should be the ultimate collage, it should be so complex, it should be very dense” (2000: ¶5). And in a more recent discussion with Amy Taubin, he recounted how his desire in *Gummo* was “to make a collage with images coming from all directions—sight and sound, a kind of tapestry...kind of making sense of chaos and of moments” (in Taubin 2008: ¶3). How to navigate and define oneself in the stream of all that chaotic cultural heteroglossia is an underlying, unspoken theme – hinted at in Korine’s quote – that nevertheless permeates *Gummo*. When Korine speaks of wanting “to see moving images coming from all directions” (1997: ¶88), he’s implicitly touching on the sheer overwhelming diversity and density of cultural stimuli that affect us in our day-to-day lives. The manner by which a character might wax lyrically about a dead loved one, only to break into tap dancing for a moment before wielding a gun a few seconds later, or engage in quiet, tender conversation before sadistically lashing a dead cat while dressed up like a cross between a fireman and a cigar-smoking gangster; such incongruity on the level of representation and behaviour parodically cites this ‘overload’ of cultural signification and the role it plays in complicating and decentring notions of identity. As mentioned earlier, what is introduced by such stimuli is a sense of cultural and ideological fragmentation; wherein what might be called one’s sense of ‘cultural wholeness’ is revealed as merely a disavowal of a far more complex process, one marked by an inherently unstable, interstitial sense of identity. Such identity is formed and reformed “in the articulation of cultural differences” (Bhabha 2004: 2) from which a hybrid, Third cultural Space is conceived. By finding ways to play up this diverse

hybridity not only in his choice of visual aesthetic but also through performance, Korine provides us with an exaggerated, but nonetheless pertinent, demonstration of how cultural stimuli complicate identity formation within the context of poor, white, small-town U.S.A.

As I suggested in the introduction, this signification as *both* 'poor' and 'white' represents the contradictory, interstitial position *par excellence*. By virtue of their not signifying as 'non-white', subjects might regard themselves as entitled to a higher degree of inclusion and superiority within the discourse of white U.S. cultural hegemony. This is evident in a candid conversational scene between several young ex-convicts – a typical instance of the film's many one-scene cameos. While a young woman describes her prison experience, another guy, who seems to have also spent time in the same prison, opines, "The worst thing I hated about it was the niggers down there. I...God, boy. They make me so mad. I just wanna tear their heads off. I hate the fuckers. I think...I just don't like 'em". Building on this discrimination, another young guy discusses, matter-of-factly, what he perceives to be their inherent cowardice – "They fight ten to one. There'll be ten of them and one of you. They ain't gonna fight you fair". As Richard Dyer has argued, this emphasis on fighting and physically proving oneself is hardly incidental to the racist or poor white context. Centuries of European thought, stemming from the Enlightenment and notions of Cartesian mind/body dualism, have tended to elevate the white, male individual as intellectually superior and intrinsically rational in thought. Against this has developed the image of 'non-whites' as intellectually inferior, but sporting "better bodies, run[ning] faster, reproduc[ing] more easily, hav[ing] bigger muscles" (Dyer 1997: 147) – the supposed trade-off for a lesser intelligence. As a consequence, "the possibility of white bodily inferiority falls heavily" on the shoulders of those poor whites that lack higher education or must rely first and foremost on their physical prowess to get by. Indeed, "in the context particularly of white working-class or 'underachieving' masculinity, an assertion of the value and even superiority of the white male body has especial resonance" (*ibid.*). There is therefore a tendency, exemplified by the above scene from *Gummo*, to discredit black strength and prowess as somehow deceitful or unfair. Following

Dyer's argument, this can be seen to stem from an insecurity that simultaneously places great stock in bodily self-improvement. To this end, masculine physical prowess and self-improvement are stressed in numerous scenes throughout *Gummo*, from two skinhead brothers lifting weights and fist-fighting in the kitchen, to a group of men arm-wrestling and attacking chairs, to Solomon's lifting 'weights' – actually tied-together eating utensils – in front of the mirror.

Such instances of either racism or attempts to (im)prove one's masculinity or bodily self-image find a correlation in Jean Baudrillard's assertion that "the fundamental law of this society is not the law of exploitation, but the *code of normality*" (1993: 29). The proletariat or poor, Baudrillard argues, are on the whole as discriminatory as the bourgeoisie, frequently adopting normative masculinist and racist discourses that are part of a matrix of norms which in sum actually discriminate against *them* by virtue of their marginalised status. But what is crucially passed over in his formulation is the degree to which *ambivalence* frequently informs *Gummo's* characters' attitudes and behaviour in this regard. This is evident to the extent that many of the acts of bodily and heteronormative 'emulation' in the film have a parodic element to them, such as when Solomon creates makeshift dumbbells out of kitchen utensils – a scene that stresses his normative aspirations while also emphasising his lack of material resources and inability to afford proper dumbbells. Furthermore, all of *Gummo's* white characters are far removed from successfully embodying the social and cultural norms they engage with. While they may adopt and occasionally ape the attitude of a racially superior 'whiteness' or 'manliness', they are also often 'other' to this 'white', middle-class, *über*-masculine image. Thus their identity signifies as markedly interstitial and unsettled, always at a remove to the norms that they cite, even at the very moment that they attempt to embrace such norms of representation.

'Normal' Concerns

Terry and Phelipo, two young, smartly dressed African American twins (fig. 22), have been faking a charity drive in order to make money off unsuspecting strangers. Standing under a tree, they count their cash.

Terry: Man, we're goin' be making all this money.

Phelipo: Yeah, outta ho's like this.

Terry: Yeah. Buy the teachers too so I won't have to go to school no more.

Phelipo: Tease people too.

Terry: Yeah. Make 'em my friend and I tease 'em with the money.

Phelipo: They'll be my friends, makin' their eyes sore.

Terry: Yeah. We gonna have all this. We gonna be rich.

Phelipo: We'll be goin' around teasing women and stuff.

Terry: Yeah. Sellin' candy, gettin' money.

Phelipo: Just sellin' candy, gettin' money, makin' the greenbacks.



Fig. 22

This scene takes place near the end of *Gummo* and is perhaps the closest the film comes to revealing any economic concerns that might (and surely must) inform its characters' poverty-stricken ways of life. However, as I pointed out in the introduction, *Gummo* tends to forgo economic concerns to focus instead on how characters semiotically negotiate cultural signs and norms. And indeed, what is clearly foreshadowed in this dialogue is not primarily a sense of newfound economic prosperity, but rather a symbolic assertion of *status*. For these boys what's as, if not more, important than making and owning money, is the fact that they can wield it over other people's heads, "makin' their [friends] eyes sore",

buying teachers so they don't have to go to school, "teasing women". The *image* and the *position of power* these activities and earnings bestow upon them are at least as important as economic betterment. What this undoubtedly humorous scene therefore parodies is a *position of power* more than the fulfilment of a need. Money can certainly provide them with a means to eat and get by, but it also positions them favourably in a capitalist – not to mention patriarchal ("teasing women") – hierarchy of exploitation and superiority.

This brief scene encapsulates a very important trend in *Gummo*; namely, the role that notions of normativity play in influencing the behaviour of the film's characters. Up until now my focus has been on examining how the paradigm of identity that is brought to bear on these characters cannot simply be reduced to a strictly oppositional and binary one, the latter emphasising a too-neat division between normative and 'other'. Instead, I have striven to show how the very notion of 'other' is constituted by the 'normative' or 'centre' (and vice versa) and that the identities of the 'marginalised' are forged precisely in a cultural engagement that blurs that separation, forming what Bhabha calls the Third Space. This of course should not be equated with the fact that social and cultural norms somehow 'don't matter'. On the contrary I would argue that they still strongly define the characters' sense of self-identity. I emphasised this point by citing instances of racism and its attendant discourse around ideas of white superiority. Just so that the influence of this normative dimension is not underestimated, I want to consider a few more examples where normativity is keenly felt in characters' dialogue and behaviour. Consider, for instance, the case of the "Girl in Car" (her name as designated by the end titles). As her name suggests, we first see her near the start of the film, making out with Tumbler in the burned out frame of a car. Their sexual encounter is cut awkwardly short when he begins feeling her up, only to discover a cancerous lump in one of her breasts. Only much later in the film, having almost completely forgotten about her, is she glimpsed again. Sitting on a hospital bed surrounded by what one can only assume is her family, she tells everyone:

The doctors say they're gonna have to take off one of my boobies. And I know what happens when they do that. Boys'll stop looking at me. And once, when I finally meet a guy that likes me, and he sees my scar, he'll just stop talking to me for no reason. Boys are like that.

What is most striking about this description of her impending ordeal is that she gives little attention to either the actual operation or the recovery; her sole fixation seems to be on how this operation will affect her self-image and, conjointly, the image others will have of her. Her concern is not with whether she will live or die, or what her chances of recovery are. Having breeched the confines of physical normativity and what she takes to be the very prerequisite for bodily recognition in the eyes of men, her overriding concern is rather whether or not she will remain desirable and attractive to them. Much like Terry and Phelipo, her primary concern here is with how the effects of cancer will affect her social status. As if to stress this fact, Korine and Escoffier film her confession in intimate, almost claustrophobic, close-up, as if the world were peering at and weighing down upon her, mercilessly inspecting and passing judgement (fig. 23).



Fig. 23

An interesting addendum, included in the original screenplay but cut from the finished film, further explores this oppressive normative influence. After the Girl in Car resignedly remarks that “boys are like that”, an Anonymous Teenage Girl’s voiceover describes what subsequently happened to her. Following the operation, the girl “finally convincing her father to let her have plastic surgery[.]

She began writing poetry about her feelings, but no one wanted to listen 'cause she looked so bad". Another girl's voiceover punctuates this point: "I felt sorry for her but I still never wanted to talk to her 'cause she made me sick to look at" (Korine 2002: 141-142). Here it is clear that a deviation from physical normativity can – and for 'Girl in Car', does – result in a kind of non-human status. This is a different kind of fatality to that biologically suffered from cancer. It is a social death: a complete lack of recognition from others who have socially excluded you from a cultural matrix of representation that would otherwise acknowledge you as a fellow human being.

In addition to this pertinent demonstration of how normative claims and standards can be strongly felt even in a film as seemingly outré as *Gummo*, we should also recognise that these norms are operating and being reinforced on a secondary level. While the anonymous Girl In Car is undeniably the primary victim of discrimination in this particular case, one should not overlook her own contribution to gender stereotyping. The comment that "boys are like that" labels *all* males as shallow and discriminatory towards females who contravene physical signs of normativity. But, as the voiceover reveals, the only record we have of her subsequent treatment proves that it was *girls* who ostracised her. That said, while the Girl in Car's strong reservations might imply a subsequent falling out with Tumbler (assuming there was ever any strong connection to begin with), this description nevertheless points to a broader stereotyping of gender on Korine's part. For if we chalk up all of the considerable violence, destruction and abuse committed throughout *Gummo*, one finds that it is the male who instigates and carries out almost all of it. Females, by contrast, are primarily treated as innocent and innocuous. Helen and Dot, for instance, never go cat killing (unlike Solomon and Tumbler), never harass anyone (unlike the sleazy journalist who picks them up and tries to take advantage of them), never threaten violence and revenge (as Tumbler and Solomon do towards Jarrod when they realise he's becoming cat hunting competition), never get directly involved in the destruction of property (though one woman does lend vocal support during a sequence where two men thoroughly obliterate a chair).

While these examples of gender-specific abstentions might be understood as an accurate reflection of the patriarchal status quo, the lack of gender subversion is disheartening in a film that breaks so many other representational taboos. More pertinently, problems of representation are not only restricted to gender typing. Even more problematic are scenes where Korine uses characters in order to deliberately exploit their otherness. Consider, for instance, his stated preference for casting actors “completely, one-hundred per cent by looks”, which he justifies on the grounds that “film is a visual medium and people seem to forget that you’re watching pictures. When I see someone who looks interesting, then I cast them” (in Hays 1998: ¶10). This of course runs the risk of simply reinforcing, rather than challenging, whatever preconceived notions of representation Korine might be bringing to the filmmaking process. For instance, if he is casting individuals for the manner in which they embody a physical and visual ‘otherness’, if he displays them only in order to demonstrate their status as ‘freaks’, then he himself is reiterating the same kind of ‘othering’ representations he has often denigrated Hollywood for unthinkingly producing (Cunha 1997: ¶9; Kraus 2000: ¶88). Consider how this obsession with “looks” problematically informs a scene near the end of *Gummo*, in which Korine documents one of the non-actors, a mentally disabled girl called Ellen, shaving her eyebrows for the camera (fig. 24-26). It would not be hard to argue that such an uncommon activity, deliberately staged by Korine for the camera, plunges Ellen into assuming the status of ‘other’. This is the consequence of providing the viewer with nothing more than “the look” of the act while stripping it of any discernable motivation. And there *is* a motivation, at least according to Korine. Defending himself against charges of exploitation, he argues that this was in fact the girl’s style, that she “liked a clean face” (in Jamie and Hainley 1998: ¶18). The off-screen reality was that she always shaved her eyebrows, but for the purposes of the film Korine asked her to grow them back so he could film a scene of her shaving them off. Unfortunately, the purposeful omission of this motivation reduces her experience to the level of the inexplicable, presenting us with an image that cannot, because of its lack of motivation, surpass its status as ‘weird’ and ‘other’ – one of the most common methods of othering groups and individuals.



Fig. 24



Fig. 25



Fig. 26

Regardless of how much emphasis critics placed on the ‘otherness’ they found in *Gummo*, these examples present clear evidence that the logic and practice of both prescribing and reinscribing normativity *does* in fact take place in Korine’s films, both in the behaviour of his characters and, to a lesser but nonetheless present extent, in the film’s own approach to representation. One cannot deny that strong normative standards often serve as points of reference in *Gummo*, despite the supposed ‘freakishness’ on display (Smit 2007: 76). Nevertheless, as I have stressed throughout this chapter, these normative elements are frequently – though, it should be stressed, not always – *re-contextualised* within the specific context and setting of *Gummo*. Because “the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity” outside of their enactment by groups and individuals, “even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricised and read anew” (Bhabha 2004: 55). Crucially, this appropriation opens up a

Third Space and makes possible a degree of *subversion*. Rather than conjuring a slavishly exact copy of the norm or ideal, such enactments evoke certain norms while simultaneously *subverting* them through parody. These enactments exhibit a degree of crucial and subversive difference typical to the Other's appropriation of dominant racial, cultural and/or class-based norms and tropes. This is something Bhabha theorises in the post-colonial context as the subversive potential of 'mimicry', whereby the subjugated colonised individual ambivalently mimics the colonial power's manners and mores in a way that blurs the assumed difference – and hence threatens the assumed discourse of superiority – that privileges coloniser over colonised (126-127). Similarly, I want to argue that when *Gummo* crosses the difference between small-town, poor white characters and metropolitan norms by having the former imitate the latter, the norms do not survive the encounter without a significant degree of re-signification taking place. In this way, images and norms that have taken on the familiarity of a transcendental 'given' are rendered alien and 'different' – re-contextualised as the familiar made strange. It is to this strategy of subversion and re-signification that the next chapter will be dedicated.

CHAPTER TWO

Idolisation, Emulation, Subversion: materialising the Symbolic

Early in *Gummo*, just after Solomon's impressionistic retelling of the tornado that wrecked Xenia, a young boy (no older than eight or nine) appears on screen, flexing his muscles for the camera as the film's title superimposes itself over his scrawny chest (fig. 1). The image presents us with a signifying pose of highly stereotypical connotations (an ideologically calcified image in other words) – one that pertains to dominant ideas about masculine virility and strength. Such connotations find their principle avenue of cinematic dissemination in the action film, a genre that came to particular prominence in the 80s and 90s, defined by stars like Arnold Schwarzenegger, Sylvester Stallone and Jean-Claude Van Damme – most of whom started out as bodybuilders or professional athletes – and the franchises that came to define them onscreen, such as the *Rambo* or *Terminator* series. Indeed, the former offers a striking similarity to the image from *Gummo*. The boy's pose clearly seems to mimic Stallone/Rambo (fig. 2) – bare-chested and physically on display as he often is – the pose showcasing a masculinity that puts pride of place in physical strength and a visually pronounced muscularity.

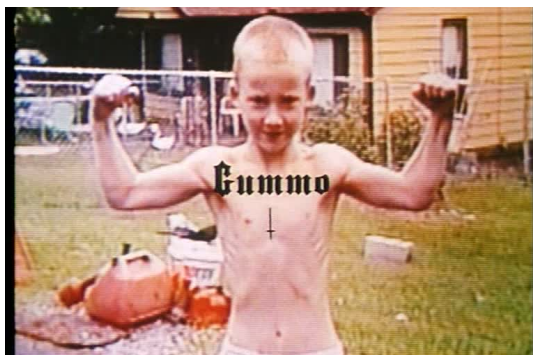


Fig. 1



Fig. 2

While we could leave the analysis at that, I want to press on a little further in order to think through the ways in which *Gummo's* engagement with such norms not only results in imitation, but also subverts and re-signifies them. For instance, consider how the cinematic image of the boy flexing his muscles for the camera in fact evokes *two* images simultaneously. On the one hand, the boy is imitating the aforementioned masculinist trope typified by the violent, heroic 90s action hero. But if the image of the boy evokes such muscular, aggressive, *über*-masculine connotations, it also *subverts* such visual tropes through its failure to match them, transforming the earnest solemnity of a figure like Stallone or Schwarzenegger into a humorous, under-aged parody that shows up the visually hyperbolic excess of the original. This is achieved through a gap between the pose's *citationality* (how it references and therefore denotes already established tropes of masculinity) and the inadequacy of the body executing the citation. For we are confronted with a body – and a boy whose constitution as a recognisably human subject is tied up with this body – that lacks the physique and physical development necessary to render his gesture anything but parodically emulative. The image is therefore a comical one, because the boy's very physicality (scrawny and too underdeveloped to display much muscle) so woefully misrepresents the masculine norm his bodily behaviour would suggest that he aspires towards.

Such an image exemplifies how *Gummo's* characters are caught up in the Third Space of enunciation. The boy imitates a certain received ideal, but his own specific, embodied and economic circumstances – one could argue that his scrawniness is the product not only of youth, but also of poverty's malnourishment – do not accord with the abstracted ideal he is trying to imitate. What emerges is thus both a copy and something different; a parodic blurring of the boundaries between a masculine norm and what it is not – not entirely 'other' to the norm, but not exactly reproducing the norm either. The result thus rests ambiguously in the interstices between those two conditions: subversion and conformity. Following Bhabha, I have sought to describe this hybrid terrain as articulating a Third Space. But, compared to the examples I analysed in the previous chapter, it is quite clear from the example I opened the chapter with

that here the Third Space is articulated differently. The last chapter focused primarily on how cultural heteroglossia enacts a certain destabilization of binary terms. There, the interstitial Third Space arose as a result of the interplay of *numerous*, vastly disparate cultural signifiers. The present chapter does not abandon the semiotic nature of this investigation – my concern is still with how images and actions signify. However, unlike the previous chapter's focus on how the "overlap and displacement" of cultural heteroglossia affects and complicates "signs of identity" (Bhabha 2004: 2), this chapter looks at how identity is articulated through a *gap* in the relationship between received cultural norms and how, in *Gummo*, such norms are cinematically expressed. Rather than focusing on the ways in which the density and diversity of cultural signifiers complicate meaning in the film, I want to focus on particular, individual moments and scenes in which specific cultural and cinematic norms are cited, only for these norms to be simultaneously re-signified through a subversion of their appearance and meaning. Different though this "tactics of resignification" (Christian 2004: 94) might be from chapter one's focus on the interplay of cultural heteroglossia, both chapters are concerned with understanding cultural identity as an interstitial, hybrid and ambivalent phenomenon – one that negotiates a number of seemingly oppositional signifiers and irreconcilable positions of identity.

Whereas the previous section drew largely on the work of Homi Bhabha, here I draw on Judith Butler's very useful theory of gender performativity. Like Bhabha, Butler argues that the norms that seem to delimit identity are not essentialist, pre-given and fully formed in advance – not "fixed" in the "tablet of tradition" (Bhabha 2004: 3). Rather, they are "socially instituted and *maintained* norms of intelligibility" (Butler 2007: 23, my emphasis). While one is constituted by these norms and cannot escape them, one can also *negotiate* them. This is achieved through "working the norm" (Butler 2006: 286), a process in which subjects use the signifiers of a mainstream, normative discourse to re-signify that discourse to different and unexpected ends. These are significations that are not entirely new, but nevertheless depart quite noticeably from the entrenched norm. In this chapter I argue that such a double-voiced, performative paradigm (both articulating the status quo while simultaneously seeking to undermine it)

underlies much of *Gummo's* ambivalent but subversive strength. Prior to examining these strategies of subversion however, I first want to establish a theoretical framework for understanding how the film and its characters are positioned in what psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan refers to as the 'symbolic order'. This is a model of human experience that is rooted in language and the notion that our engagement with society is mediated through the play of semiotic signs/symbols. Because Butler's theory is also immersed in notions of signification, and frequently draws on or challenges Lacan's insights, an overview of the symbolic order provides a good foundation for understanding *Gummo's* subversive engagement with, and subversion of, various symbolically imposed norms and ideals.

For Lacan, the symbolic order offers a structural model that argues that all human existence and experience is fundamentally rooted in languages. Here he draws on the seminal and highly influential linguistic theory of de Saussure, returning to what is perhaps Saussure's most elementary semiotic concept: the 'sign'. This is an aural and visual communicative 'referent' of sorts (both visual and verbal) that constitutes the most basic linguistic unit. However, much like an atom (the smallest unit in physics), the semiotic sign is dividable into smaller sections – "a two-sided psychological entity" (de Saussure 2005: 66), the two halves of which can be denoted individually as 'signifier' and 'signified'. This formula is indicated as follows:

SIGNIFIER

SIGNIFIED

The top half, the *signifier*, refers to the acoustic image – the pronunciation of the word 'tree', for instance, though it could just as well be an imagistic representation of what we have come to regard linguistically as 'tree' – while the bottom half is the resulting *signified* concept, the idea (Lemaire 1986: 12). For Lacan, this formula provides an argument for how, almost from the beginning of a human's life, his/her experience of the world is filtered through language and

the system of signs that structures that language. The manner in which we make meaning in the world is thus achieved through an employment of signs. This applies to written and verbal communication, where we of course resort to language. But, according to Lacan, it also applies to the very functioning of our unconscious – an unconscious that, he famously argued, is structured like a language (2006a). In this sense, language is not employed in order to give articulation to the unconscious. Rather, “language constitutes thought”, bringing “thought, consciousness, or a sense of things into being” (Fry 2009).

According to Lacan, it is through the interplay of semiotic signs and their connection to language that we are inaugurated into the symbolic order. But this is an inauguration that happens prior to our choosing, for our sense of self is *installed* within the symbolic order through an inevitable and involuntary process of language acquisition. “The *symbolic*”, Lacan argued, “takes hold in even the deepest recesses of the human organism” (2006b: 6). Therefore, “if man [sic] comes to think about the symbolic order, it is because he is first caught in it” (40); “it is”, in other words, “the discourse of the circuit in which I am integrated” (Lacan 1988: 89). In this sense, the symbolic order constitutes the world of signs in which we come to terms with our existences, formulate ideas and ideology and ascribing meaning to things. Around these signs (the ‘symbols’ that make up the symbolic order) all meaning is structured (Homer 2005: 44). From our individual, subjective perspectives, it “constitutes the sum of our universe” and as such is a structure “we can never fully grasp” (*ibid.*). Nonetheless, the symbolic order represents a totality that “has a structuring force upon us as subjects” (*ibid.*).

If we understand the symbolic order to be structured by the interplay of signs, this means that objects and images are not recognisable ‘in themselves’, but rather *signify* values that have taken on *symbolic* meaning within the symbolic order. Much like the doll that the character Ellen carries around with her throughout *Gummo* (fig. 3), signs/images are always referring to *other* signs or values, just as Ellen’s doll signifies ‘motherhood’ and ‘children’ for her – values and desires that she lacks but projects onto the object. Late in the film, there is a touching scene where she addresses the camera – “This is my baby, and I breastfeed it...I love my babies. I kiss them on the head. On its bald head. And I

rub it and I hug it” – all the time referring to the doll she holds in her arms (fig. 4). However, there is nothing in the doll’s actual plastic makeup to signify, for instance, ‘motherhood’. One could scrutinise the doll as closely as one wanted from front to back, inside and out, but no real, material manifestation of ‘motherhood’ would be revealed. Rather, this is an ideological value that has been displaced onto certain signs and symbols, of which the baby doll is one.¹



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

Of course, the doll is a quite literal ‘non-real’ referent to an actual baby child, functioning in a much more overtly symbolic manner than many other signs. It might therefore be better to demonstrate a less obviously referential example. For instance, consider a scene I touched on briefly in the previous chapter, in which Terry and Phelipo count the money they’ve earned and brag about how much they’ve made. Importantly, the green pieces of paper they hold do not in themselves constitute, *a priori*, ‘wealth’, ‘status’ or even ‘money’. It is only the collective societal recognition of the note’s *image* and shape as signifying these values – as opposed to its merely phenomenological description as ‘rectangular green paper’ – that allows them to function as signifiers of ‘wealth’ or ‘status’. This is a perfect example of the way signs function in order to structure even the most taken-for-granted, everyday meanings.

This is not to say that objects are entirely without a material dimension. A house, for instance, can signify ‘family’ and ‘togetherness’, but it also serves the practical function of keeping one dry and warm by placing a roof over one’s

¹ By extension, this would also count for an actual human child, who is just as intrinsically devoid of the inherent, material property of ‘motherhood’.

head. Similarly, a Ferrari sports car might signify immense wealth, prestige or economic prosperity, but it also serves a practical function in getting someone from one place to another. This practical function is what Karl Marx referred to as an object's use-value (1990: 125-131). This much is not in doubt, but neither does it cancel out these objects' symbolic or signifying dimension, a dimension that Saussurian linguistics and Lacanian psychoanalysis – not to mention certain schools of post-Marxist analysis (Baudrillard 1981: 91) – have demonstrated as crucial to how we semiotically conceive of the objects and individuals that constitute the world around us. It is through the interplay and constant referentiality of signs to one another that the symbolic order is structured. Here, it is crucial to recognise that the structure of the symbolic order represents a kind of fiction – it does not have a strictly material basis in reality but exists instead in the fantasy and myth of pop culture, in the simulacra produced by film, television and other media, and in the everyday *discourse* that circulates indefinitely within any given society. All of these activities and phenomena articulate and reinforce certain symbolic meanings that objects, practices, groups and individuals in any given time and place possess. A broken-down house might take on the meaning of 'poverty'. A black person in a predominantly white society might signify the racist preconception of 'inferiority'. A man wearing makeup might be presupposed 'homosexual'. These objects and individuals don't in themselves materialise 'poverty', 'inferiority' or 'homosexuality', but rest on a complex network of relatively entrenched preconceptions and references – the "norms of intelligibility" (Butler 2007: 23) that structure the symbolic order. Because we cannot conceive of objects and persons outside of this discursive network of signs, and because we always do so within a symbolic order that attempts to fix our ideas about the world to one ideology or another, one can refer to the symbolic as a 'structuring fantasy' or 'necessary fiction'. This is particularly pertinent in light of its being structured around certain norms and ideals that can never actually be materially grasped and rarely embodied, even though they are often endlessly reproduced in different forms of media, such as magazines, on the television or in the cinema. To take some examples from the latter medium, consider how a film like *Charlie's Angels* (2000) or its sequel, *Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle* (2003), maintains the groomed allure of its three

heroines' appearance at almost every turn. Despite the ongoing turmoil and hardship of physical combat, which defines a large chunk of the film's action, there is a near-constant concern amongst the filmmakers with maintaining unrealistically high standards of physical beauty. This means that even in the midst of battle the three characters' appearances are relatively unruffled; appearances whose physical attractiveness – thanks to deliberate casting, the tools of lighting, high-budget makeup, expensive wardrobe and post-production image 'correction' – is exceptionally inflated to begin with. A similar contrivance is all too evident when one questions how a character like Cat Woman from the recent *Dark Knight Rises* (2012), despite her working class status and physical ordeals as a cat burglar, can afford the expense and care that keeps her hair in the kind of pristine condition that would be difficult to maintain even for someone with a less demanding line of work. In a similar vein, consider how almost all biographical films tend to enhance the beauty of their protagonists by casting exceptionally good-looking actors and painstakingly perfecting their wardrobe, makeup and lighting in order to further beautify them. To emphasise how this practice is not only restricted to Hollywood films, consider how such tendencies are evident in a South African film like *Die Wonderwerker* (2012). Detailing a period in the life of Eugène Marais, the film portrays him as so physically attractive and energetic as to defy the crucial premise that he suffers from a debilitating, long-term morphine addiction.

In all of these cases – and one could go on indefinitely – we are presented with representations that far exceed what everyday life, unmediated by media representation, offers us. But because of their omniscient position in a media-saturated society like the U.S., cinematic representations such as these have helped define and reinforce certain visual norms and ideals. Despite being encouraged to identify with and often embody such idealistic images, they are more often than not completely removed from one's day-to-day reality. As Rosemarie Thomson puts it, "One testimony to the power of the normative subject position [the preconceived norm articulated within the symbolic order] is that people often try to fit its description in the same way that Cinderella's stepsisters attempted to squeeze their feet into her glass slipper" (1997: 8). The normative is always an ideal out of reach.

The Material Reinforcement of Ideology

Lacan's theory places great stock in language and the semiotic sign as a means of structuring human existence and experience. In our discussion of the norms and ideals that structure the symbolic order, we are focusing on a process of signification. If we talk about challenging governing symbolic norms and ideals, what is at stake is primarily a re-signification or re-inscription of *semiotic meaning* over and above material change. This is not to say that what we perceive as 'material' is not affected by a change in signification. Rather, Lacan's argument is that the symbolic (rooted in the logic of the semiotic sign) governs the way in which we perceive our material reality, not the other way round (Lacan 2006a). While this is not in itself a bad thing – I stand by his Saussurian contention that our experience of reality is by and large mediated through the interplay of signs – his lack of distinction between, on the one hand, verbal, written or thought discourse and the way this discourse is articulated and made material through various actions and physical activities, fails to account for the exact ways in which the symbolic order's hierarchy of norms are *reinforced* in the material domain. For Lacan, "reference to the experience of the community as the substance of this discourse" – that is, reference to the specific, material embodiment of certain cultural norms in a given situation, "resolves nothing". The real importance, the "essential dimension", lies "in the tradition established by this discourse" (414). In a typically structuralist vein, Lacan urges us to pay attention to how this "tradition" is grounded in "the elementary structures of culture", structures that are in turn "authorised by language" (*ibid.*). In other words, language precedes and structures the symbolic order and, by extension, material experience as we have come to understand it. But it is not enough that this cultural symbolic exist in abstract discourse, even if we assume language to have the domineering role Lacan claims for it. It cannot merely have existed in some rumoured past time for it to be able to impose its dominance on the present. Rather, it needs to be physically embodied and hence made *material* through "a regulated process of repetition" (Butler 2007: 198) that can theoretically be continued indefinitely. While I doubt Lacan would deny this, his own work fails to properly account for how this material reinforcement takes

place. To supplement this absence, I would therefore like to turn to the seminal work of Louis Althusser and his 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)'. In this essay, Althusser pointed out that "the 'ideas' or 'representations', etc., which seem to make up ideology do not have an ideal or spiritual existence, but a *material* existence" (1971: 155, my emphasis). For Althusser, ideology – which is the ideology of the symbolic order – must manifest itself in the material world. Without this material support, ideology lacks the necessary reinforcement to move beyond speculative abstraction into the realm of 'fact'. The material provides the setting in which the cultural symbolic can justify and perpetuate itself (158). Backing up this claim, Althusser uses the example of Christianity and the entire process of attending church, kneeling, praying, singing hymns, making confessions and taking communion, by which one's ideology is reinforced and acquires the status of a phenomenological given. Althusser argues that this kind of material reinforcement is not just isolated to religion, but is at work in all institutions and forms of discourse. Take advertising, for instance. While its connection to the free-market makes it more politically decentred and less state-specific, it nevertheless thrives on a connection between the circulation of ideological messages and the way these abstract concepts and standards – 'beauty', 'bodily perfection', 'masculinity', 'femininity', notions of what is 'fashionable' or 'chic' – are reinforced by individuals' possession and utilisation of the products being advertised. This process, whereby the products are bought and consumed, is only the most direct form of an ideological state of affairs that also reinforces a bodily insecurity and desire for these products via the encouragement of dietary regimes, exercise routines, various forms of beauty treatment and bodily modifications – all undertaken with the hope of attaining a 'perfect' figure or 'ideal' weight. Similar to church, one kneels and prays to the god of advertising by engaging in such self-improvement regimes – a process that in turn breathes material validity into the discourses that prop up bodily perfection.

For Althusser, there is therefore a direct correlation between discourse and its material enforcement; the two working in endless loops that reinforce one another. However, what Althusser does not really address in his essay – or does so only very generally by suggesting that his theory is obviously an abstract

reduction (170) – is a concrete consideration of the *gap* that might exist between the material and the symbolic abstract. The weakness of Althusser's model is that he only contemplates those scenarios in which the material body and environment are adequate for the purposes of reinforcing the symbolic order. By contrast, *Gummo* poses the question of what happens when the environment and/or the body are *unsuited* to the citational or representational status required of it by the ideology. Consider again the example of the boy who flexes his muscles at the camera, materially evoking normative notions of the macho male but falling short of the ideal because of his lack of musculature. How does one make sense of Althusser's theory in such an instance, where a character materially cites and embodies norms of masculinity while simultaneously *undoing* and making a mockery of that same notion, because he or she so clearly lacks the material means to match the norm?

Performance/Citation/Subversion

This is the question that Judith Butler's work takes up. Whereas Althusser theorises a relationship between ideology and its materialisation that sees the one primarily reinforcing the other, Butler explores what *subversive* opportunities and *gaps* are opened up by such a materialisation. To understand how this process might be achieved, I would first like to place Butler's work and its aims in their original context, namely the field of gender studies and specifically queer theory, a field Butler played a large role in developing. What resides at the foundation of her ideas is a rethinking of the categories of 'sex' and 'gender'. What she seeks to question is the biological deterministic attitude that views gender and its intelligible characteristics as a fatalistically determined, unchanging and unchangeable biological product of the physical bodies we 'are'. Butler contests this attitude by pointing out that gender has a history; representational notions of what constitute 'maleness' and 'femaleness' have undergone massive permeations. Consider a practice among wealthy English families at the turn of the 19th century, which was fashionably disposed to attire young boys in dresses. By normative standards, such a practice today would seem antithetical to dominant notions of 'maleness' – would, in fact, possibly

even drive particularly conservative, misinformed groups to suggest that such a 'cross dressing' practice could instil 'deviant' homosexual inclinations at a young age. Similarly, even within the same historical period, what constitutes 'maleness' in one culture could be just as easily construed as 'femaleness' – and hence normatively 'incorrect' – in another. Such relativism is clearly demonstrated by the Scottish practice of men donning kilts and how this masculine cultural 'anomaly' is often treated with narrow-minded ridicule in other countries and cultures. Gender and its representative forms are therefore in a constant state of flux and are never really fixed, though they almost always become entrenched within societies and cultures and can easily take on the appearance of an unchangeable, transcendental norm – can, in other words, become culturally fixed in that society's symbolic order (Butler 2007: 23). Gender, Butler argues, is not so much a material phenomenon residing in, on or as our bodies, but a form of discourse that exceeds the specifics of our own bodies altogether and constitutes a form of knowledge and power that compels us to 'do' our gender in ways that conform with the regulated dictates of the symbolic. Butler sees this 'doing' constituted in the form of a reiterative performance, a performance each of us is always carrying out. It is through this aspect of performativity – this 'doing' – that our gender identity is formed, but also policed and punished when it turns out that an individual is failing "to do their gender right". For such a failure shows up gender as "a construction that regularly conceals its genesis; the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions" (190). Similar to Althusser's remarks that ideology is reinforced by its subjects' material doing, so gender construction and our performance "compels' our belief in its necessity and naturalness" (*ibid.*).

This theory of gender performativity, while having had an influential impact in gender studies and numerous other fields, has been frequently misunderstood – and erroneously critiqued – as implying that individuals have the physical and biological freedom to be 'whatever they want to be' – that we could freely pick a gender of choice, don it for however long we choose and discard it whenever we see fit (Butler 1993: x). Part of the fault behind this misunderstanding lies with Butler's choice of wording: 'To perform' suggests a

self-willing agency, a physical freedom to *choose* to perform, and therefore implies a state *prior* to such a performance. But, as Butler clarifies, such a conception is inaccurate:

The 'activity' of [gender performance] cannot, strictly speaking, be a human act or expression, a wilful appropriation, and it is certainly *not* a question of taking on a mask; it is the matrix through which all willing first becomes possible, its enabling cultural condition. In this sense, the matrix of gender relations [the conditions that provide for the enforced adoption and performance of gender] is prior to the emergence of the 'human' (7).

Here we can understand Butler's notion of the "matrix of gender relations" as akin to Lacan's notion of the symbolic order; "the discourse of the circuit in which I am integrated", which provides the very conditions in which gender is thinkable. Thus, it is strictly within the symbolic matrix of what constitutes the 'human' that representations of 'male' and 'female' gender are allowed – or *not* allowed – to emerge. Butler describes this limitation as "improvisation within a scene of constraint" (2004: 1), in which the very repertoire of 'legitimate' gendered expressions are always already defined for us, but which also define us from birth within the restricted representational framework of what constitutes representations of 'normality', 'human', 'male' and 'female'.

If this constitutes the foundational premise of performativity, how exactly does one go about *doing* their gender in the concrete sense and – from a film spectator's perspective – how is this doing recognised? When an individual wears make-up, dons a skirt and high heels or talks in a high-pitched voice – all forms by which gender is performed and recognised – by what perceiving mechanism is gendered recognition being or not being bestowed upon them? What rules and parameters govern the recognition of individuals who witness the performance of gender? What theoretical vocabulary does one draw upon to discuss the process of this recognition – or misrecognition, as the case may be? Here, Butler informs her ideas about performativity with the concept of citationality (1993: 12-16). This is a term she appropriates from Jacques Derrida who – working within the realm of speech theory – refers to citation as the process by which speech not only cites a prior model in order to render it

intelligible, but wherein certain authoritative actions (or 'performative utterances') are lent the appearance of having being self-willed by the speaker, when in actuality they require a citation that the very 'self-evidence' of the *mise-en-scène* and appearance of the speech act would seem to hide. "Could a performative utterance", as Derrida puts it, "succeed if its formulation did not repeat a 'coded' or iterable utterance, or in other words, if the formula I pronounce in order to open a meeting, launch a ship or a marriage were not identifiable as a 'citation'" (1988: 18)? The "unity of the signifying form" in other words, "only constitutes itself by virtue of its iterability" (10). Citation is therefore the process by which norms and the power that circulates in and through them, is bestowed upon, and takes the guise of, an individual or group. But this power is only present in that individual or group's expression and person (as a judge, priest, police officer, school teacher and so on) to the extent that their expression can *cite* that originating (but hidden) source (Butler 1993: 225). In this manner, citation also implies that there are certain limits of intelligibility – that one's performative utterances and actions must conform to already established models, at least if one wants to be understood within and by certain normative standards. Drawing on these ideas, Butler extends this concept of citationality to the recognition and performance of gender in order to explain how gender norms both become naturalised, but also how one risks falling outside of the limits of gendered intelligibility if one were to, as it were, cite the un-citable and break with these norms.

Such restrictions notwithstanding, the notion of gender as a *performance* implies a degree of unforeseeable change and hence, a degree of unenforceability. Like any live performance, not everything can go according to one's plans or wishes, nor will the performance be received the way one intends. There can be a break with expected gendered norms. I could, for instance, let down my hardened, masculine image by crying 'like a girl', fail to live up to a masculine stereotype by refusing to fight someone much bigger than me or even violate an unspoken heteronormative code by flirting with another man. But these breaks with gendered norms and expectations should arguably not be viewed as a failure, since the norm is often so unrealistic to begin with. As Thomson puts it: "If one attempts to define the normate position by peeling away

all the marked traits within the social order at this historical moment, what emerges is a very narrowly defined profile that describes only a minority of actual people" (1997: 8). To return to my own examples: Almost all men have cried at least once in their adult lives. Practically all men have 'wimped out' of a potentially painful situation and many of us, even those who wouldn't honestly consider themselves 'gay', have at least questioned just how unbending their heterosexuality really is. In this sense, the normative is always an ideal that is out of reach, and for this same reason the reiterative attempts to match such norms usually imply a failure that has the potential to destabilise by showing norms up as the "socially instituted and maintained norms of intelligibility" (Butler 2007: 23) that they are.

Working the Norm in *Gummo*

Crucial to an understanding of this notion of performative subversion is to recognise that it is usually predicated on ambivalence. As I stressed in the example where the boy flexes his muscles for the camera, his actions are grounded in a double-voiced mimicry *and* deviation, placing one foot within the discourse of the norm, while simultaneously modifying it in some way that renders the familiar practice 'other'. Like Lacan's symbolic order, "one depends upon that very norm to be formed as a subject and an agent even as one struggles against the conditions of one's own formation...If I am asked to accept the claim that there is no subverting of a norm without inhabiting that norm, then I fully agree" (Butler 2006: 285). In line with this, a second crucial point needs to be made. This pertains to Butler's argument that subversion can happen "not only or exclusively as a 'tactic' mobilised by an intention but also as a strategy *without* intention" (*ibid.*, my emphasis). Thus, even if *Gummo's* characters' actions don't seem to be deliberately or explicitly articulated as acts of resistance to the norm, they may nonetheless have a subversive *effect* that escapes the intentions of the subject performing the citation. When the boy flexes his muscles for the camera, he does not have to be intent on parodying certain masculine norms in order for us to read the scene parodically. Such a double-voiced strategy lends political meaning to a film that so many others have

misdiagnosed as devoid of political comment (Arthur 1997; Tatara 1997), without sacrificing its high degree of representational complexity and political ambivalence. We can now understand that critics like Paul Tatara miss the point when writing this sort of condemnation:

At the risk of sounding like I'm taking this as a work of art, I'm going to venture a guess that you, Harmony, are trying to display some nihilistic 'punk' leaning. Well, good try. Take it from someone who was around when the original punk explosion hit. The punks of the '70s were railing against an economic and social oppression that kept their families down for generations. Those were instantaneous, disposable outbursts, incendiary bombs aimed at very specific, button-down targets. What you, on the other hand, are doing is 'making fun of people'. Barely-educated drunks who live in squalor and arm-wrestle for entertainment are not telling us anything that we don't already know (1997: ¶9-10)

Here Tatara fails to conceive of an undermining of the status quo that would depart from an unambiguous stance of 'resistance'. This is a term Butler's theory distances itself from, preferring 'subversion'. This is because, for Butler, 'resistance' conveys "the purity and oppositional character of a stance" (2006: 285), and while "railing against an economic and social oppression" is all good and well, Butler's typically post-structuralist response would take issue with the way such resistance "implies an exteriority to [the] power" (*ibid.*) being railed against. Such a self-distancing from the terms and conditions that one is opposing is impossible, because these terms and conditions have also shaped and formed the self as a recognisable subject. In such a scenario, "agency is a vexed affair, and *resistance* does not seem the right word for this kind of struggle" (*ibid.*, her emphasis).

Indeed, Tatara doesn't seem to grasp that this ambivalent, double-voiced aspect was in fact already evident in the 70s punk movement, whose iconography and subcultural style *co-opted* and re-signified signs and commodities that already circulated in the mainstream cultural domain (Hebdige 1979: 107-110). This bears at least a passing similarity to the subversive strategy on display in *Gummo*, which similarly installs *and* subverts the norms being cited. Furthermore, Tatara elides the fact that The Sex Pistols, the premier and progenitorial British punk act, were signed to two major record labels: first

EMI, then Virgin Records. Or that the band's look and sound originated from a carefully designed marketing scheme by their manager, Malcolm McLaren, whose ambitions were primarily commercial, *not* prompted by "railing against an economic and social oppression", though he certainly took advantage of this working class sentiment. Even in the oppositional politics of punk, one witnesses an ambiguity of subversion that is similar to *Gummo's* own.²

To elaborate on an example – only briefly mentioned earlier – that coalesces both the citational destabilisation of gendered norms and the ambivalence of this tactic, consider the sequence where Solomon binds a series of kitchen utensils together with elastic bands (a poor boy's substitute for weights), carries them down to his basement and – in a truly bizarre routine – 'exercises' by lifting them up and down in front of a giant, wall-length mirror (fig. 5-7). There is nothing in Solomon's execution of this activity to suggest that he undertakes his bizarre routine with anything but the utmost seriousness – no self-conscious, knowing smiles to the camera or a faltering in his actions to signify that they are anything but second nature to him. However, as with the preteen boy who flexes his muscles for the camera, a gap appears between the earnestness of Solomon's citational gesture in mimicking a bodily workout and the nearly incomprehensible manner in which he carries this citation out. Furthermore, apart from wielding a bizarre kitchen substitute for the real article, Solomon's dress negotiates a similar ambivalence between a citation of masculine conventionality and a subversion of that same code. His bare-chested display suggests a readiness for exercise and a citation of a rugged masculine ideal – an imitation of the sort of muscular action icons mentioned earlier in this chapter. But, like the bare-chested boy discussed earlier, Solomon's skinny, near malnourished, frame (not to mention his pink slippers!) upsets and subverts such a neat, conforming display of masculine norms.

² As for Tatara's complaint that "barely-educated drunks who live in squalor and arm-wrestle for entertainment are not telling us anything that we don't already know" – this seems unjustifiable in light of Korine's fairly unique perspective and emphasis on poverty as a socio-cultural, not socio-economic, phenomenon (see Introduction for a more extensive argument of this point).



Fig. 5



Fig. 6



Fig. 7

Such a double-voiced (re)inscription is not only restricted to the film's male figures or a masculinist discourse. Consider a scene where Helen and Dot engage a similarly bizarre form of bodily self-improvement. Standing topless in front of a mirror, Dot attaches a line of black tape to each of her nipples, instructing her sister – also topless – to do the same. Helen has reservations about whether this will be safe, but Dot reassures her that “this is the right way”: pulling off the sticking tape, Dot insists, will have the effect of making the nipple “fatter and popping it out bigger”. The fear of pain makes Helen hesitant, but Dot reassures her and quickly rips the tape off. Unfazed by any pain she might have felt, Helen stares at her nipples in the mirror, glad that “they look bigger” (fig. 8-10).



Fig. 8



Fig. 9



Fig. 10

Observed on the level of plain event, this scene (like much else in *Gummo*) might appear as a bizarre narrative diversion. However, taking the film's larger thematic context into account, we find the girls' behaviour tying in with a recurrent focus (and parody) of physical strength and beauty. Once more, what renders the sisters' actions from acquiring the status of a complete non sequitur is the tangential, citational resemblance they bear to more 'normal' forms of 'bodily care'. Here, Dot and Helen's 'self-improvement' betokens regulatory bodily regimes such as shaving, waxing, dousing the body in scented sprays and beauty products, as well as more radical surgical procedures such as plastic surgery, face lifts, and breast augmentation, all of which are intended to render the body more 'feminine' and desirable. Butler has noted how this regulated connection between one's gender and its heteronormative construction functions to signify desire in the eyes of the opposite sex (2007: 24). Here, Helen and Dot render such normative behaviour strange, while seeming to fully

subscribe – indeed delight, if Dot’s self-pleased expression at the end of the scene is anything to go by – in the logic of the normative practice. They therefore occupy an ambivalent space between parodically restaging the trope of bodily perfection while simultaneously conforming to it.

Decentred American Myths

These two examples – three, if one includes the scene with which I began the chapter – represent applications of Butler’s theory that hew closely to the original gendered context of her work. At this stage I’d like to point out that numerous theorists, including Butler, have applied her ideas to film analysis.³ Not surprisingly, the vast majority of this work focuses on the cinematic representation of gender. While the analysis in this chapter has so far covered similar ground, I would now like to employ Butler’s notions of performativity and citation in order to explore not only how the onscreen body materialises norms whilst simultaneously challenging them, but also to look at how Butler’s ideas can be brought more generally to bear on *Gummo*’s engagement with cultural norms. Unlike my previous examples, here I want to foreground the role that the cinematic apparatus plays in such representations, particularly in the context of *genre* (as opposed to *gender*) representation and how such genre is subverted through what Korine has irreverently referred to as ‘genre fucking’ (Hack 1998: ¶7; Pride 1997: ¶7; Ramos 1997: ¶9). Such analysis can suggest to us how the films own identity – not just that of its characters – is predicated on a certain ambivalent subversion.

Smit has emphasised how *Gummo* and its characters, in brief though frequent moments, enact “curious reconstructions of classical Hollywood tendencies” (2007: 72). Sometimes these reconstructions emerge more or less fully intact and hold up an exact mirror to the dominant cinema, such as when Dot gratuitously waves her hair around and licks her lips in slow motion for the camera, in clear emulation of “an image of classical Hollywood excess and specularly” (ibid.) – a scene I analyse in detail below. At other times, the

³ See, for instance, Butler 2011; Cheever 2006; Chilcoat 2004; Cowan 2009: particularly 109-117; Morgan 2004; Vojković 2009; among many others.

reconstruction is more overtly parodic or only partially cites the genre, incorporating only *certain* elements of iconography and/or behaviour. Such is the case with the scene I want to analyse here, which cites aspects of the Western while simultaneously re-contextualising that genre in a manner that rethinks its status as U.S. cultural myth. Featuring a one-off cameo by a couple of foulmouthed ‘cowboys’ – in reality, two pre-teen kids dressed up in cowboy hats with toy guns – the scene is set in a junkyard and consists of the boys cursing and parading around, arbitrarily smashing car windows and tossing pieces of junk in the air. Bunny Boy – a silent, enigmatic character sporting big, pink bunny ears, who habitually appears throughout the film – enters the junkyard. The two boys quickly block his path. Hurling verbal abuse on him, they raise their hands to their holsters and stare him down, enacting the trope of an old Western shootout. After one of the boys shouts to “kill his ass”, they draw their guns and shoot what turn out to be only toy caps, ‘killing’ Bunny Boy who falls to the ground and remains motionless for the rest of the scene (fig. 11-14).



Fig. 11



Fig. 12



Fig. 13



Fig. 14

In an act of jarring misreading, Felicia Feaster has described these two boys as a caricature of “budding serial killers” (1998-1999: 42). This view seems to ignore the obvious genre encoding taking place here, but – diagnosed in a Butlerian vein – perhaps represents a typical example of how certain norms of intelligibility must be present if a citation is to be clearly recognised as such. *Gummo*’s displacement of the Western from its mythic, romantic and atavistic setting to the grime, poverty, verbal abuse and shocking violence of the modern U.S. small-town represents such a radical reimagining that at least one critic doesn’t even recognise the relocation. But despite Feaster’s apparent oversight, I want to suggest that this scene is indeed the poor man’s (or boy’s) citation of that most iconic and mythical of U.S. genres. From the dress to the rough speech and the parodic manner in which they ‘stand off’ against Bunny Boy, the generic traits of the stereotypical Western are unmistakable. But, as I have just suggested, a number of relocations and modifications are also evident. In addition to replacing its grand vistas with a dilapidated junkyard, the gallant figure of the Western hero – the adventure-seeking, unbound man of the frontier and valiant preserver of justice – is literally diminished, both in masculine and moral terms. What we get instead are two gun-crazy, foul-mouthed homophobic kids (they deride Bunny Boy’s pink ears and call him ‘queer’) who spew profanity and hatred at anything that crosses their paths and aren’t even above pillaging the felled boy’s pockets (fig. 14).

This demythologising revisionism is akin to John Cawelti’s reading of *Chinatown* (1974), which he sees as lifting the shroud that traditionally concealed the gap between fiction and reality in the myth of the detective narrative. *Chinatown*’s strength, according to Cawelti, is to present certain tropes of the *film noir* and hard-boiled detective narrative in order to upset and subvert genre expectations, revealing that such clichés and conventions are tragically inadequate in the face of “a universe that is deeper and more enigmatic in its evil and destructive force” (1979: 567). For the reasons I have argued above, I want to suggest that Korine enacts a similarly subversive citation of the Western in the cowboy scene from *Gummo*, both embracing and undermining the genre’s images and conventions. It must be pointed out, however, that critiquing

the myths of the Western by subverting its moral values is certainly not breaking new critical or cinematic ground. What is more unique about Korine's contribution to such a critique is how he enacts a re-contextualisation that plays loose enough with the genre tropes and citational 'markings' of the Western in order for it to come undone in the hands of other signifiers. Again, there are other forbearers for such a disruptive practice – consider, for instance, the deliberately anachronistic, diegesis-shattering approach to the Western in a film like *Walker* (1987). Here, director Alex Cox explores the colonial subtext at the heart of the Western myth and traces its continuation into contemporary U.S. imperialist politics by combining a 19th century traditional Western setting and timeframe with 20th century helicopters, firearms, automobiles and other anachronistic details. What Korine contributes to this radical revisionist approach is to enact a conflation of Western tropes with overbearing signifiers of *class*. Korine literally displaces the Western from the boundless splendour of the Old West – 'old' in two senses; its roots in 19th century history as well as the classic Hollywood of yore – to the dirt of a late 20th century consumer capitalist junkyard, afloat in "the numbing residue of mass consumption" (Arthur 1997: ¶1) and surrounded by Xenia's poverty. This is no idle addition, since the U.S. Western is founded primarily along such economic lines, in so far as it is inextricably rooted in a capitalist-colonial discourse of the rugged individual who will carve out his fortune, literally by scarring the land and subjugating its indigenous peoples (the latter frequently being disavowed in order to make this conquest morally permissible). Yet there is a basic irreconcilability between where all this rabble-raising entrepreneurship will lead if the cowboy were to ever settle down and become a predecessor to the modern, middle-class U.S. audience – an overtly comfortable, decadent position at odds with the adventure-loving, anti-establishment figure he embodies on the screen. So, together with the native Americans, class difference – along with the entire political economic situation – needs to be dissolved by way of conflating and embodying capitalist-colonial development with the mythical figure of the nomadic freedom fighter: the cowboy. While certainly more akin in appearance to the working class, the cowboy can appeal to a middle and upper class audience precisely because all notions of class tension have been disavowed. By

stark contrast, *Gummo*'s own cowboys give us a parodic and frightening image of what the Mid-Western cowboy (or at least a cowboy-in-training) might look like today, whilst simultaneously pointing towards an unvarnished reality of what he might in fact have *always* looked like.

This approach to revising and critiquing the great U.S. genres, while never the overt subject of Korine's films, is nonetheless implicit in much of his work. Consider a comment he made about his aborted *Fight Harm* project. A planned documentary of sorts in which Korine verbally provokes fights from much bigger opponents until they snap and beat him up, shooting had to be aborted after he sustained numerous injuries and was repeatedly hospitalised (Jones 2008). Discussing the film, Korine professed an ambition "to make the great American comedy, a cross between a snuff film and Buster Keaton" (in Mclean 2000: ¶101). "Comedy", Korine revealingly argued, "is the most violent [genre] of all, because there's always a victim. A guy slips on a banana skin and cracks his head. It's a funny thing to hear. But when you see it, how does the humour evolve and translate" (¶103)? Such an observation reveals Korine's interest in parodically citing genre forms in order to reveal a dark, unpleasant reality that has in fact always been there, but must be disavowed. To return to the distinction we drew earlier between resistance and subversion, this is one of the advantages of the latter. Through the citation and (re)performance of familiar genre tropes by re-contextualising aspects of the genre to a different time and place, one can reveal the hidden assumptions that nonetheless govern that genre, exposing "precisely what is excluded from" the system and thereby seeking "to show and to reintroduce the excluded into the system itself" (Butler 1993: 45).

Consider the (cow)boy scene again. It is tempting to read the boys' behaviour as simply a case of misrecognition; like the boy who flexes his underdeveloped muscles for the camera, merely representative of a citation that falls short of the emulative mark. But this would be a reading that (either deliberately or unwittingly) reduces its subversive power; a power that lies in (mis)citation's ability to critique traditionalist norms, as they exist in both the Western film genre and, by broader extension, the iconography and ideology of the American West. As Bhabha explains, "the recognition that tradition bestows is a partial form of identification. In restaging the past it introduces other,

incommensurable cultural temporalities into the invention of tradition. This process estranges any immediate access to an originary identity or a 'received' tradition" (2004: 3). Re-enacting the Western as it emerges in popular discourse from a position that is contemporary in its point of view, urban (as opposed to undeveloped) in its setting, that reframes the Western along distinctly capitalist economic and social lines of poverty and that redresses the cowboy's enemy from 'Indian' to 'queer' – thus bringing to the fore a certain violent, masculinist heteronormativity – this scene reconstructs Western tropes only to seriously *deconstruct* them. Such a deconstruction brings out the unchecked aggression and essentially amoral world of the West and, in a broader historical sense, the United States up to the present.

This identification with the cowboy figure and the mythical milieu of the West is certainly not just restricted to this one isolated scene. Indeed, the complete lack of higher authority that would clamp down on the sporadic acts of violence and animal cruelty carried out by Solomon, Tumbler and their rivals harkens back to a kind of Western lawlessness. This comparison draws further credence from the fact that Tumbler and Solomon partially embody the image and iconography of the old West. They carry around hunting rifles with which to kill their prey and occasionally harm humans (as is the case when Solomon fires a steel ball into Jarrod's catatonic gran's foot). Furthermore, their bicycles seem to substitute for the steeds of yore (Smit 2007: 72). *Gummo* therefore shares the stereotypical Western frontier town's loose sense of restorative justice. But if this is a tip of the hat to one of the U.S.'s most culturally and historically relevant film genres, its appropriation is typically loose, merging with a deluge of other cultural influences and a socio-cultural and contemporary historical context that brings the Western myth up to date, in the process shattering any charm the genre might still hold.

Celebrities for Celebrities' Sake

Like the 'cowboy' scene, the presence and impersonation of celebrity provides a similarly complex case of (mis)citation, parody and subversion. Interestingly, despite the great focus (relative to the small body of writing on Korine's films) given to non-professional actors, very little, by contrast, has been dedicated to the flipside of this coin: the director's fascination with, and employment of, celebrities *as* celebrities. Yet the presence of such celebrity figures permeate his work, a fact most obviously demonstrable in his film, *Mister Lonely*, whose story centres on a cast of celebrity impersonators that range from entertainment industry figures such as Michael Jackson, Marilyn Monroe, Charlie Chaplin and Shirley Temple to the Queen of England and the Pope. As I pointed out in the previous chapter, such a fascination with pop culture's contemporary and historical figures also permeates *Gummo*, from the repeated name-dropping of actors like Pamela Anderson, Patrick Swayze and Freddie Prinze to the pointed, diegetic use of music by Madonna, Roy Orbison (who also comes up in a conversation between Tumbler and Solomon), Buddy Holly and of course, the titular allusion to the fourth Marx brother.

If a cursory glance through Korine's films reveals an obsession with celebrity, this is also carried through to his work in other mediums. His *The Bad Son* photo-book, for instance, consists entirely of photographs of former-child star and then-reclusive teenager Macaulay Culkin, which Korine took on the set of the music video he directed for Sonic Youth's 'Sunday'. In Warholesque fashion, Culkin essentially plays himself and spends most of the video pouting at the camera. In its even more concentrated form, Korine's collaborations with Mark Gonzales on the zines *Foster Homes and Gardens* (compiled in Korine 2008a) consist of little more than facetious, sparse, deliberately misspelled, handwritten descriptions of celebrities engaged in bizarre and fictionalised behaviour ("Rock Hudson swallowed a large cup"), expressing fictionalised opinions ("Sean Connery hates all blacks and from what ive heard alot of blacks don't seem to mind") as well as relating fake personal histories - "Woodie Harlsons dad excaped from a federal penn" or "Harrison Fords wife is nasty but

kind of nice you wouldn't expect him to be with a model" (*ibid.*: page numbers not specified).

These remarks provide a concentrated encapsulation of Korine's fascination and irreverent play with celebrity image. In works such as these, he creates scenarios that allow him to envision his own *subversive* versions of particular celebrities. Again, in keeping with Butler's theory of citation and 'working the norm', Korine doesn't achieve this in a vacuum, but rather uses imitation and parody to work off the dominant image of the celebrity as it circulates in popular discourse. His strategy here is to perform a citation that deliberately fails to conform to our preconceptions of what particular celebrities should or should not signify, instead offering outrageously parodic re-significations of celebrity personalities that play against their common public images.

Out of all his work, one particularly exceptional case of this interplay with celebrity culture deserves special attention. This is due to the fact that Korine was actually able to use a bone-fide celebrity to play (and thereby cite) *himself as a celebrity*. I am of course referring to the aforementioned collaboration between Korine and Macaulay Culkin for the music video *Sunday* (1998). In an interview given in-between *Gummo* and *Sunday's* making, Korine professed a disinterest in working with star actors – "the idea of being a pro or someone who does it over and over again...it's a job. Actors, to me, they fail to startle" (in Hirschberg 1997: ¶39). However, when presented with a hypothetical situation in which Kevin Costner displays an interest in working with him, Korine's reply is a little more tempered, though no less contrary: "I wouldn't...I mean, I would do something with him. Like, if I felt like I could make him do something he'd be embarrassed about" (¶41). Interestingly, when Korine got the chance to work with Culkin, all personal hesitations would seem to have been dispelled. As Thurston Moore (singer and guitarist in Sonic Youth) noted in the DVD commentary to *Sunday*, Korine "met Macaulay Culkin, like the night previous at some event or something and he went up to Macaulay and said, 'I want to make a movie with you'. He became really obsessed". Nor would his professed desire to embarrass a professional actor mark his approach towards working with Culkin,

with whom he reportedly got on well. Nevertheless, Korine's interest in citing and subverting the public associations that an established celebrity actor brings to bear on a visual work is, in the case of *Sunday's* production and public reception, altogether clear. Much like *Gummo's* subversion of conventional notions of narrative development, *Sunday* consists primarily of deliberately held, slow motion close-ups and medium shots of a bare-chested, newly adolescent Culkin staring and pouting at the camera (fig. 18). These shots are interspersed with two sequences that contain slightly more activity: the first in which he kisses his then-fiancé (fig. 15-17), the second in which he plays guitar with Moore (both individuals maintaining the camera's gaze) and scenes of frenetic activity (often sped up in-camera), featuring pre-teen ballerinas practicing dance routines in a studio.



Fig. 15



Fig. 16



Fig. 17



Fig. 18

One of the most notable aspects of Culkin's presence in the video – his first onscreen appearance in four years – is that he makes no pretence to perform a discernable role or embody a particular character. At no point does one catch a glimpse of the kinds of onscreen characters Culkin portrayed in, for instance, *Richie Rich* (1994), *The Good Son* (1993) or the *Home Alone* series. Watching the finished music video, it becomes clear that Korine's interest in Culkin is centred squarely on Culkin *as* Culkin. It would be wrong to say that Korine casts him against type, because Culkin is not really acting. He is hired for the job not as an actor, but as a celebrity. In this sense, *Sunday* seems a way of testing Walter Benjamin's assertion that, "in the case of film, the fact that the actor represents someone else before the audience matters much less than the fact that he represents himself before the apparatus" (2006: 260). *Sunday* also strongly echoes Andy Warhol's one-shot experimental films, which depict his factory 'stars' and friends engaging in lengthy, unbroken spells of mundane activity – Robert Indiana consuming a mushroom in the forty-five minute *Eat* (1963), for instance – or even states of complete non-activity, such as his (in)famous *Sleep* (1963), which featured John Giorno sleeping in real-time for five hours and twenty minutes. For Warhol, this was a parodic and ironic way of 'appeasing' the popular obsession with celebrity by giving audiences nothing *but* 'celebrity' – albeit of the Warhol Factory variety. "People", Warhol suggested, "usually just go to the movies to see only the star, to eat him up, so here at last is a chance to look only at the star for as long as you like no matter what he does and to eat him up all you want to" (in Buchloh 2000: 503).⁴

There are certainly traces of this playful intent in *Sunday*. However, I would argue that the video succeeds more as a means of *reassessing* – through a citation that fails to match the 'conventional' child star image – the popular cultural associations that had, up to that point, been affixed to Culkin as a child celebrity. No longer the cute kid he had been only a few years before, Culkin's new appearance is both significantly older and disarmingly sexual. Indeed, much of the video involves him doing nothing but gazing intently and directly at the

⁴ As if to prove the critique, *Sleep* was essentially remade in 2004 by Sam Taylor-Wood, this time featuring a certified celebrity, David Beckham. In what might be taken as symptomatic of the average contemporary audience's shortened attention span, Beckham slept onscreen for 'only' 67 minutes.

camera for very long durations,⁵ pouting and lasciviously running his tongue over his lips, and at one point even tongue-kissing his then-fiancé. It is interesting to note how Korine leaves the more sexualised depictions until the end, thus structuring the video around a movement from the ‘innocent’, G-rated Culkin of pre-adolescent fame to the alienating, sexualised teenage image of Culkin that confronts us in the video’s final moments. This risqué depiction finds resonance in a facetious, but nevertheless telling, remark by filmmaker Bruce LaBruce, who referred to Korine’s *The Bad Son* photographs of Culkin as “a remarkably modern artifact: has-been child-star kiddie porn” (1998: ¶11). This goes some way to motivating Moore’s own comment – again from the music video’s DVD commentary track – that *Sunday* “was a very weird, off-putting video for a lot of people. Especially seeing this child star all of a sudden”.

But what exactly was the audience seeing? The child star they all remembered or something else? To return this analysis to the theory of citationality, one finds a gap here between the audience’s expectations of the ‘innocent’ child star and the hormonal, sexually aware adolescent that they are instead confronted with. Similar to his zines, Korine (with Culkin) incites discomfort by failing to cite the normative characteristics that still governed the actor’s public image. However, I want to further argue that this is not merely the pitting of one image against another, but the *blurring* of two images that might otherwise seem morally reprehensible to each other. Rather than giving us the child star from the *Home Alone* series, eternally fixed in a childish state of ‘innocence’, Korine paints a non-essentialist picture of Culkin in flux. Much like *Gummo*’s characters, which are caught in that hybrid space between centre and margin, Culkin is trapped in the no-man’s-land of adolescence that marks the liminal, ambivalent space between ‘child’ and ‘adult’. Korine makes no bones about sexualising his onscreen subject, his big close-ups and Culkin’s lascivious expression forcing us to confront the reality that the former child-star is indeed growing up. But I want to contend that what *truly* disturbs is the uncanny similarity-in-difference that *Sunday*’s Culkin bears to the iconography of pre-teen

⁵ The entire four-minute video consists of only ten shots (an average shot length of roughly twenty-four seconds), six of which feature Culkin, of which four have him staring directly into the camera.

Culkin. This goes beyond an obvious similarity in appearance between child and adolescent (fig. 19-20), finding additional amplification in its purposeful referentiality. Consider, for instance, how Korine foregrounds the former child star's lips and mouth (fig. 21-22) in a way that seems to cite and mirror the famous *Home Alone* (1990) poster (fig. 23).



Fig. 19



Fig. 20

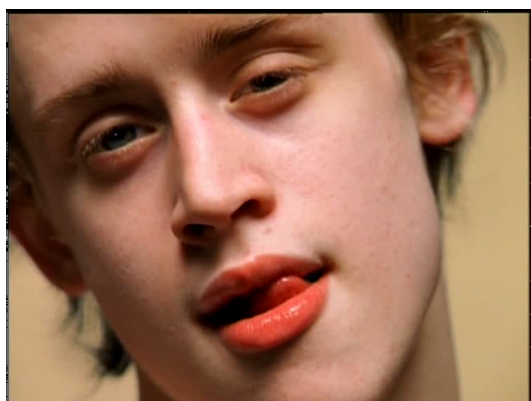


Fig. 21



Fig. 22



Fig. 23 (detail)



Fig. 23

This sort of similarity does not allow us to easily extricate the ‘adult’ from the ‘child’, and Korine deliberately seeks to blur the boundaries between the two. Rather than perceive this difference as simply a gap between an audience expectation fixed in the past (the sweet and innocent Culkin of the early 90s) and the reality of the situation in what was then the present (the sexualised adolescent Culkin in *Sunday*), the music video raises the far more provocative notion that child actors have *always* had something unsettlingly desirable about them, and that there has always been something disconcerting about the way the cinematic apparatus encourages us to gaze at them. James R. Kincaid, in a provocative thesis, argues that “what we think of as ‘the child’ has been assembled in reference to desire, built up in erotic manufactories, and that we have been labouring ever since, for at least two centuries, both to deny that horrible and lovely product and to maintain it” (1992: 4). Kincaid views Culkin as one in a series of “big-eyed, kissy-lipped blonde figures” (369). Not surprisingly, those ‘kissy’ lips receive particular attention in *Sunday*, encapsulating how the video skews the anxious border between an underhanded eroticised representation and an aboveboard signification as ‘cute’. As Steve Carlton-Ford notes – albeit in a different context, but one that implicitly reflects the grey zone of attraction I am discussing here – “child stars are never fully children nor fully adults” (2009: 139). By emphasising the similarities between

Culkin in childhood and Culkin in adolescence, as opposed to sealing off their differences, *Sunday* draws attention to this uncomfortably ambiguous field of desire and disavowal. And while we are challenged by such discomfoting representations, we gaze onscreen at a celebrity who meets us with *his* gaze, emanating from a face that signifies from the uncertain space *between* innocent/lascivious, boy/man, endearing/unsettling, the phantasmic memory of the child star image and the onscreen adolescent (mis)citation of that image. Neither marked down to one or the other of these positions, Culkin is a typical Korinean subject: forever ambivalently hovering in-between.

Famous In Their Spare Time

He's got what it takes to be a legend. He's got a marvellous persona – Solomon, speaking about Tumbler

So what does Korine's first music video have to do with his first feature film? On the level of form, the connection between *Gummo* and *Sunday* is actually quite transparent, at least in the case of one particular scene that clearly foreshadows the aesthetic approach Korine would take with *Sunday*. This is a shot of Dot gazing at the camera while she seductively licks her lips and waves her bleached blond hair back and forth, all in a slow motion (fig. 24-25).

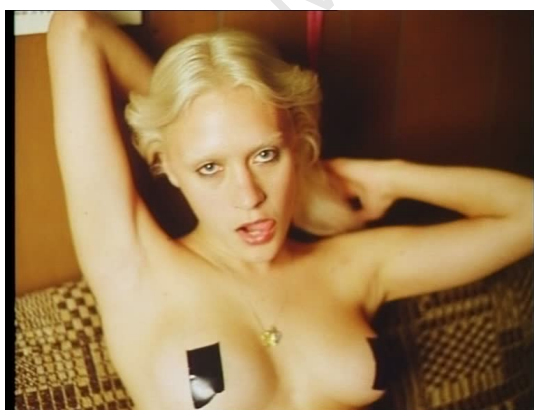


Fig. 24



Fig. 25

As with *Sunday*, the camera, which more often than not functions in *Gummo* as an invisible observer, is directly acknowledged here by Dot's gaze. Furthermore,

because she breaks the fourth wall in such a brazen way and because no clear temporal or clear spatial connection is made to the previous scene – Dot, Helen and Darby jumping up and down on their bed – one can reasonably question whether it is even Dot we are still observing and not the actress, Chloe Sevigny. There is therefore a certain degree of self-reflexivity in the scene, a point I will return to below. But there is also, by contrast, a strong degree of the kind of immersive spectacle found in much mainstream cinema. The scene’s particular framing, glowing lighting and use of slow motion, coupled with Dot’s seductive posturing, all seem to signify a concerted construction of the kind of feminine allure frequently found in glamour magazines, commercials or those moments in films where a woman’s visual presence tends “to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation” (Mulvey 1989: 19) – the latter aspect accentuated by literally slowing the image down.

Like *Sunday* and similar to many of the other examples from *Gummo* that I have analysed thus far, these contrasting factors infuse the scenario with a marked ambivalence, splitting and decentering Dot as an onscreen character, (dis)lodging her somewhere between fictional character (Dot), real life celebrity (Sevigny) and star (Dot’s fantasised image). Similar to my analysis of *Sunday*, I would suggest that one way of reading this scene is as a cinematically mediated encounter between director and performer – who at the time also doubled as girlfriend and muse. This is an important fact to take into consideration, because Korine’s interest during this scene is arguably not exclusively with the character of Dot, but rather with the actress and celebrity – that is, Sevigny *as* Sevigny. Here Korine blurs the distinction between character and *professional* actor, acknowledging that the celebrity iconography that structures Dot’s fantasy world is being self-reflexively commented upon *by* a celebrity (Sevigny) and an image-making apparatus that plays a central role in structuring her symbolic aspirations.

But the fantasy dimension is also present here. For if Sevigny signifies a celebrity, the character she portrays, Dot, signifies as an ‘ordinary’ resident of Xenia who here cites the image of the centrefold beauty, bearing the visual signature and beatific representation synonymous with ‘dominant’, mainstream

cinema.⁶ From this perspective, the cinematic gaze is not Korine's or Seigny the celebrity's, but *Dot's* own glamorised conception of herself. If *Sunday* attempts to interrogate how Culkin signifies as a celebrity, inciting discomfort by questioning and deconstructing the pleasure of looking at him, then the parallel scene of Dot in *Gummo* moves in the opposite direction. Rather than *deconstructing* celebrity, Dot's close-ups signify instead the *character's identification* with the cinematic/pictorial medium's power to *create* celebrity. This is the medium's promise to the ordinary individual; that he or she can be elevated within the cultural symbolic by the camera, which carves from them an image of great allure and signifying power. Here one thinks of Theodore Adorno's critique against what he saw as cinema's powers of seduction – its overwhelming effectiveness in encouraging identification and emulation:

When a film presents us with a strikingly beautiful young woman it may officially approve or disapprove of her, she may be glorified as a successful heroine or punished as a vamp. Yet as a written character she announces something quite different from the psychological banners draped around her grinning mouth, namely the injunction to be like her. The new context into which these pre-prepared images enter as so many letters is always that of the command (1991: 81).

Adorno's position is typically modernist in its staunch opposition to what he calls the 'culture industry'. By contrast, *Gummo's* own position is more in line with a post-structuralist strategy of subversion. For if an individual like Dot answers "the command" by trying "to be like" the celebrity actress or the centrefold, her embodiment of that normative symbolic figure also stresses the subversive difference in the citation. While Dot/Seigny certainly possesses a degree of normative beauty, her hair and eyebrows are bleached an extreme white, and her breasts are still bizarrely taped over from the earlier nipple-enlargement routine. By trying "to be like" the woman in Adorno's hypothetical film, Dot's figurative citation almost seems to try *too* hard, subverting the normative image of white female beauty by pushing it to an extreme that renders it freakish and 'other'. Therefore, contrary to Adorno's theory that popular culture co-opts one

⁶ To this end, Smit draws similarities between Dot/Seigny's appearance and that of Marilyn Monroe (2007: 72), an interesting comparison in light of Samantha Morton's explicit embodiment of Marilyn in Korine's later film, *Mister Lonely*.

to adopt a prescriptive, normative appearance, this scene from *Gummo* stresses that matters are never so simple, and that one can subvert the symbolic order while *simultaneously working within it*.

Crying

In this and other examples, this chapter has sought to highlight the subversive potential in *Gummo's* (re)working of gendered and more broadly cultural norms. Much of this analysis has emphasised the liberating aspects of such an engagement, primarily focusing around how such subversion provides marginalised individuals a means to fight back and negotiate their own place in a symbolic order that has tried to exclude them. But it is also evident that such a practice is an ambivalent and vexed affair at best, and does not always preclude disappointment and a degree of lack. This is something Butler herself has pointed out. In analysing Jennie Livingston's *Paris Is Burning* (1990), a documentary about the black New York drag ball scene and its transvestite and transsexual participants, Butler stresses that to work within the norms and ideals of gender is not always to undo them in a way that validates one's own marginalised identity (1993: 131). There is always a sense of a "phantasmatic promise" when one embodies norms and ideals, "a promise which, taken too seriously, can culminate only in disappointment and disidentification" (*ibid.*).

Similarly, for all of the examples in which *Gummo* and Korine's wider work re-signifies elements of popular culture to new and subversive ends, and for all of the exuberance with which characters so often undertake to dance, sing or otherwise act out these tropes of popular culture, one cannot entirely dismiss a certain tragic dimension to these performative outbursts, outbursts that barely conceal a longing for recognition and alleviation from immense human loss. One should not forget, as *Gummo's* opening sequence makes so clear, that most of the film's characters have lost their parents and friends to the tornado. Such loss and longing sometimes finds expression in song, as when Tummler, high on wood glue, sings a rendition of Roy Orbison's 'Crying' to an equally intoxicated Solomon. Slanted against a graffiti-sprayed concrete wall, Tummler and Solomon seem barely there, about to drift off into sleep, their faces poised

somewhere between pain and ecstasy as the drugs seem to impart both a heaviness that grounds them within their material environment, and a lightness that seems to elevate their thoughts and feelings elsewhere – an ambiguity matched by a tilted camera that makes it difficult to tell if they’re lying down or standing and leaning against the wall (fig. 26-27). Together they carry on a half-cognisant conversation that turns around Tumbler’s long-lost brother, who now lives “in a big city” after leaving Xenia in a bus. “My brother used to sing ‘Crying’”, Tumbler claims, and his wistful, barely there *a cappella* rendition seems to pine for another in a long line of lost family members. A similarly pertinent but diffused expression of the pain of loss is evident in the scene where, while Solomon lifts his weights, his Mom dances in his late father’s oversized tap shoes; “the huge empty shoes” that “so eloquently” emphasise his loss (Smit 2007: 80-81). In typically ambivalent form, her dance has a bizarre and energetic joviality to it that can nevertheless not fully cover up the loss of the absent father and husband.



Fig. 26



Fig. 27

Such scenes cannot be understood *only* on the level of subversion or parody, or even just as a reflection of cultural influences. Any analysis of *Gummo* needs to be additionally attentive to how characters resort to jingles, rhymes or the tropes of song and dance as a kind of structuring device to cover up absence. Indeed, such displacement finds its antecedent in two of Korine’s cinematic role models: John Cassavetes and Rainer Werner Fassbinder. The former in particular employs a loose approach to staging scenes and evoking a sense of

improvisatory immediacy that sits well with Korine's method. In Cassavetes' *Faces* (1968), for instance, scenes often seem to go on endlessly, playing out in merciless real time as characters who are frequently unable to maintain honest conversations with one another lapse instead into songs, embarrassingly awkward dancing routines, stale jokes or even nursery rhymes like Peter Piper. Having witnessed these characters' sadness and desperation in other scenes, the effect is often agonising to watch. Indeed, at one point a character pauses to say: "we're making fools of ourselves". More often, however, characters throw themselves with unabashed abandon into their private performances, manifestations of "psychic impotence, outlets for those unable to project through the barriers of physical reality" (Jacobs 1980: 31).

Such tropes and performances' ability to function as a conduit for expressing the inexpressible, whilst simultaneously covering up a great deal of pain and suffering, is similarly evident in Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1980), a miniseries adaptation of Alfred Döblin's famous novel. Set in 1920s Weimar-era Berlin, *Berlin Alexanderplatz* tells the story of Franz Biberkopf, recently out of prison and determined to stay on the straight and narrow. But times are tough and soon Biberkopf finds himself drifting back into a life of crime. Running parallel with this story is a thematic emphasis on the ways in which the cultural symbolic order structures one's ability to cope and make sense of everyday life. This is crystallised in popular song, which repeatedly functions as a cover and replacement for vulnerable emotional expression. For instance, unhappy that Mieze, Franz's girlfriend, has to go away and work for him (he himself is a cripple), Franz refuses to openly talk to her prior to her departure. When Mieze demands some sort of compliment before she leaves, instead of responding with an original reply he recites phrases from hymns ("Silent night, holy night") and hackneyed popular expressions ("Siegesmund can't help it if he's handsome. Siegesmund can't help it if he's loved...") that are so completely unrelated to the situation at hand as to cast a blanket over his true thoughts and feelings. Falling back on "familiar lines from old hymns, hits and other fragments of his musical inheritance [he] lets them express what he himself is not capable of formulating" (Thomsen 1997: 242). But these cultural tropes (musical or otherwise) provide a poor and insufficient

respite from Franz's loneliness and alienation. As he himself at one point acknowledges: "Sometimes the song is too short for the eternity of the feelings".

This similar sense of sadness, of a markedly present absence, barely hidden by song or dance, informs a scene in *Gummo* in which Ellen, alone in the confines of her house, performs a cheerleading routine for the camera. Here Ellen cites a form of performance typically associated with mass spectatorship and recognition in the public space. However, the incongruity of seeing what is conventionally a large-scale outdoor spectacle being performed in the isolated privacy of a starkly adorned living room creates a melancholy contrast between the enthusiasm of Ellen's song-and-dance and the fact that she performs it alone. Her isolation is further highlighted by Korine's decision to frame her in wide shot, pointedly positioning her in relation to the unpopulated interior surroundings (fig. 28-31). This emphasises the gap between her normative aspirations and the untypical manner in which these aspirations are acted out. As if providing the viewer with a moment to contemplate this gap, after Ellen finishes her routine the shot is held for a few more seconds in which she self-consciously glances at the camera and giggles. On the one hand, this moment emphasises a sense of warm intimacy; Ellen's tacit acknowledgement of the camera implies both Korine's and the viewer's presence and subtly attempts to join and reconcile what's onscreen and what's off. This is a moment that is shared and therefore one of *presence*. However, read from Ellen's standpoint and understood within the conventions of public cheerleading performance – clearly the spectacle that Ellen is citing – the moment should perhaps be read as conveying her own isolation. Here the silence marks an *absence*, carving out an aural space where the imaginary public's applause should go. What Ellen therefore acts out in this scene is a yearning for recognition, a recognition that is quite clearly lacking in her marginalisation and symbolic confinement indoors. This is a yearning and absence that the song and dance not only fail to sufficiently cover up, but instead *draw attention to* by exposing the difference in citation between Ellen's particular, isolated cheerleading performance and the large-scale, normative model to which she aspires.



Fig. 28-31

This falling back on the tropes of song, dance or even hackneyed quips and phrases as a means of substituting for a lack or hiding an insecurity brings us back to the relationship between generalised *sign* and the specific *material environment* that crucially informs *Gummo*. On the one hand, as I have argued throughout these last two chapters, the film's characters are influenced and constituted within a symbolic realm that coercively prescribes certain norms of intelligibility. However, it is their positioning in relation to these norms – in bodies that render them 'weird', 'other' and/or in environments that fail to faithfully reflect the generalised and symbolic norms of cleanliness and middle-class affluence – that creates a form of *material resistance* to these more symbolic, abstract ideals. When the immediate environment is marked by a tornado that obliterates human life and infrastructure, where bodily cruelty to both humans and animals is rife and where the landscape is awash in dirt and decay, the norms and ideals that structure the symbolic order cannot help but suffer a degree of re-signification. As a consequence, *Gummo* and its characters occupy a materially and ideologically hybrid space, in which the material and

symbolic are seemingly incompatible but must nevertheless share the onscreen space. While these last two chapters have been given over primarily to exploring the *symbolic* dimension of this relationship, in the following chapter I turn more closely to an examination of the *material* realm and how exactly this materiality – as it manifests in both the body and environment – complicates the normative dictates of the symbolic.

PART TWO

University of Cape Town

CHAPTER THREE

Flinching at Materiality: the harsh matter of poverty

Salivation, urination, dirt, cockroaches, fistfights, haphazard physical destruction, sexual abuse, decapitation, cancer, diabetes, cat killings, drug use, euthanasia, patri- and matricide; these are shorthand descriptions for bitter but sizeable portions of *Gummo's* subject matter, providing a summary encapsulation of why, for many, the film can be so difficult to watch. Although popular and critical opinion on the film is divided to say the least, I think that even *Gummo's* admirers would admit that it is not a conventionally pleasant or comfortable experience. This is a point I have thus far generally put to one side – a conscious attempt on my part to avoid reproducing many of the negative kneejerk reactions by ‘disgusted’ critics who found the subject matter too much to handle. Following from Janet Maslin’s negative advance review, which proclaimed *Gummo* nothing less than “the worst film of the year” (1998: ¶1), the film was written off as “contrived pointlessness” (Tatara 1997: ¶8), “a multipanel freak show” (Guthmann 1998: ¶5) marked by “sourness, cynicism and pretension” (Maslin 1998: ¶1) – in short, a film with no redeeming merit or meaning.

My analysis in the previous chapters implicitly raises the suggestion that one needs to seriously rethink such an evaluation. Contrary to Tatara’s complaint that the film isn’t “telling us anything that we don’t already know” (1997: ¶10), there is a great deal to be learned from *Gummo's* refreshingly different focus on poverty’s *cultural* dimension, particularly how characters’ identifications with (but also subversion of) dominant cultural trends results in a hybridised and interstitial sense of identity. Few critics, however, have engaged the film on these terms, a deficiency this thesis has sought to address. Nonetheless, as of yet my argument does not properly account for the aspect of *Gummo* that has most discomfited critics. What many negative reviews have focused on, or at least give a great deal of space to, is what we might call the

film's '*material dimension*'. For the purposes of this study, I define the 'material' as the geographical, tactile, olfactory and corporeal reality that governs characters' existences in the here and now. On the one hand, such a dimension is strikingly characterised in *Gummo* by a frequent foregrounding of dirt, disease and bodily vulnerability – fairly negative manifestations of the material. On the other hand, the material also occasionally takes the form of a kind of infantile play ('infantile' here used in its liberating, but also unruly and antagonistic, sense) – examples of which I analyse near the end of this chapter. But regardless of such occasionally positive and playful intentions, the visceral manner in which materiality is presented seems to have deeply and negatively affected many of the film's critics. Typical of such responses is Edward Guthmann's derisive review, which opens with the mock tagline: "Come and smell the rotting corpse of America – while it lasts'. No, that's not the ad slogan for *Gummo*...but it might as well be" (1998: ¶1). His review goes on to list a string of the film's most bracing moments and condemns Korine for rejoicing "in the rot he's recorded" (¶2). He describes Xenia as "a filthy place" that "has yet to sweep up its literal and emotional debris" (¶4) and, in a reiteration of his opening statement, facetiously compares *Gummo* to "the festering rot that hid beneath the surface of David Lynch's *Blue Velvet*", which Korine brings "completely into the open", congratulating "himself for having the artistic courage to show us the raw, grotesque truth" (¶10). Paul Tatara seems similarly affected by Korine's visceral approach and, like Guthmann, passes it off as a deliberate attempt to court controversy. He likens Korine to "the hollow-chested kid who sat in the back of your geometry class" and "tried to make everyone nauseous...*Gummo* is the cinematic equivalent of Korine making fart noises, folding his eyelids inside-out, and eating boogers" (1997: ¶3).

I want to suggest that what makes Korine's 'gross' representations of materiality really objectionable to these critics is not necessarily the off-putting content itself, but rather a twofold breaking of cinematic narrative convention. In the first instance, this involves a willful failure to adhere to what Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson have called the "system of narrative logic" that governs most narrative films (1985: 6). Crucial to such a system, which depends on "story events and causal relations and parallelisms among them", is the

privileging of narrative logic over and above a “system of cinematic time” and a “system of cinematic space” (*ibid.*). While the latter two systems are necessarily present – every narrative film needs to create the illusion of time and space, after all – they are nonetheless subordinate to the narrative logic of a film. Where *Gummo* differs is in its subordination of this narrative logic in favour of foregrounding cinematic space, the latter synonymous in *Gummo* with a disquieting accentuation of the material – that is, spatial – realm. This leads to the second break, which lies in the fact that *Gummo* does not link this foregrounding to an explicit motivation. Because the presence of “rot” and abjection in *Gummo* is not narratively motivated or linked to some kind of ‘message’ – a connection Korine explicitly insisted on avoiding (Walczak 1997: ¶44) – critics like Guthmann and Tatara automatically equate such a disconnection with an attempt on Korine’s part to be willfully controversial and off-putting.

Between the Symbolic and the Material Real

In this sense, *Gummo*’s ‘gross’ representations of materiality are considered excessive precisely because they cannot be ideologically hemmed in by narrative motivation or explanation. But, just as Linda Williams argues in her seminal essay, ‘Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess’ (1991), I want to suggest, though for completely different reasons to Williams, that there is in fact something to be gained from *Gummo*’s seemingly unmotivated representations of ‘gross’ material excess. Specifically because they seem excessive and off-putting, such representations of materiality can exert “an almost unbearable” and disruptive “presence on us” (Žižek 2005: 133n), rupturing the regulatory rules and conventions of cleanliness, taste and organisation that structures the symbolic order. By using particular filmmaking methods to often literally foreground those aspects of corporeal existence that trouble or disgust us, *Gummo* demonstrates how such a materiality works in unresolved tension with the symbolic norms that simultaneously stake a claim on Xenia’s impoverished characters. If such representations of excessive materiality sound overtly negative, one should also note how they are paralleled with more positively

playful representations, albeit the sort of childlike playfulness – playing with one’s faeces, for instance, or gleefully smearing oneself and one’s surroundings in dirt and waste – that contradicts norms of cleanliness and hygiene. Whether positive or negative, the foregrounded presence of such abject materiality frames its characters’ existences as interstitial – caught between, on the one hand, a representation of material excess that resists easy appropriation into the symbolic order and, on the other, the cultural norms and ideals that govern that same symbolic order. In *Gummo* there is always a tension between these two dimensions – sign and matter – and both the film’s characters and we as viewers are called upon to negotiate this impasse as best we can.

Here it is crucial to qualify the nature of this relationship between ‘matter’ and ‘sign’. When I discuss the ‘material excess’ or the ‘materially abject’ aspect of an image, this is not to discount the ways in which it contains both a visceral material dimension *and* an ability to signify. Butler has argued that there can be no ‘matter’ outside of discourse and signification (1993: 1-12). To refer to materiality is therefore not to deny that it has a signifying component or that an onscreen image can ever really escape the framework of signification. Indeed, it is important to recognise how symbolic norms and material specificity are rarely presented as separate in *Gummo*, but rather intertwine and play off one another in numerous scenes and images. Both the harsh materiality of Xenia and the symbolic norms that the film and Xenia’s inhabitants cite are layered representations that appear simultaneously, ‘on top’ of one another as it were, not in opposition. Together they constitute an on-going struggle, negotiating another version of the Third Space model that I have been making reference to throughout this thesis – this time negotiated between the materially specific and the generalised symbolic norm. The word ‘negotiate’ is important here. In a quote that echoes the notion of this Third, in-between, Space, Derrida argues that “whether one wants it or not, one is always working in the mobility between several positions, stations, places” (2002: 12). This requires negotiation, a word that for Derrida implies just such “mobility between two positions, two places, two choices. One must always go from one to the other, and for me *negotiation is the impossibility of establishing oneself anywhere*” (*ibid.*, my emphasis). Similarly, I want to argue that in analysing *Gummo*, we conceive of the relationship

between material specificity and symbolic abstraction as constituting a restless, irreconcilable negotiation that never comes to rest. I would refer to the relationship as ‘dialectical’ if that term didn’t imply resolution or sublimation of the respective elements. However, mirroring Derrida’s claims to “the impossibility of establishing oneself anywhere”, *Gummo*’s representation of poverty does not seek synthesis or resolution. Thus, in what follows I have tried to avoid giving the impression that materiality simply exists independent of either the norm or signification more generally, instead drawing attention, wherever appropriate, to the interstitial and unsettled workings of these relationships.

In explicating these ideas further, I would like to turn to the work of two rather different thinkers. The first is Jacques Lacan and his definition(s) of what he calls the Real. I am particularly interested in how this notion, which underwent considerable theoretical changes throughout the course of his career and which I synthesise for my own purposes, stands in opposition to his notion of the symbolic order – a concept I introduced in the previous chapter. The second thinker is film theorist Vivian Sobchack, whose work centres on carnality and the materialised embodiment of both onscreen images and film spectators.¹ Sobchack privileges what she calls the ‘lived body’ and the tactile, immediate experience of both the real world and the moving image that we have as “sensing and sensible” bodies (2004: 86). For Sobchack, our bodily constitution fundamentally informs the way we think and conceive of the world. This is a phenomenological approach, informed by the philosophical work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, that jars somewhat with psychoanalysis and post-structuralism. The latter’s emphasis on how language and semiotics frame our experience has tended to discount the role played by the “ontology of the flesh” (Merleau-Ponty in Carman and Hansen 2005: 19), with which Sobchack is primarily interested.

¹ In utilising Sobchack’s theory, I owe something to Alexia Smit’s work on *Korine* (2007). In her own thesis she also applies Sobchack’s ideas to *Gummo*. But whereas Smit explores how *Gummo*’s representations of materiality complicate notions of cinematic realism and spectatorial engagement, my own work is primarily concerned with how such representations render notions of cultural identity and poverty interstitial and hybrid. As such, we use the same theorist and general subject matter to very different ends.

Lacan's formulation of the symbolic order, for instance, is predicated on the very notion that human experience is informed on the most fundamental level by our involuntary adherence to sign systems and the conventions of language. This places language as a sort of screen between reality and our embodied, tangible means of experiencing it. As such, the body is relegated to playing, at best, an auxiliary role in our experience of consciousness and reality. But I would argue that in light of the visceral disgust felt by so many critics, whose own bodies clearly flinched at *Gummo's* foregrounding of the body and materiality, Sobchack's approach to embodied experience is vital in grasping how the film's representations of materiality function.

To begin by defining the Real, what needs to be initially stressed is that my particular use of the term refers to an amalgamation of two different definitions accorded by Lacan. Throughout his career the theory of the Real underwent great changes and so different versions have arisen. The later and more popular version pertains to those events and circumstances that exist beyond symbolically comprehensible experience. This Real tends to manifest itself when events become too traumatic for the human mind to process or compartmentalise (Lacan 1998: 53-56). As such, what we might call the 'traumatic Real' remains hidden and contained from everyday experience. Disavowed, it exists outside the symbolic order. According to Lacan, this is a strictly involuntary state of affairs. We couldn't really experience the Real even if we wanted to. Because it is outside the symbolic, it is *beyond* direct experience, even though it may affect us in the form of displaced psychical symptoms and side effects that censor its true character.

There is, by comparison, an earlier, different definition that Lacan put forward in his 'Seminar on the Purloined Letter' (2006b). This is the Real not as something beyond our reality but rather a constant presence that takes the form of the most basic drives and sensations (hunger, thirst, pain, the need to relieve ourselves, etc.), as well as the material fixity of the world that surrounds us. We may want to ignore or disavow these bodily phenomena – and often, particularly in the more abject cases, we are socially compelled to do so. We may wish that the world were arranged differently. But ultimately, these are material realities that cannot be simply disavowed. This situation is encapsulated in Lacan's

suggestion that the Real, “whatever upheaval we subject it to, is always and in every case in its place; it carries its place stuck to the sole of its shoes, there being nothing that can exile it from it” (17). In this definition the Real is certainly there, ever present, an irritant, but it is not considered much of a hindrance or oppositional force to psychic life. This is suggested in the comparison of the Real to trodden-on gum: while the gum is there under one’s shoe, apart from an occasional hindrance in one’s step, it can be ignored with relative ease. Lacan does not accord much importance to the Real in this early definition, generally placing far more emphasis on the symbolic order. Nor does he usually view it as much of a hindrance – quite the contrary, in fact. In his seminars from the mid and late 50s, he relates how the Real’s permanent, un-exiled presence has in fact been a boon to science’s preference for empirical investigation (1993: 64-65; 1992: 75). “Matter does not cheat”, writes Lacan. “It has no intention of crushing our experiments or blowing up our machines. This sometimes happens, but only when *we* make a mistake. It’s out of the question that it, matter, should deceive us” (1993: 65, my emphasis). By contrast, in *Gummo* we find the Real functioning a little differently to either Lacan’s earlier or later definitions. While it has the material presence of Lacan’s early formulation, “always in the same place” (1992: 70), it also exhibits a hostile, antagonistic character that is more in keeping with Lacan’s later definition of the Real as representative of trauma. While *Gummo*’s particular version of the Real is not linked to trauma per se – what Lacan defines as “essentially the missed encounter” with the Real because of our inability to actively experience it (1998: 55) – it functions in a similarly invasive way. Indeed, it can be likened to ‘pollution’. This is the term Mary Douglas gave to what she called “matter out of place” (1970: 35): dirt, clutter or any unwanted objects that need to be jettisoned from the symbolic order. This ‘matter out of place’ is representative of what, in synthesising Lacan’s two definitions, I want to call the ‘*material Real*’. This is the Real conceived as both visibly present and deeply threatening to the ideological status quo. Violating the organisational norms upon which any given society’s symbolic order is structured, the material Real represents the *disorder* to the symbolic’s *order*. To provide a brief example, consider the emphasis many societies have tended to place on politeness and cleanliness. This ideological

prerogative generally forbids the public display of dirt or ‘uncouth’ bodily functions, such as burping, spitting, farting, urination or defecation. To this end, social space is constructed and managed in a way that labels such bodily processes abject and minimises their visual presence, so that if they have to occur, they can happen in utmost solitude and privacy. Matching this organisation of social space and discretion is an attendant ideology that promotes and equates bodily restraint with a sense of positive discipline and self-control – a notion that goes back at least as far as the Ancient Greeks (Foucault 1992).

This promotion of cleanliness and restraint is matched by that aspect of human and social endeavour that calls for the assertion of control over one’s environment: carving order out of the chaos of dirt, instilling domination over the mercurial danger of the elements and re-arranging the indifferent and arbitrary so that it will signify meaningfully. As Mary Douglas sought to demonstrate in her seminal book, *Purity and Danger*, “dirt-avoidance” represents

a creative movement, an attempt to relate form to function, to make unity of experience...In chasing dirt, in papering, decorating, tidying we are not governed by anxiety to escape disease, but are positively re-ordering our environment, making it conform to an idea (1970: 2).

Gummo demonstrates what happens when this sense of material order breaks down, either as a result of poverty’s dilapidated infrastructure – epitomised by homes littered with junk and vermin – or through a deliberate defiance of cleanly norms, as when one character spits and urinates over a bridge in an early scene. In both of the aforementioned categories (bodily and environmental), *Gummo* stresses how the material Real either impinges upon or is deployed by characters whose existences are governed and inscribed, however tenuously, within the symbolic order, but who simultaneously occupy a material reality ‘other’ to the norms of that order. This is evident in *Gummo*’s predominant choice of *mise-en-scène*: damaged, disorganised and dilapidated spaces, which contrast starkly with the normative, tidy image of bourgeois material prosperity – the latter observed and critiqued in films like *Far From Heaven* (2002), *Blue Velvet* (1986) and *American Beauty* (1999). Similarly, *Gummo* draws repeated

attention to various off-putting bodily functions – from spitting, urination and missing teeth to characters deliberately (and even joyously) dirtying themselves or drawing remarks about how bad they smell. This strongly contrasts with the hygienic and groomed image of bodily success that nowadays holds such currency as a sign of affluence and “one of the many signifiers of social status” (Baudrillard 1998: 131). This is by no means to suggest that being poor inherently entails being dirty. After all, there are many people, disadvantaged by poverty, who nonetheless put pride of place in their cleanliness. It would be incorrect and very much contrary to the non-essentialist argument I have been making throughout this thesis to suggest some inherent connection between the two. A number of *Gummo*’s characters deliberately engage in ‘abject’ activities (urinating, spitting and exercising other bodily functions), but these clearly don’t stem from a material lack and have far more to do with an openly rebellious stance to social norms and rules. At the same time, however, the film’s particular focus on crumbling, grotty milieus – all of which were found on location in Nashville’s poorer neighbourhoods (Van Sant 1997: ¶28) – undoubtedly showcases the consequence of how certain groups and individuals have been developmentally stranded and abandoned by the capitalist ‘American Dream’. Regardless of whether such material excesses derive from individual behaviour or the consequence of certain social conditions, my main point is that such manifestations stand as indifferent and messy material proof – “stuck to the sole of [the character’s] shoes” – against a symbolic order that many of these environments’ inhabitants nonetheless find themselves inscribed within. In this manner, the film is positioned in irreconcilable tension between a symbolic order – whose normative tropes are engaged with by *Gummo* and its characters – and a disorderly materiality (the material Real) that frequently disrupts and undermines this order’s values.

Theorising Corporeality

In approaching this complex position, one needs to take into account not just the immediate material environment that *Gummo* presents but also the ways in which the film frames the *body's* relationship to this environment. Indeed, *Gummo* represents the human body – often bare-chested, dirt-stained, physically accosted or lashing out at someone or something – in a manner that draws reflexive attention to its malleability and impermanence. This makes the body itself part of the film's overall thematic concerns. To elaborate this point by way of illustration, consider how most films usually display the body: in both male and female cases, when either corporeal form is overtly displayed, this occurs in very limited economies of representation. In the case of the conventionally depicted female body, what is offered is less a figure of flesh and blood than a two-dimensional cinematic image usually encoded as desirable (Mulvey 1989). And the same holds for the male body. On those lesser occasions when *his* body is exposed, the representation is usually contextualised in a fight scene of an action film (Neale 1993: 17-18) or during a steamy sex scene.

In either case, such bodily representations more often than not fall within well-worn tropes and genres – the action film, for instance, or romance. Far less common is the film that takes the body itself as a thematic focus. This is evident in the work of only a handful of filmmakers; David Cronenberg, Peter Greenaway and Carlos Reygadas are three such notable exceptions whose films frequently deal with bodily vulnerability, its malleability and the difficulty or willed ignorance humans often have in recognising this fact (de Luca 2010; Mathijs 2008: 6; Willoquet-Maricondi 1999). Korine has at least one foot in this thematic group, even if his specific concerns also far exceed such a designation. As numerous examples throughout this chapter will demonstrate, the (usually male) body in *Gummo* is not taken for granted, but visually exposed, gazed at in detail, both its vulnerability and playfulness frequently emphasised. Such an emphasis calls for a theoretical approach that draws a similarly heightened attention to corporeality. In this regard, the work of Vivian Sobchack is pertinent. Sobchack's writings on the body represent an intervention into a theoretical domain that, she argues, has tended to ignore the Real, material

presence of the body – or what she calls the “*lived body*” (2004: 1, her emphasis). This is an awareness of bodily presence that pertains to both the cinematic representation of bodies as well as the embodied spectator who watches – but more importantly *feels* – such representations. As Sobchack stresses in the introduction to her collection of essays, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*,

The focus here is on what it is to *live* in one’s body, not merely *look* at bodies...[T]he essays in *Carnal Thoughts* foreground embodiment – that is, the lived body as, at once, both an objective *subject* and a subjective *object*: a sentient, sensual, and sensible ensemble of materialised capacities and agency that literally and figurally makes sense of, and to, both ourselves and others (2, her emphasis).

Rather than viewing the material reality of our bodies as an irritating side effect of existence – implicit in Lacan’s suggestive comparison of the Real to nothing more than the gum under one’s shoe – Sobchack argues that we accord the lived body its rightful place as the *foundation* upon which existence and experience are predicated. Where Lacan, in this particular definition of the Real, sees such materiality as a mere distraction from where we should be focusing our attention – namely at the semiotically bound unconscious – Sobchack sees this material dimension as the pre-conditional frame in which all experience and thought is made possible. Following Merleau-Ponty’s argument in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1962: 91), Sobchack stresses that, “embodied as sensing and sensible objects, we are thrown into the material world and are a part of it – and, however much, as subjects who transcend our objective status through our consciousness and agency, we would like to forget this fact of existence, we are always caught up short by it” (86). What does Sobchack mean when she says we are ‘caught up short’ by embodiment? What are we being caught up short *from* or *by*? The answer, I would suggest, lies in that excessive aspect of our bodies that I have been calling the material Real. This is that characteristic of corporeal existence that often betrays our symbolic aspirations by standing in opposition to our idealistically fashioned self-images. Whether it is something as drastic as a mental disorder or physical disfigurement; something as small as the visible trace of cellulite, the stomach growling at an

inopportune moment, the body letting off an unintended burp or fart in the company of others; or our bodies merely imposing their mundane limitations on our intentions, as in those moments when we feel hunger, thirst, exhaustion – these are all instances where “the body functions as a kind of ‘spoiler’, always baffling or exceeding the ways in which it is represented” (Gallagher and Greenblatt in Sobchack 2004: 7).

Such excess thwarts our aspirational desires, holding us back from having the kinds of ‘perfect’ bodies we long for. In such situations we are put, quite literally, in our place – our bodies providing an empirical refutation to our normative aspirations and goals, “restraining us from doing the things we want to do and being all that we think we can be” (Sobchack 2004: 184). In order to combat this scenario, various bodily functions must either somehow be reconciled or re-inscribed within the symbolic order or, as Julia Kristeva suggests in the opening pages of her seminal *Powers of Horror*, exiled from the symbolic by being deemed shameful, indecent, abject (1982: 1-6). The body is thus the central site of intense ideological friction – a crucial representative arena that performatively articulates and re-inscribes norms and ideals, while simultaneously serving as a site that also materially *refutes* them. Because of its importance, Sobchack urges us to reckon with the body as a material entity, even though this can be a humbling, embarrassing or (sometimes quite literally) painful acknowledgement. And it is precisely in *Gummo*, a film whose narrative concerns, visual techniques and characters offer embodied proof of many of Sobchack’s claims, that this engagement with the materiality of the body unabashedly takes place. Not only is it clear that spectatorial bodies were deeply affected by the film – evident in the aforementioned critics’ disgust at *Gummo*’s representations of abjection – but the onscreen body is also foregrounded in numerous and diverse ways. Consider, for instance, the scene where Solomon and Tumbler go to visit Cassidey, the prostitute. Before sleeping with her they conduct business with her topless pimp, Cole. In what is an otherwise fairly unremarkable scene, Cole draws the viewer’s attention by sporadically raising a hand to his chest, shaking one of his nipples and rubbing and scratching himself. Similarly, only a few moments later, as Solomon sits at the end of Cassidey’s bed, she reaches forward and smells his wrist to make sure he’s clean, luxuriously

taking in the smell of cherries. Here body odour is represented as something pleasurable, but elsewhere it takes the form of insult. In the cowboy scene, for instance, the two boys hurl abuse at the fallen Bunny Boy, accusing him of smelling “like fucking piss”, claiming that the “shitty ass rabbit stinks” and, in a string of sexually explicit accusations, accuse him of smelling “like pussy”, “asshole” and “wet, bad dick”. Similarly, when Solomon and Tumbler confront Jarrod, their potential cat-killing rival who casually confirms their suspicions, Tumbler belittles him by pointedly asking about the specifics of having to clean his catatonic Grandmother. Jarrod, at Tumbler’s prompting, admits to bathing her, having “to scrub her off with a big sponge” and change her diaper, remarking that he hates “all that shit”. *Gummo* also draws attention to the body by stressing certain normative deficiencies, as when a girl describes being born without toes, or when Solomon mentions how his father had “a bad case of the diabetes”. Even in Korine’s screenplay, repeated emphasis is brought to bear on the body and its functioning. For instance, Solomon sticks “his pinky finger in his ear and moves it around” (Korine 2002: 99), “cleaning the cracks of his toes with his fingers” (140), whereas Tumbler is described as scratching his earlobe (136). The screenplay also stresses bodily vulnerability, describing Solomon as “so thin that you can almost see his heart beating through his skin” (130) and, elsewhere, “a short lady with balding hair and orange-painted fingernails” who “has a small hole in her throat from getting a tracheotomy” (147). Korine’s script even gives occasional but careful consideration to how this bodily presence should be framed. This is epitomised by a character “spitting into the lens of the camera” (90), a forced, visceral confrontation between the would-be audience and the character’s bodily fluids.

Even in the script stages, the body and its functioning are not taken for granted, but are instead foregrounded time and again. But the similarities between Sobchack’s theories and *Gummo* run deeper than this. In fact, it sometimes seems as if Sobchack the theorist and *Gummo* the film were holding a mirror up to one another. For instance, in her discussion of the overlap that exists between the human body and the material world, Sobchack argues that passion – defined in the Judeo-Christian sense as suffering – brings “subjective being into intimate

contact with its brute materiality”, by linking it “to the passive, mute, and inanimate objects of the world” (2004: 287). To contextualise her argument, Sobchack refers to “a devastating *tornado*” as an example of “some intentionless external force” that “acts on us with such extremity that we become acutely aware not only of the irrelevance of our subjective will but also of the extreme vulnerability of our material objectivity” (*ibid.*, my emphasis). The body is thus linked to and merges with its surrounding environment by virtue of its permeability and vulnerability to environmental, material indifference. In a strikingly similar manner, *Gummo*’s narrative is foregrounded by an impressionistic retelling of the tornado that crippled and disrupted life in Xenia, Ohio. I analysed this scene at the start of chapter one, looking at how it is indicative of *Gummo*’s propensity for fragmenting and complicating signification. But it is worth revisiting here for the light it simultaneously casts on *Gummo*’s foregrounding of the material Real. Indeed, taken together, the two readings provide both literal and figurative examples of how *Gummo* is pulled between the symbolic order and the untethered materiality that threatens that order.

To briefly recall the specifics, the film opens with Solomon’s whispered description of the tornadic disaster that crippled his hometown and left him fatherless. It is not insignificant that the film should begin by foregrounding a traumatic and grandiose act of physical destruction, or that Solomon’s voiceover should draw repeated attention to bodily vulnerability, illness and human absence. This is characteristic of a film that emphasises the harsh material indifference of, and human vulnerability to, a destitute world. Furthermore, the traumatic, rippling after-effect of the tornado is accentuated by the film’s eerie choice of sound design – distant echoed voices, the ghostly sound of wind, the barely-there timbre of Solomon’s voice. What complicates this tone and adds extra resonance to Solomon’s description is the fact that paradoxically, with one or two exceptions, the opening’s visuals don’t really accentuate either the descriptions or the sound design’s atmospheric sense of absence. Instead, we are confronted with rather *lively*, candidly videoed, pixilated scenes of small-town life. This bustling onscreen life offers a time capsule that seems to take us to a period before the tornado hit, developing a spectral counterpoint to the voiceover’s tales of destruction. In this manner, a gap between the symbolic and

the material Real seems complementarily split between the visuals and the sound. In their onscreen comings and goings, one can recognise a typical community comfortably inscribed within the symbolic order. By contrast, the destruction recounted in voiceover represents the threatening, harsh indifference of the material Real. But there is more going on here than such a neat division suggests. As I suggested in chapter one, the visuals in this opening sequence are *also* emphasising a sense of destruction, albeit predominantly the destruction of semantic meaning. This is evident in the jerky, rapid-fire editing style, in which shaky, re-photographed images flash by, each one quickly giving way to the next. The resultant bedazzling and bewildering effect dislodges us from the images' narrative meaning – another instance of the system of narrative logic that I discussed earlier in the chapter giving way to other concerns, such as an engagement with the images' colours, textures and visual rhythms. Here we are not able to form a coherent understanding either of what is really happening onscreen (the shots are not held long enough or the camera is too jerky) or to put the too-quickly edited montage together in a narratively coherent way. In this sense, critics are quite right to liken *Gummo's* filmmaking approach to the tornado (Jamie and Hainley 1998: ¶4; Van Sant 1997: ¶2). Korine's editing and photographic technique provide a cinematic correlation to the de(con)struction wreaked on both Xenia's human population and the norms of semiotic meaning – the latter intimately bound up within the symbolic order by virtue of the symbolic's reliance on language. In both cases, what is stressed here is the precarious relationship between (symbolic) order and how it breaks down into the chaos of non-meaning and *disorder*. On both a literal and semantic level, the opening thus establishes the film's positioning *between* the ordered symbolic and the chaotic disruption of the material Real.

A Body That Betrays

If this opening foreshadows the way the film will repeatedly foreground the presence of the material Real through the environment – represented here by the tornadic disaster – another early scene emphasises the equal emphasis *Gummo* accords the *body*. Taking place in a junkyard at night, the scene opens on

a wide shot of a teenage couple who face each other in the front seat of a car's burned out, demolished husk (fig. 1). The boy is Tumbler. The girl, who we first mentioned in chapter one, is the plaintively titled Girl in Car. Immediately one is confronted with an image emphasising both the dilapidation of the setting and certain normative genre tropes. As the girl's name suggests, the scene takes place in that most typical of romantic teenage movie milieus, the parked car at night. In keeping with the conventions of such a well-worn trope, it is hardly surprising when the couple start displaying physical affection towards one other. However, the way this trope materialises on-screen renders it decidedly 'other'. First there is the car in which they sit, which has been smashed to pieces, the front bonnet and window crumpled and bent in. Second is the general setting, which places the scene in a junkyard – hardly a conventional romantic getaway. By introducing a class consciousness that emphasises the harshness of the setting in which the characters live, this is yet another instance in which the symbolic preconceptions that inform our popular cultural associations of the romantic 'make out scene' – gleaned from countless Hollywood teen movies – are uprooted by their materialisation in the specific world of Xenia.



Fig. 1

Moreover, the scene deploys certain forms of bodily *abjection*, which significantly disrupt the structural norms of the symbolic. For Julia Kristeva,

who has written at length on the subject, abjection represents that physical phenomenon that must be exiled from the symbolic order but can never be fully gotten rid of. Like Douglas, she recognises that abjection is not just a “lack of cleanliness”, but “what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (1982: 4). Abjection is a threat precisely because it cannot be totally rejected by the symbolic order, even if it has been branded by that order as ‘other’. This is analogous to what I have been calling the material Real, occupying an interstitial position remarkably similar to that of *Gummo*’s own characters and the film itself, simultaneously ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ the symbolic system.

How does such abjection manifest in this scene? After Tumbler slowly works his way from arm and facial caresses to getting a hand under the girl’s top, his strained foreplay is suddenly disrupted when he feels a cancerous lump in one of the girl’s breasts. Tellingly, after a moment of awkward silence, when he coldly announces to her, “you have a lump in your titty”, the girl’s reaction is framed so that she appears boxed in, trapped and isolated – her whole head not even visible in a framing that suggests a sort of symbolic decapitation (fig. 2). Here the frame functions as a metaphorical mirror for the breast that will later be severed, capturing succinctly the shattered and dejected recognition of self-abjection. Indeed, in an uncanny link similar to Sobchack’s example of the tornado, Kristeva draws a comparison between abjection and the symptom, describing the latter as “a structure within the body, a non-assimilable alien, a monster, a *tumour*, a *cancer*” (1982: 11, my emphasis). As such, the discovery of the cancerous lump represents a clear instance of bodily alienation; the crisis of identity that recognises oneself as ‘abject’ and inseparable from all that is non-life, worthless, pollution. As Kristeva puts it, “it is no longer I who expel, ‘I’ is expelled” (3-4). Again we are reminded again of Sobchack’s assertion that, in negative moments such as this, the body functions as “an objective and exteriorised physical limit...constrain[ing] us like so many iron bars that would keep us from the free and open play of both our existential and social possibilities” (2004: 184). The lump in the girl’s breast aptly demonstrates how physical desirability, constructed on the level of the symbolic, is disrupted by the material Real(ity) of the body, which hastily swings the scenario from the pole of

romantic attraction to that of repulsion. To be fat, to bear the visible signs of cancer, to be scarred or have a body part amputated – these scenarios entail a deviancy from and subversion of symbolic normative conceptions of what the body ‘should’ look like, compared to what one’s day-to-day bodily reality actually *is*. But whatever subversive potential this deviation might entail, it emerges from a self-recognition of oneself as abject, a recognition that occurs on the most painful emotional level. This scene therefore stresses the interstitial crisis of the marginalised subject, confined in an ‘othered’, materially abject body, who yearns to embody a normative feminine allure, but whose physical ‘ugliness’ forbids it.



Fig. 2

Poverty as Pollution

It is not incidental that the girl’s moment of abjection should occur in a junkyard. In keeping with *Gummo*’s theme of marginalisation and the relationship it establishes between a ‘well kept’ symbolic order and an ‘unkempt’ materiality, the junkyard is significant as a demarcated space where unwanted objects are discarded so that their identities can dissolved and rot away. As Douglas points out, this stripping of identity is a means of disavowing and annulling unwanted

objects from the symbolic order under the vague, catchall phrase of ‘pollution’ (1970: 160). Throughout *Gummo*, one finds a pertinent metaphorical relation between discarded junk, “matter out of place”, and the characters who have been similarly marginalised by a symbolic order that has no place for them. In its choice of a tornado-struck small town and the dirtied *mise-en-scène* of so many of its scenes, *Gummo*’s settings repeatedly emphasise the gap between a symbolic that privileges cleanliness and order and how this privileging is materially contradicted by spaces and bodies that register the presence of dirt, vermin, abjection and “matter out of place”. Whether as a result of poverty or the characters’ deliberate deviance, this material Real is reintroduced onscreen and confronts us as a very real, material aspect of their existences.

It should be noted that this predilection for dirtied environments is evident in Korine’s seeking out pre-existing locations that could offer material proof of a script that already made extensive reference to dirt.² Contrary to Maslin’s view that such a propensity for dirt is inherently nihilistic, juvenile and distasteful, this preference for seeking out real locations over artificially constructing sets again signifies the distinction *Gummo* draws between the rawness of its specific material setting and the fantasised contrivance that so many films bring to their *mise-en-scène*. Foregoing the film studios of Hollywood and New York, *Gummo* was filmed entirely in Nashville, Tennessee and actively embraced the physical dilapidation of the poor communities that already existed there. As Korine recalls, many of these shooting locations remained more or less unchanged, dirt and squalor intact, and were photographed as the filmmakers initially encountered them. This was a fact that frequently gave the crew a palpable sense of discomfort. Korine remembers with great disdain how numerous members of his team came dressed in toxic safety outfits in order to hygienically separate themselves from the locale (Korine and Herzog 1999: ¶21).

² In *Gummo*’s screenplay, Korine draws attention to dirt stains on a dress (2002: 91), the malnourished bodily effect of poverty on “three delinquent boys”, as well as their lack of dental care (147), dandruff in Solomon’s hair (79) and the disease that dirt and uncleanness can cause, exemplified by Helen’s warning to strangers who spot Foot Foot, her missing cat: “She’ll just lick your fingers to death. And if your fingers are dirty then it’ll get a disease. Wash your fingers if you find her” (150). While these are very much bodily details, elsewhere this same penchant for messiness also marks his conception of setting (143, 147).

This is another example of how *Gummo*'s shaking up of the symbolic order via an emphasis on harsh materiality has a decidedly extra-diegetic effect – one that affects not only characters and critics but also even the film's own crew. According to Gus van Sant, the location that triggered the disgust of so many on-set helpers was dubbed, “only semi-affectionately”, the “Bug House”, “a small home which housed fifteen people and several thousand cockroaches” (1997: ¶28). The ‘Bug House’ makes its notorious appearance in a scene where a little boy lifts his family portrait from the wall, only to reveal a swarm of cockroaches who scurry in all directions (fig. 3) – a visual compliment to Solomon, Tumbler and the boy's mother (whose house it presumably is), who sniff aerosol cans on a couch in the same lounge space. According to Korine, not only were the cockroaches an in-built aspect of the location's *mise-en-scène*; the space was so cluttered with household junk (fig. 4) that Korine and his production team, instead of adding anything, were actually forced to take things *away* (Korine and Herzog 1999: ¶21).



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

While the sight of the scurrying cockroaches incites a certain visceral reaction, as evidenced by the distaste it left amongst the crew and many critics – see Maslin's disdainful comments, for instance (1997: ¶5) – once gotten past the initial gut reaction and the documentary realism of the scene, which is filmed with a roaming handheld camera, it is also hard not to respond to the image on a symbolic level. Indeed, the cockroaches that emerge from behind the family portrait, together with the space's massive organisational upheaval, seem to serve as a traumatic metaphor for a broken home – an invasion into a familiar

and familial space. Housing a drug-abusing mother and her neglected little boy, whose face and legs are smeared with fleas and dirt as he sits idly in his mother's lap (fig. 5-6), and taken together with cracked walls, scurrying insects and a domestic mess that seems to swamp characters on all sides, the home appears both literally and figuratively broken, presenting us with a shockingly grim image of U.S. poverty.



Fig. 5



Fig. 6

Environmental Indifference

Reality breaks all the rules, as can be discovered if you walk out with a camera to meet it – Cesare Zavattini (2000: 58)

Contrary to the claims of a critic like Tatara, who insists that *Gummo's* depiction of “barely-educated drunks who live in squalor” is “not telling us anything that we don't already know” (1997: ¶10), by stressing this material aspect and conveying it in a viscerally charged and deeply disconcerting way, Korine might not be ‘telling’ us anything new about poverty, but his camera literally takes us closer and makes us *feel* the poverty in a far more acute way. Through a near-tactile emphasis on an uncaring and harsh environment, together with highly non-sentimentalised depictions of the body, Korine’s visualisation of the material hardship of poverty unsettles in a manner rarely seen in other U.S. films on the subject. Just as Sobchack draws attention to the fact that those academics that theorise away the body nonetheless do so from *within* a body, so Korine does not

just draw attention to bodies on screen, but also forces a viscerally felt reaction from the bodies of audiences *watching* his film. In this manner, *Gummo* truly lives up to Korine's desire to make movies that convey "something more like a feeling. Something that you are *affected* by" (in Cunha 1997: ¶3, my emphasis). This means that *Gummo's* message, for better or worse, is nearly inseparable from the way that message is conveyed – viscerally and in a manner that challenges us to work through our discomfort in order to understand the film. Admittedly, such understanding requires a greater physiological investment than most viewers are probably used to or willing to put in. For what arguably contributes further to the disconcertion of watching *Gummo* is the feeling that we as an audience are not only being made to face highly abject and discomforting images, but have been deprived of any emotional or narrative clues as to how to respond to what we're seeing. This is a point I made near the beginning of the chapter, when I suggested that a large reason for the complaints of critics like Maslin, Guthmann and Tataru stems not so much from the unpleasant aspects themselves, but from Korine's *refusal to comment* on the viscerally unpleasant aspects of his film (a refusal which his detractors equate with cynicism and emptiness). However, might it not be more useful to try and understand this indifference as *citing the very unconcern* of *Gummo's* material environment? After all, reality does not play by anyone's rules, to paraphrase Zavattini. Understood as a brute, indifferent force, it bares no concern for human endeavour or ideology, even though it is the precondition for life and, by extension, every socio-cultural system to arise. The symbolic order might represent a system that elevates humans to a higher level of importance than their surroundings, placing us at the centre of lived experience – "the ego as centre of a solar system of objects" (Kristeva 1982: 14). However, this is a necessary fiction that can come undone by the disruption of an indifferent material Real.

In *Gummo*, such material indifference is repeatedly stressed, not only by Korine's refusal to comment, but also by staging scenes that emphasise the environment's lack of response. The environment's failure to answer the call of its inhabitants, while simultaneously weighing such hardship down upon them – in the form of

the tornado, icy rain, cancerous growths and domestic infestation, to name but a few examples – is taken to an absurd extreme late in the film. In an extended scene set in a kitchen or basement of some kind, a group of characters take turns arm-wrestling each other. After one of them gets aggressively upset about having lost a match – a reiteration of the body’s limits failing to meet certain aims and expectations – another character (played by Korine’s friend, sometime collaborator and famous skateboarder, Mark Gonzales) leaps upon a chair in the centre of the room and attempts to pin it down. What follows is both comic in its absurdity and frightening in the ruthlessness of its destruction. Gonzales keeps sliding around on the floor, egged on by the shouts and cheering of a handful of onlookers (fig. 7-8). As the wrestling continues (the whole ‘contest’ goes on for about two minutes) he gradually knocks over nearby tables and objects, spilling bottles all over the floor, eventually letting the upset man have the floor. Rather than wrestle with the chair, however, the man simply picks it up and begins smashing it to pieces, twisting the limbs and letting loose pieces of upholstery fly around the room (fig. 9). Gonzales soon accompanies him and the two tear the chair apart, cheered on by the handful of onlookers. Finally, having completely destroying the object, Gonzales dumps the chair in the trashcan and spits beer on it in a mock sign of victory (fig. 10).



Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Fig. 9



Fig. 10



Fig. 11



Fig. 12

This scene represents one of many instances in which *Gummo's* characters lash out at their surrounding environment. One finds this exact same kind of behaviour in the film's opening credit sequence, where Bunny Boy – standing on a bridge overlooking the highway – violently kicks and rubs his backside against the fence in a kind of backlash against and confrontation with his unfriendly surroundings (fig. 11). Similarly, in the junkyard the two cowboys hurl loose objects around and break car windows with relish (fig. 12). While this sort of tactile resistance to the material world is hardly unique to Korine's cinema, what distinguishes it is its detachment from any higher narrative purpose. Cast loose from the "system of narrative logic" discussed earlier, contact with and the attempt to alter the state of the characters' environments does not represent a means to a narrative end. Instead, I want to offer two different ways to read this kind of tactile engagement. The first is as a form of liberating, amoral play that breaks with the codes and conventions of cinematic representation, as well as

symbolic norms. The second, more pessimistic reading, stresses the futility and defeat of these characters' actions in relation to the indifferent environments that surround them. I will begin by discussing the second reading before moving on to recognising the positive, tactile playfulness that is also at work in the film.

To begin with the chair-wrestling scene, what lends this encounter between man and object its absurd character is of course the fact that the chair does not fight back. Gonzales attempts to give it the illusion of sentience and purpose by pretending to struggle with it, even 'letting' it pin him down briefly (fig. 17 above). But, as the father in *Julien Donkey-Boy* (Korine's follow up to *Gummo*) succinctly points out, after his son similarly tries to wrestle a plastic dustbin, "That's not a real opponent". In the end, a chair remains a chair, and the sheer lengths and dedication to which *Gummo's* combatants violently exert themselves ultimately does more to emphasise this point than it does to convince otherwise. Their overinvestment in animating what is clearly an inanimate object only draws more attention to that object's indifference. Interestingly, Korine has alluded to this aspect of the chair-wrestling scene in interviews, offering a poignant image of an indifferent materiality's domination of anthropocentrically conceived space:

The idea of a man fighting a chair means very much to me. The outcome is central, because what would happen if the chair won? What would the man feel if the seat-cushion of the chair got the better of him, or if he got tangled up in its legs and felt that his opponent, although not necessarily alive, had been too worthy an adversary? I imagine the man's self worth would diminish as the chair stood there, bent and laughing (in Lippy 2000: ¶5).

While this might come across as an absurd 'what if' speculation, I would argue that throughout *Gummo* one in fact finds this very reversal of the dominant anthropocentric order being staged. Against the indifference of their material environments, characters *do* frequently lose. Whether it be the destruction of the tornado, an icy downpour that leaves them shaking and shivering, or their own bodies' weaknesses and vulnerabilities – all of these instances represent an inability to transcend or triumph over their specific material circumstances and

match the normative, taken-for-granted dictates of the symbolic order. Indeed, in losing against the indifferent environment, *Gummo*'s characters appear to stand in precise contradistinction to the normative symbolic order, if one considers that, at heart, such an order privileges the human element and the self above all else, placing it at the centre of a representational economy to which non-human matter is always secondary. However, as we've seen in previous chapters, *Gummo* and its characters also engage the normative tropes of this order. Thus, while their environments might appear in contradistinction to certain symbolic norms, the characters themselves are more awkwardly and ambivalently positioning between the un-ideal harshness of their environment and the norms that govern the symbolic order.

Child's Play

While much of what I've discussed in this chapter tends to cast materiality in a negative light, one must also recognise that this isn't always the case. Nor do the body and its surrounding environment always function as a restraint on characters' activities. There are also moments and scenes when the body is treated in a more playful manner and approached by characters with something akin to a childlike curiosity – provided we strip 'childlike' of its cute and sentimental associations. This childhood inquisitiveness towards the body is best exemplified in a striking, extended scene near the very end of the film, where Solomon takes a bath, soaping down his body in water so dirty it appears almost black (fig 13). Starting out in medium-wide shot, the scene moves in for a series of close-ups, foregrounding bodily details in a manner that renders them almost tactile. These close-ups track the progress of Solomon's fingers and the bar of soap as he scrubs various parts of his body (fig. 14-17), even rubbing and splashing water on the chipped bathroom wall (fig. 18). This engagement with both his body and surroundings is carried through to Solomon's immersion in the bath water, whose liquid fluidity and bodily merging is reminiscent of Sobchack's argument, taking after Merleau-Ponty, that "both body and world" are "intertwined" in the way that one affects the other and by the common, interchangeable status they both hold as matter (2004: 286-287). This

interconnection is particularly stressed at one point when Solomon submerges himself till just his eyes are showing, poised in the water like a frog (fig. 19). One gets a similar sense of both the blurring of the body's separation to its environment and its physical effect on the body when Solomon blows water through a circle he creates with his fingers. Held up to the camera, his hand reveals startlingly pronounced wrinkles (fig. 20). Here the water merges with and then escapes Solomon's body, blurring his separation to the world that surrounds him, a connection similarly stressed by the environment's leaving a mark on his body, even if only temporarily, in the form of the wrinkles that form upon his skin.

At this point Solomon's mom enters the bathroom with a tray laden with his dinner – spaghetti and milk. She places it before him and begins washing his hair, throughout which he eats and drinks. Flakes of shampoo appear to fall on Solomon's meal, but he continues consuming his dinner unperturbed. For dessert, his Mom presents him with a bar of chocolate. Unfortunately, he drops it in the filthy water. Managing to retrieve it, he eats it anyway (again unperturbed). His mouth immediately becomes smeared with the soggy chocolate, whose waterlogged inside squirts out and runs back into the bathwater as he chews (Fig. 21).



Fig. 13



Fig. 14



Fig. 15



Fig. 16



Fig. 17



Fig. 18



Fig. 19



Fig. 20



Fig. 21

On the face of it, this scene description sounds anything but 'playful' or 'childlike'. Indeed, for many disgusted viewers and reviewers it registers as just the opposite (Schwarzbaum 1997). And it is indeed difficult to ignore this abject dimension, particularly because it affects many of us on such a visceral level. In order to understand what might be liberating about this scene we need to therefore take a leap of faith and attempt to read it from Solomon's point of view. Adopting his standpoint and suspending our standards of taste, what becomes apparent is how this scene treats the body and environment as something that is *not* separate, distancing or oppressive – at least to Solomon, whose actions range from the curious (touching and scratching the bathroom wall's surface) to a kind of blissful obliviousness towards the abjection of his surroundings and behaviour. Indeed, if we suspend our standards of taste, what becomes apparent is how this scene treats the body and environment as something that is *not* separate, distancing, or oppressive to its user. Solomon's interactions with his body are instances of a childlike fascination and corporeal relationship with the world that does not resemble a site of fear or insecurity, but rather one of play (Nochimson 1992-1993: 25). It is in this light that we might understand his indifference to the complete filthiness of the bathwater in which he is submerged, or the moment when he drops a chocolate bar in the water and, retrieving it, accidentally smears the chocolate all over his mouth in an attempt to consume it. Both his indifference and his ineptitude recall a childhood scenario of messy, tactile engagement with the material world. While spectators might recoil at Solomon's immersion in dirty water, the dilapidated clutter of the set dressing and the way in which his spaghetti gets 'contaminated' by the filth of

the water, Solomon himself seems indifferently at one with all these phenomena. As substances fluidic and solid, edible and indigestible, merge with one another, Solomon comes to represent the child who has yet to generate a fear of and aversion to the messiness of the material, has not yet learned to distinguish cleanliness from dirt – in short, has yet to be installed within the normative dictates of the symbolic order.

In addition to providing a welcome exception to the negative relationship that is so often presented between character and environment, the bath scene functions more generally as an exemplar of much of what I have been discussing throughout this chapter. The distinctive close-ups of Solomon's water-wrinkled fingers, the series of shots focusing on him soaping off various parts of his body or the way his hair bends back after his mother shampoos it up (fig. 22-23) – these examples and many elsewhere in this chapter exemplify the manner in which *Gummo* foregrounds the material environment and body. The last of these serves as a particularly striking example. After Solomon's mother pulls his shampooed head up in a spike, she hears a knocking on the front door and exits frame. At this point all external action freezes for over ten seconds as we are left to contemplate the sprout of hair as it ever so gradually bends to one side. This is what Gilles Deleuze (1989) would have called a pure 'time image', or what Bordwell, Thompson and Staiger would refer to as the "system of cinematic space" freeing itself from the "system of narrative logic" (1985: 6) – the temporal dimension breaking free of the insistent drive of narrative, allowing itself to be asserted in a purer state that is no longer subordinate to the demands of onscreen event. In a vein both similar and more suited to the thematic trajectory I have been tracing here, I would further suggest that it is a moment in which the *body* asserts itself in its independent, materially Real dimension. Playing with the fact that hair is a part of our bodies over which we have no muscular control, Korine and Escoffier concentrate the camera's gaze on Solomon's hair, lending his body a degree of autonomy. This fact is compounded with a staging that, in terms of shot size, duration and the boy's own complete stillness, gives his hair a strikingly independent character. As if some mysterious and autonomous force were governing the body, the gravity and weight of the hair forge a bodily motion that seems to act in complete indifference of its owner's will. The body

thus comes into its own as a material phenomenon; a body part with a 'life' of its own, one that does not always align with our intentions.



Fig. 22



Fig. 23

However, as I stressed at the beginning of this chapter, an emphasis on materiality only comprises one half of *Gummo's* considerably more complex approach. Firstly, to stress the materiality of an image is not to imply that it stands outside of signification. After all, if we read Solomon's hair as a material entity in and for itself, such a meaning is itself *signified* to us. Nor does this suggest that Solomon's tuft of hair doesn't have other signifying resonances, for instance evoking a toddler's head of hair – a convenient comparison in light of Solomon's positively infantile play with matter. The materiality of the image is also poised in tension with its signifying properties in more conflictual ways. If we observe the frame in its entirety, it soon becomes apparent how the image encapsulates the tension between an embodied materiality and symbolic aspiration. The close-up of Solomon's hair is ironically framed so as to include a series of mangled and dismembered Barbie dolls in the background. Barbie has frequently been identified as giving plastic expression to a bodily representation so removed from reality it would be considered laughable, were it not so strongly embedded in normative ideals of the female figure.³ We are therefore presented with two bodily signifiers. One that emphasises the independent,

³ Barbie's status as an unrealistic representation of what the feminine body should aspire to be is by now well known. This unrealistic and disturbingly underweight image has perhaps its most memorable cinematic critique in Todd Haynes' Karen Carpenter biopic *Superstar* (1987), where the anorexic Karen and all of her friends and family are depicted as Barbie dolls.

materially Real dimension of existence – Solomon’s head and hair – and a symbolic approximation of the body in the form of Barbie dolls, whose very plastic (and therefore ‘fake’) materiality signifies them as *unreal*. The latter represents an idealised product of the symbolic order that has been literally mangled and dismembered in the material Real, but that retains its presence nonetheless.

Crying and Dreaming

This image thus concisely sums up the tension between, and intertwining of, the material Real and the symbolic. This is a tension that runs throughout *Gummo*, forging an in-between, destabilising space that never reconciles the two, but is instead always in a constant state of negotiation. I want to end this chapter by exploring the ways in which this interstitial characteristic coincides with and culminates in the film’s climax, where these two opposing dimensions are brought strikingly – even violently – to bear upon and blur into one another.

Supporting the climactic ending, arguably even driving it, is Roy Orbison’s ‘Crying’, which plays non-diegetically over four ‘scenes’ or blocks of action, imposing a musical arc that encourages us to read the disparate scenes as a single sequence. In the first, Helen, Dot and Bunny Boy splash around and kiss in a plastic backyard swimming pool as rain pours down on them (Fig 24-25), a downpour that visually connects this scene to the second one, in which Tumbler and Solomon shoot at a fallen dead cat (Fig. 26), shaking and shivering as the rain shows no sign of abating. These acts of ineffectual violence increase in scale as we segue to shaky, re-photographed footage of a tornado (Fig. 27-28), identical to the sort we saw in the opening. As rousing percussion and strings entwine with Orbison’s final high notes, the film cuts back to 35mm, revealing a wet green field from which Bunny Boy emerges, holding a dead cat (possibly Foot-Foot) up to the camera (Fig 29).



Fig. 24



Fig. 25



Fig. 26

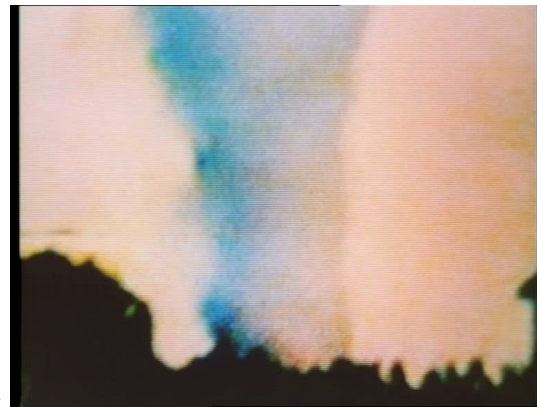


Fig. 27



Fig. 28



Fig. 29

The film thus ends more or less on the note with which it began, marking a cyclical return to the footage of the tornado. Both beginning and end are marked by material vulnerability and death. Not only from the harsh materiality of the destruction a tornado wreaks, but by the brutal killing of a cat. In a very early scene, a boy grabs a cat by the scruff of its neck and drowns it in a barrel of

water, an event that mirrors the climax in which a cat is shot to death. Similarly, in a shot from the film's opening credit sequence, Bunny Boy is shown shaking from the rain and cold (fig. 30), a visual motif reiterated at film's end by Tumbler, who shudders as the rain lashes down upon him (fig. 31). This is a moment of affectivity that Korine and Tellefsen are at pains to emphasise. They cut twice (once at the beginning of the scene, once at its end) to a medium shot in which Tumbler's discomfort is visibly discernible. They also include a wide shot that emphasises how both he and Solomon are dwarfed by their indifferent surroundings (fig. 32) – an image that also reveals how, like Bunny Boy, Tumbler's scant outfit is a hopeless deterrent to the rain: he wears nothing apart from shorts and a t-shirt so soaked that one can make out his nipples through the dark blue fabric.



Fig. 30



Fig. 31



Fig. 32

Just as the film begins with scenes that stress material vulnerability, it ends on an identical note, seeming to suggest that physical suffering and destruction, both to humans and animals, take on an unending dimension in Xenia. As emphasised throughout this chapter, this suffering is conveyed in a decidedly material and corporeal way, with Tumbler and Solomon's scene particularly marked by a near tactility, powerfully conveying the characters' affectedness and discomfort.

At the same time, the end sequence also exhibits strong elements of fantasy and pop culture – elements that we've come to associate with the illusory comfort of the symbolic. Most obvious amongst these is Roy Orbison's 'Crying', whose nostalgic and syrupy tone of yesteryear sits at a considerable remove from the unsparing and very real despair evoked by the cat corpses, shivering bodies and tornadic destruction. But at the same time, this pain and sadness often feels as if it is being channelled *through* Orbison's music, aestheticising the unsparing onscreen images so that the tears evoked by the music and the falling rain seem to merge and play off one another. In this way, *Gummo's* climactic 'rain sequence' is marked by a hybridity, interstitially and ambiguously positioned as it is between symbolic and material dimensions that seem to collapse into one another. In such a blurring, any strict sense of binary separation between material and symbolic dissolves. At the same time, the two dimensions don't find dialectical synthesis. Rather, they carve out a complex, ambiguous, unsettling and unsettled Third Space of enunciation, which constantly scuttles between affirming either material or symbolic, quite often doing both simultaneously.

This simultaneity is an important factor, because it stresses the hybrid and intermingled aspect of this relationship. While there might be moments where we slip into symbolic fantasy, there are just as many moments when material specificity and symbolic norms blur onscreen. *Gummo's* climax contains both such instances. It is on the former note that the sequence begins, with the one-shot scene of Bunny Boy, Helen and Dot. The setup itself seems like something out of a dream. Bunny Boy has never met or seen the two sisters elsewhere in the film, nor has there been any indication that any of them own a swimming pool. Coupled with the fact that one rarely, if ever, actually swims in

the rain (and Korine certainly doesn't provide any motivation for why they would do so here), the scene takes on the unreal dimension of fantasy. Rather than presented as the indifferent, discomforting phenomenon it so often is elsewhere in the film, rain here *enhances* the symbolic aspect in a manner akin to Gene Kelly's famous song and dance sequence in *Singin' in the Rain* (1952). As Helen, Dot and Bunny Boy swim, kiss and smile at one another, the downpour combines with the setting, music and characters' behaviour to produce something akin to a teenage fantasy of carefree romantic abandon.

This makes the transition to Tumbler and Solomon's shooting of (what we can suppose is) Foot Foot all the more affecting. While Orbison's music connects the two scenes, adding immeasurably to the heightened fantasy of the first, in the latter instance it pointedly clashes with the unsparing onscreen sentiment, adding a layer of irony that barely softens the violence and suffering. It seems that a similarly ironic and contrapuntal function would also hold for the tornado montage. But because the re-photographed images of what would otherwise be images of fierce awe and destruction tend to abstract into bursts of colour and shifting shapes, the music makes for a far more ambivalent accompaniment – images that are often difficult to discern cling to the emotive power from Orbison's music, music both lyrically bittersweet and musically beautiful, in order to generate their meaning. Indeed, there is in 'Crying' itself ambivalence that greatly heightens the sequence's ambiguity. While the musical composition, full-bodied arrangement, sonic production and the nostalgic era it is connected to encode it as warm and sentimental, the lyrics and very title bespeak unadorned sorrow and loss. Ambiguity thus compounds ambiguity, and when we move back to sharply defined 35mm and are confronted with Bunny Boy holding a cat's corpse up to the camera, the music both reinforces and splits harshly from the image, leaving us lurching from the literally cold and grotesque image to the inappropriate sweetness of the music to its mournful lyrical content and back again in an emotive chain that never stabilises or comes to rest.

This sequence therefore encapsulates *Gummo's* hybrid, unsettling, often simultaneous emphasis on material harshness and symbolic fantasy, a tension that might privilege the symbolic one moment, only to switch in the next to the

harshness (but also the pleasures) of the material Real. But it is also a tension that frequently exists synchronically, so that Orbison's musical attempt to relocate us to a nostalgic simulacrum of yesteryear is shattered by the onscreen evidence of material suffering *at the same time* that the onscreen material hardship is sweetened and romanticised by Orbison's music. This is indicative of the irreconcilable tension between symbolic fantasy and material Real that marks *Gummo* through and through. While the history of U.S. cinema has tended to furnish us with one or the other dimensions, thereby placing them in diametrical opposition, Korine's great achievement is to bring them into relation in the same work, often at the same moment. In doing so, he presents a vision of marginal existence that can give an account of globalisation and consumer culture's effect on the poor and disenfranchised, *without* abstracting the very harsh material conditions that impinge upon and restrict the everyday existence of these same groups and individuals. As such, *Gummo*'s characters essentially occupy two positions at once – torn between a symbolic order that compels them to cite its norms and ideals while simultaneously seeking to expel them as 'other'; and a harsh material existence that accentuates their corporeal vulnerability, making a liveable, 'normal' life all the more difficult.

CONCLUSION

Negotiating Marginality Elsewhere

At the beginning of Homi Bhabha's introduction to *The Location of Culture*, he quotes Martin Heidegger's notion of the boundary as "not that at which something stops", but rather "that from which *something begins its presencing*" (2004: 1, his emphasis). Heidegger's conception serves Bhabha's point that the boundary is not so much a dividing line – the barrier that separates and classifies opposing values. Rather, it represents a Third Space that can be occupied and which can account for identities that exceed clearly delineated cultural separations. These cultural identities are not recognised by oppositional binaries due to the fact that, being hybrid, they in fact encompass *both* oppositional values in their makeup. The Third Space is thus a theoretical innovation that recognises an in-between space that disrupts, through its 'presencing', the neat binary divisions that fall on either side of it. My thesis has demonstrated how Harmony Korine's *Gummo* occupies just such an interstitial space of representation, constantly blurring divisions between mainstream and margin, a specific materiality and an oppositional symbolic norm, the normative and the 'other'. Such separations are challenged by *Gummo's* staging of white poverty as an *interstitial* phenomenon, presenting marginality not as diametrically opposed to the norm, but rather caught in a sort of unidentified no-man's-land *between* normativity and 'otherness'.

On the one hand, the film engages a plethora of dominant cultural norms – concerns with weight and sporting success, attaining and retaining certain norms of masculine strength, repeated references to celebrity culture, amongst many others. As Althusser points out, these normative notions are purely abstracted until they have been materialised in action and everyday discourse. And they are of course materialised in *Gummo*. But this occurs in settings and in relation to a *mise-en-scène* that complicates their status as 'the norm', often 'contaminating' and re-signifying them in new and subversive ways. This is partially achieved through characters' eccentric behaviour, which constitutes

their performative citation of the norm, and the way Korine chooses to direct and frame this behaviour. Similarly, in the way he subversively mines tropes of genre – the Western say, or the musical. But it is also achieved by his foregrounding the harsh materiality that characterises many scenes' settings. *Gummo* frequently emphasises the dirty, cluttered and abject nature of its locations, which include a house full of cockroaches, a junkyard, bodies wracked by the cold and smudged with dirt, and a bathtub containing perhaps the dirtiest water any cinematic character has ever had to submerge him or herself in. *Gummo* thus visually highlights two disparate dimensions of representation: one based on an abject materiality that is often framed in an almost tactile and disconcertingly *visceral* manner, the other relying more on the maintenance of a plastic or surface aesthetic through which cultural symbolic norms and ideals are *semiotically* conveyed. *Gummo's* great achievement is to accord these two seemingly incompatible dimensions equal weight of representation, often presenting them as operating in simultaneity, inseparable in their interstitial merging.

This complex positioning encourages us to rethink representations of poverty in the developed world, particularly how the notion of 'culture' is received and (re)formulated by the so-called margins. While most films tend to treat the poor as always *outside* of the normative order, the conception I have formulated above allows us to re-think poverty and marginality's cultural identity as always hybrid and in-between. In arguing this point, I began by jettisoning a structuralist conception of binary value. Traditionally, binary formulations have tended to structure film narratives and still serve as a key tool in both the production and analysis of film texts. However, they also have the disadvantage of often reifying and rendering essentialist certain binary values, passing over the conditions of their formation and thereby assuming that they are always already fixed. In contrast to such a reification and stabilisation of meaning, I demonstrated how *Gummo* takes a far more radical and deconstructive approach, opting for a decentring and hybridisation of value that embraces a heteroglossia of cultural signs, genres, abrupt changes in character behaviour and a plethora of interchangeable film and video formats. Instead of the fixing of meaning

endemic in the structuralist approach, this process is more akin to a post-structuralist notion of deferral. As *Gummo* cycles through different and disparate cultural signs, the underlying meaning is never arrived at, never conclusively settled, but stays instead in a constant state of flux and circulation. Such an approach breaks up the reification that tends to accompany binary formulations, instead seeing the question of cultural identity as hybrid, fluid, always being negotiated. In short, a matter that is never conclusively settled and reducible to a series of set oppositions.

Drawing on the work of Louis Althusser and Judith Butler, chapter two took this notion of hybridity and the breaking down of binary value further by investigating how the norm or 'centre' can become 'contaminated' by the margin. While chapter one focused on the semiotic deferral of various cinematic and cultural signs, chapter two focused more closely on Butler's notion of performativity and citation, which demonstrates how norms can be materialised and cited in non-normative circumstances that render them 'other'. As I demonstrated, *Gummo* sports many such examples of 'othering' the norm, whether by re-enacting gendered norms or citing and subverting the tropes and genres of popular culture and mainstream cinema.

Chapter three further expanded this notion of re-signification and normative subversion. However, whereas chapter two was primarily concerned with operating within the realm of language and post-structural semiotics, this final chapter made recourse to the phenomenology-based work of Vivian Sobchack. Sobchack privileges materiality and the body as sites of experience that *precede* symbolic meaning and thought. But by reading her in relation to Butler and Bhabha and applying Sobchack's ideas to *Gummo*, I argued that it was not so much the case that the material precedes the symbolic. Rather, utilising Lacan's notion of the Real and Kristeva's concept of abjection, one finds the material dimension working *simultaneously* and in counterpoint with the symbolic. As such, the harsh materiality of *Gummo's* setting and the tactile manner in which Korine frames this material dimension plays off against the presence of symbolic norms and ideals. *Gummo* and its characters are thus lodged firmly in a hybrid Third Space; in-between the cultural signs of 'normalcy' and the materialised space of abjection – the latter representing an 'otherness'

that must be banished from the norm. It is between these two seemingly incompatible dimensions that the film and its characters make meaning and forge a sense of cultural identity.

I therefore sought to develop a model for identifying how such an interstitial conception of cultural identity and class informs *Gummo's* cinematic representation. What is refreshingly innovative about Korine's film is how it reveals the *cultural* dimension of poverty so frequently missed in representations of the marginalised poor. That said, while my analysis has proceeded in a fairly thorough, systematic and totalising way, I would resist the temptation to impose my particular interpretation and concerns as the film's defining structure. It should be clear from its fragmented (de)construction and emphasis on semiotic deferral that *Gummo*, in the very unruliness of its cinematic syntax, defies a totalising system of interpretation. Having argued that the film is deeply marked by ambivalence, differing and eliding any settled meaning, the last thing I would want to do is follow that observation by imposing a totalising interpretation. Even a thesis-length study like my own, which has been attentive to the blurring and incorporation of multiple signs, meanings and theoretical paradigms, far from exhausts the film's avenues of investigation – one of the sad ironies behind Korine's relative neglect in film studies today.

Extending my argument to the rest of Korine's oeuvre, it would be even more erroneous to lift the paradigms and conclusions I've reaching in *Gummo*, merely drop them on his other work and expect an exact fit. One of the reasons behind solely focusing on *Gummo* was the time and space it afforded me to dig into the *specifics* of the film. As I stressed in the introduction, this is not the study of an auteur, but of a single film. At the same time, I'm sure that a broader – though necessarily brief – appraisal and contextualisation of Korine's work would be undeniably useful and welcome. Every attempt at emphatic conclusion tends to efface new beginnings, and instead of ending on a note that closes off the subject of *Gummo* and Korine, I'd rather open up avenues for future enquiry. Korine's creative reach encompasses numerous formats and mediums, from film to music videos to his own music, novels, art installations and documentaries, not to mention numerous unfinished film projects. There is obviously not space

here to touch on the entirety of this vast oeuvre. So sticking – with one important exception – to the feature films, what follows is a brief overview of Korine’s subsequent work and how it reflects and expands on ideas of cultural hybridity and interstitial identity that I’ve explored thus far.

Korine followed up *Gummo* two years later with *julien donkey-boy*, a loosely plotted film about the life of a schizophrenic, which represents both an extension of *Gummo* and a departure. What might seem to set it most obviously apart from Korine’s debut is its adherence, however loose, to the precepts of the Dogme 95 manifesto. Conceived by a Danish group of filmmakers, headed by Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg, the Dogme movement calls upon its adherents to make films under a strictly imposed series of rules. These include (but are not limited to) only shooting on handheld video under natural light, the prohibition of camera filters and optical manipulation, only making use of sound that was recorded in sync with the on-screen image and working with unmodified, found locations.¹ While these rules would seem to necessitate an ascetic limitation and downscaling of the filmmaking aesthetic, Korine in fact uses the Dogme rules as an impetus to *greater* visual experimentation. In its wayward narrative and aesthetic approach, *julien donkey-boy* sports a diversity that easily rivals *Gummo*’s, making use of still frames, blurry long-exposure shots, images filmed off television screens and highly innovative handheld camerawork by cinematographer Anthony Dod Mantle. Furthermore, the film reiterates *Gummo*’s focus on marginalised lives, drawing attention to how such marginality entails a grappling with certain forms of normative discourse. Particularly prominent in this regard is the film’s citation of certain ‘macho’ forms of masculinity, exemplified by Julien’s brother, Chris, who aspires to be a professional wrestler, spending all of his free time engaged in bizarre training routines akin to Solomon’s weightlifting in *Gummo*. Moreover, he has an abusive father who frequently harasses him, insisting that he “be a man” while forcing him to endure various forms of physical torture, such as getting hosed down with water in the freezing cold. Such scenes point to how the film also foregrounds the harsh materiality in which its action is set. Note, for instance, how the film’s

¹ For a full list of the Dogme 95 rules, see Hjort and MacKenzie 2003: 199-200.

icy colour palette conveys the chilly immediacy of Chris' hosing down in the cold outdoors (fig. 1). Like *Gummo*, bodily function is emphasised, as when Julien, overcome by sadness, lets a long string of snot run from his nose down towards the precariously placed camera (fig. 2). One thus finds a reiteration of the central thesis I detected in *Gummo*: the relationship between symbolically abstract principles of normativity and the specific materiality of the film's setting. However, I would argue that *julien donkey-boy* does not conceive of the Third Space in quite the same way that *Gummo* does. Whereas the latter film envisages this space as existing between white, heteronormative middle-class norms and the decidedly 'other' materiality of Xenia, *julien donkey-boy* substitutes material 'otherness' for *mental* 'otherness', plunging us into the subjective experience of a schizophrenic. All the film's action is framed as a consequence of the titular character's battle with his mental illness. Thus, the Third Space of meaning emerges through Julien's particular interpretation of the norms and ideals that structure the cultural symbolic order – an interpretation that is filtered through the experience of schizophrenia.² This is not to say that the film lacks *Gummo*'s visceral representation of materiality. Indeed, this harshness is conveyed by a deliberately lo-fi visual style, which emphasises the immediacy and frequent onscreen violence and bodily function in a way that glossy, carefully composed filmic images and sequences cannot. However, this materiality is experienced and channelled through Julien's schizophrenic and subjectively 'other' conception of the world.

² Julien's particular interpretation of social and popular cultural norms finds interesting resonance with a study conducted by Rod Lucas, where he noted how a group of schizophrenia sufferers brought their own, illness-specific interpretations to bear on cultural texts ranging from the Bible to pop music (Lucas 2004).



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

Following a drug-fuelled personal and artistic burnout (Haramis 2009: ¶1), Korine did not make another feature film for eight years, only ending his silence in 2007 with *Mister Lonely*. A much less formally subversive work than either *Gummo* or *Julien Donkey-Boy*, *Mister Lonely* also lacks those films' discomfiting and deliberately off-putting tactile representations of materiality. Nevertheless, the themes of marginality and dislocation are still very much present. The film centres around Michael, a Mexican celebrity impersonator scraping together a living in Paris by performing Michael Jackson dance moves on the city's streets. But this isn't simply a public act. In much the way that Butler conceives of gender performativity, Michael, as his name suggests, is *always* impersonating and 'performing' Michael Jackson, whether in public or alone by himself. Like so many of Korine's characters, he is suspended in an interstitial space of identification, somewhere between an 'original' self and the public celebrity figure of Jackson that he evokes. Nor is he alone (no Jackson reference

intended); *Mister Lonely* is full of celebrity lookalikes, from Madonna, Marilyn Monroe and James Dean to the Pope and Abraham Lincoln. As such, the film represents Korine's clearest engagement with – and subversion of – celebrity culture. Even more so than *Gummo*, here one finds the clearest emphasis on how failed citation can perform a deliberately subversive function. The film also reiterates the attention *Gummo* pays to how popular tropes such as song, dance and the attempt to embody a fantasised ego ideal can only offer a temporary respite to the pain of one's immediate lived experience. As Korine put it, "there is a kind of inherent trauma in these obsessive characters. They can get so far removed and isolated that they forget that the world is waiting" (in Taubin 2008: ¶66).

This is a promising theme to work with, one very much aligned to Korine's earlier exploration of the gap between idealised expectations and the harsh reality that governs one's immediate experience. It is therefore unfortunate that *Mister Lonely* is not able, or does not want to, sustain this tension to quite the degree found in *Gummo* and *julien donkey-boy*. This is at least partially because the film's geographical setting is itself too fantastical: a castle in the Scottish highlands where all the celebrities communally live. Combined with its uniformly lush cinematography, *Mister Lonely* lacks the disruptive material and geographical dimension that so distinctly and disturbingly characterised Korine's earlier films. Moreover, whereas *julien donkey-boy* and *Gummo* articulated very distinct and particular U.S. locales – places whose material and cultural specificity contrasted greatly with the films' citations of generalised symbolic norms – *Mister Lonely* lacks such a setting and the contrast needed to stress the gap between the fantasised, materially abstracted world of celebrity and the more traumatic domain of its impersonators. As a consequence, the Third Space the film creates is far less compelling than that found in either *Gummo* or *julien donkey-boy*.

Korine followed *Mister Lonely* with an altogether different feature film: *Trash Humpers*. Arguably because the film is such a fervent reaction to the experience of making *Mister Lonely* – laden as that film was with the bureaucracy that accompanies almost all filmmaking (Ebiri 2009: ¶13) – *Trash Humpers* jettisons

Mister Lonely's thematic concerns and engagement with popular culture, focusing instead on the specific, strange and insulated world of its characters. Involving little more than Korine, his wife and a handful of friends donning masks and partaking in nefarious activities such as humping trash and vandalising property, the film has an incredibly insulated feel to it, deliberately exclude any normative frame of reference. As such, it is an 'outsider' film in a manner unique to his oeuvre.

This makes *Trash Humpers* an exception to the culturally interstitial Third Space trend that first emerged in *Gummo* and has resurfaced throughout so much of Korine's subsequent work. Indeed, he followed *Trash Humpers* with a fascinating short called *Umshini Wam* (2011), which strongly reaffirms his engagement with the Third Space. A collaboration with South African hip hop group Die Antwoord – a duo comprised of Ninja and Yo-Landi Vi\$\$er – *Umshini Wam* casts the group as a paraplegic, wheelchair-bound couple who amble around a small-town South African backwater and dream of being successful criminals. The basic narrative trajectory, such as it is, consists of them enacting their own twisted rendition of the gangster heist narrative, stealing the most expensive wheelchairs and 'pimped out' accessories they can find and killing anyone who gets in their way. At heart, *Umshini Wam* is about two 'othered' outcasts, nomadically living on the edge of society, steeped in small town, white South African poverty – the parallels here to Korine's small-town vision of Xenia shouldn't be ignored, and possibly served as an initial point of interest for the collaboration. Indeed, like *Gummo's* characters, Ninja and Yo-Landi take their cultural points of reference from far beyond their immediate material and geographical sphere. The two white Afrikaners act more like Cape Flats gangsters, a group who in turn take many of their cues from African American hip-hop culture, which itself has been popularised within a white hegemonic context while its progenitors have, to a large degree, remained marginalised. These complex, intertwined influences form a kind of underlying structural fantasy for their lives; they constantly make reference to how 'gangsta' they imagine themselves to be, Ninja literally dreams of being "the greatest rapper in the whole fockin' world" and they take every opportunity to fire their semi-automatic firearms – usually not at any target, but merely to reinforce the self-

image of being armed to the teeth. In line with such imagery, the film's title derives from a Zulu, Apartheid-era protest song – 'Umshini Wam' translates as 'Bring me my machine gun', a revolutionary call to armed struggle against the white, predominantly Afrikaner regime. In another act of deliberate cultural dislocation, *Umshini Wam* has Ninja and Yo-Landi (themselves white and Afrikaans) answering the call to armed warfare and gunning down what amounts to stuffy, racist, male, Afrikaans stereotypes – the same right-wing cliché the struggle song initially targeted. Combining this appropriation with U.S. gangster rap clichés, *Umshini Wam* presents a fascinating, irreverent look at how its two main characters take their cultural inspirations, cues and popular myths from black pop culture on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. Stranded in wheelchairs and at a great national and/or cultural remove from the 'gangster' ghetto iconography or call to 'bring me my machine gun' that they're aping, Yo-Landi and Ninja represent another variation on the interstitial, Third Space of identification that emerges time and again in Korine's work. Die Antwoord's 'zef rap' style and imagery is, after all, a typically hybrid phenomenon, as one antagonistic character in *Umshini Wam* pertinently points out when accusing them of being "a waste of a white skin. You're like white *kaffirs*" – neither falling into the 'respectable' stereotype of middle-class whites nor the gangster rap stereotype of the tough, urban black criminal. In this respect they represent a variation on the culturally interstitial subjects of *Gummo*, who signify as 'white', but whose class and disabilities render them not 'white' (i.e. normative) enough.

The similarities between *Umshini Wam*'s cultural depiction of South African white poverty and *Gummo*'s portrayal of poor mid-America reveals how Korine's culturally interstitial take on poverty and marginality has an applicability that far transcends the United States.

Similarly, while I would not want to insist on an unmodified, wholesale application of my theoretical work to just any film that represents poverty, my adapted notion of Bhabha's Third Space as a negotiation *between* symbolic norms and the cinematically represented material realities of poverty provides a fascinating paradigm for analysing a range of films from different contexts and nationalities. Consider a film like *La Haine* (1995), which spends twenty-four

hours in the lives of second-generation French émigrés living in the projects that line the outskirts of Paris. On the geographical and ideological surface, the film pits these characters *against* the dominant order of French society, embodied by rioting, the constant police presence in their neighbourhood and their geographical positioning *outside* a Western cultural hub. However, an interstitial reading would recognise just how thoroughly enamoured – perhaps even indoctrinated – these characters are by the transnational and globalising influence of U.S. cinema’s glamorised representations of the criminal lifestyle. Like Ninja and Yo-Landi, *La Haine*’s characters fashion themselves in these ‘outlaw’ images, acting out scenes and adopting the tough guy swagger of films like *Taxi Driver* (1976) and *Scarface* (1983). The émigrés’ bad boy self-images are thus actually a product of the dominant popular culture, shaping them as products of the symbolic system even if that same system seems to recognise them as ‘other’ and discard them accordingly. At the same time, however, there is a very real sense of geographical separation between the projects and the rest of Paris. One therefore finds a repetition of *Gummo*’s interstitial gap, a dislocation, between the dominant symbolic norms adopted and the geographical distance – indeed, the entrenched separation – that places the one at odds with the other. In this sense, *La Haine*’s characters are both distant *and* close, seemingly rooted in two places at once.

This notion of a Third Space, pulled between idealised cultural myth and a far less impressive material reality, is similarly evident in a very different kind of film: Jim Jarmusch’s *Mystery Train* (1989). Set in what was then present-day Memphis, *Mystery Train* tells three separate stories in the course of twenty-four hours, peaking in on the lives of the town’s residents and its star-struck tourists. What is perhaps most striking about the film is the way it evokes the myth of Memphis – deeply rooted in Sun Records and its iconic roster of musicians, most famously Elvis Presley – while simultaneously countering the sleepy town’s glamourised status by emphasising the mundane setting and details of day-to-day life. As Roger Ebert succinctly put it, “this is not a Memphis approved by the chamber of commerce” (2010: ¶2). But at the same time, “the ghost of Elvis...seems to haunt the movie [and the town] with his voice and legend” (Ebert 1990: ¶7). His is a name evoked by almost everyone, a celebrity image

plastered all over hotel walls, a mythical figure who even appears in ghostly form late at night and briefly converses with one character in her hotel room.

While its characters are predominantly of the working class and one of them has recently been retrenched, *Mystery Train* does not explicitly centre on issues of marginality or poverty. Nonetheless, it is an ideal example of a film structured around the tension between idealised cultural myth and the much starker material reality. One finds this same interstitial positioning in the Mexican film, *Lake Tahoe* (2008). Rooted in a minimalism not all that dissimilar from *Mystery Train*, *Lake Tahoe* depicts a few aimless days in the life of a teenage boy, Juan, whose father has recently died. Significantly, the title is not taken from an actual location we get to see, but from a bumper sticker on a broken down car that the boy's poor family owns – a place the family had always intended to visit, but never could afford to. Such juxtaposition succinctly encapsulates what I have been saying about the interstitial nature of poverty, where idealised fantasy collides and is internalised within settings of economic, material despair.

Engaging and dissecting cinematic representations of marginality in this manner opens up important avenues of investigation in film studies – avenues that have not been travelled often enough, whether in the context of Korine's work or elsewhere. Returning to *Gummo*, my thesis has sought to challenge critics' rejection of the film, seeing in Korine's work an opportunity to wed post-structuralist theory to cinematic representations of marginality. If approaches such as Bhabha's notion of the Third Space or Butler's ideas about performance and citation seem so well suited to Korine's work, it is arguably because he is a quintessentially post-structuralist filmmaker. Korine parodically, humorously and often uncomfortably complicates many of the neat binary divisions we take for granted, making us rethink our fundamental expectations of how poverty, marginality and 'otherness' can and should be cinematically represented. While Korine himself decries interpretation and the critical community has seemed, on the whole, more than eager to comply, both critic and filmmaker have obscured a unique body of work that offers crucial insight into taking film analysis and filmmaking in excitingly new and provocatively stimulating directions. With a new film on the way – *Spring Breakers* (2013), which sees U.S. release this March

– there is perhaps no better time for a critical re-acquaintance with the work of Harmony Korine.

Filmography

Primary Film

Gummo. (1997). dir. Harmony Korine; screenplay by Harmony Korine; cinematography by Jean-Yves Escoffier; edited by Christopher Tellefsen; Fine Line Features

Secondary Films

American Beauty. (1999). dir. Sam Mendes, DreamWorks

Berlin Alexanderplatz. (1980). dir. Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Bavaria Film

Blue Velvet. (1986). dir. David Lynch, Metro-Goldwyn-Meyer

Charlie's Angels. (2000). dir. McG, Columbia Pictures

Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle. (2003). dir. McG, Columbia Pictures

Chinatown. (1974). dir. Roman Polanski, Paramount Pictures

Dark Knight Rises. (2012). dir. Christopher Nolan, Warner Bros. Pictures

Die Wonderwerker. (2012). dir. Katinka Heyns, Sonneblom Films

Eat. (1963). dir. Andy Warhol

Faces. (1968). dir. John Cassavetes, Walter Reade Organisation

Far From Heaven. (2002). dir. Todd Haynes, Focus Features

The Good Son. (1993). dir. Joseph Ruben, Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation

Hail Mary. (1985). dir. Jean-Luc Godard, Sara Films

Home Alone. (1990). dir. Chris Columbus, Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation

julien donkey-boy. (1999). dir. Harmony Korine, Independent Pictures

Kids. (1995). dir. Larry Clark, Miramax Films

Killing of a Chinese Bookie. (1976). dir. John Cassavetes, Faces Distribution

La Haine. (1995). dir. Mathieu Kassovitz, Canal +

Lake Tahoe. (2008). dir. Fernando Eimbcke, Cine Pantera

Mister Lonely. (2007). dir. Harmony Korine, O'Salvation

Mystery Train. (1989). dir. Jim Jarmusch, JVC Entertainment Networks

Paris Is Burning. (1990). dir. Jenny Livingston, Miramax Films

Richie Rich. (1994). dir. Donald Petrie, Warner Bros. Pictures

Scarface. (1983). dir. Brian De Palma, Universal Pictures

Singin' in the Rain. (1952). dir. Gene Kelly, Metro-Goldwyn-Meyer

Sleep. (1963). dir. Andy Warhol

Spring Breakers. (2013). dir. Harmony Korine, Muse Productions

Stroszek. (1977). dir. Werner Herzog, Werner Herzog Filmproduktion

Superstar: the Karen Carpenter Story. (1987). dir. Todd Haynes, Iced Tea Productions

Taxi Driver. (1976). dir. Martin Scorsese, Columbia Pictures Corporation

Trash Humpers. (2009). dir. Harmony Korine, O'Salvation

Umshini Wam. (2011). dir. Harmony Korine, O'Salvation

Walker. (1987). dir. Alex Cox, Universal Pictures

Winter's Bone. (2010). dir. Debra Granik, Winter's Bone Productions

A Woman Under the Influence. (1974). dir. John Cassavetes, Faces Distribution

Other Media

Television

The Name of This Film is Dogme95. (2000). Documentary. dir. Saul Metzstein,
Minerva Pictures

Music video

Sunday. (1998). Music Video for Sonic Youth. dir. Harmony Korine

University of Cape Town

Works Cited

- Adorno, Theodore W. (1991). The Schema of Mass Culture. In *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*. London: Routledge
- Althusser, Louis. (1971). Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation). In *Lenin and Philosophy and other Essays*. Translated from the French by Ben Brewster. London: NLB
- Arthur, Paul. (September, October 1997). Tom and Huck Go To Hell. *Film Comment*. 33(5)79-80
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. (2011). 'Heteroglossia in the Novel'. In *The Continental Aesthetics Reader*. 2nd Edition. Translated from the Russian by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Edited by Clive Cazeaux. London and New York: Routledge
- Battaglia, Andy. (2008). *The A.V. Club: Harmony Korine*. Available from: <http://harmony-korine.com/text/int/hk/?p=301> (accessed 16/7/2012)
- Baudrillard, Jean. (1998). *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*. Translated from the French by C.T. London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: SAGE Publications
- (1981). *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*. Translated from the French by Charles Levin. St. Louis: Telos Press
- (1993). *Symbolic Exchange and Death*. Translated from the French by Iain Hamilton Grant. London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage Publications
- Bellour, Raymond. (2000). *The Analysis of Film*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press
- Benjamin, Walter. (2006). The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility (Third Version). In *Selected Writings Volume 4: 1938-1940*. Translated from the German by Harry Zohn and Edmund Jephcott. Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press
- Bhabha, Homi K. (2004). *The Location of Culture*. Routledge Classic Edition. London and New York: Routledge Classics
- Bordo, Susan. (1993). *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body*. Berkley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press
- Bordwell, David, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson. (1985). *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960*. London: Routledge

- Bryson, Bethany. (1996). "Anything But Heavy Metal": Symbolic Exclusion and Musical Dislikes. *American Sociological Review*. 61(5)884-899
- Buchloh, Benjamin H.D. (2000). Andy Warhol's One-Dimensional Art 1956-1966 (1989). In *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975*. Cambridge and London: MIT Press
- Butler, Judith. (2006). Afterword. In *Bodily Citations: Religion and Judith Butler*. Edited by Ellen T. Armour and Susan M. St. Ville. New York: Columbia University Press
- . (1993). *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*. New York and London: Routledge
- . (2007). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York and London: Routledge
- . (2011). Gender is Burning: Questions of Appropriation and Subversion. In *The Continental Aesthetics Reader*. 2nd Edition. Edited by Clive Cazeaux. London and New York: Routledge
- . (2004). *Undoing Gender*. New York and Oxfordshire: Routledge
- Carlton-Ford, Steve. (2009). Review: The Cultural Significance of the Child Star, by Jane O'Connor. *Contemporary Sociology*. 38(2)139-140
- Carman, Taylor and Hansen, Mark B. N. (2005). Introduction. In *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*. Edited by Taylor Carman and Mark B. N. Hansen. Cambridge, New York, et al.: Cambridge University Press
- Cawelti, John G. (1979). *Chinatown* and Generic Transformation in Recent American Films. In *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Reading*. 2nd Edition. Edited by Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Cazeaux, Clive. (2011). "Introduction" to "Heteroglossia in the Novel". In *The Continental Aesthetics Reader*. 2nd Edition. Edited by Clive Cazeaux. London and New York: Routledge
- Cheever, Abigail. (2006). "The Man He Almost Is": Jerry Maguire and Judith Butler. *Arizona Quarterly: a Journal of American Literature, Culture and Theory*. 62(4)71-91
- Chilcoat, Michelle. (2004). Brain Sex, Cyberpunk Cinema, Feminism, and the Dis/Location of Heterosexuality. *NWSA Journal*. 16(2)156-176

- Christian, Laura. (2004). Of Housewives and Saints: Abjection, Transgression and Impossible Mourning in *Poison and Safe*. *Camera Obscura*. 19(3)92-123
- Cowan, Sharon. (2009). "We Walk Among You": Trans Identity Goes to the Movies. *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law*. 21(1)91-117
- Cunha, Tom. (1997). *A Conversation With Harmony Korine*. Available from: <http://harmony-korine.com/text/int/hk/?p=48> (accessed 11/10/2011)
- De Beauvoir, Simone. (2010). *The Second Sex*. Translated from the French by Constance Borde and Sheila Maolvany-Chevallier. London: Vintage
- De Luca, Tiago. (2010). Carnal Spirituality: the Films of Carlos Reygadas. *Senses of Cinema*. 55. Available from: <http://sensesofcinema.com/2010/feature-articles/carnal-spirituality-the-films-of-carlos-reygadas-2> (accessed 23/03/2013)
- De Saussure, Ferdinand. (2005). *Course in General Linguistics*. Translated from the French by Roy Harris. London: Duckworth
- Deleuze, Gilles. (1989). *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*. Translated from the French by Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta. London, New York: Continuum Books
- Derrida, Jacques. (2002). Negotiations. In *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews, 1971-2001*. Stanford: Stanford University Press
- (1988). Signature Event Context. In *Limited Inc*. Translated from the French by Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman. Evanston: Northwestern University Press
- (2003). Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences. In *Writing and Difference*. Translated from the French by Alan Bass. London: Routledge
- Deussing, Ryan. (1997). *Harmony Korine's America*. Available from: <http://harmony-korine.com/text/int/hk/?p=44> (accessed 11/10/2011)
- Douglas, Mary. (1970). *Purity and Danger: an analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul
- Dyer, Richard. (1993). *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representations*. London and New York: Routledge
- (1997). *White*. London and New York: Routledge

- Ebert, Roger. (2010). *Great Movies: Mystery Train*. Available from: <http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20100721/REVIEWS08/10072992/1023> (accessed 27/02/2013)
- (1990). *Mystery Train*. Available from: <http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/19900126/REVIEWS/1260301/1023> (accessed 27/02/2013)
- Ebiri, Bilge. (2009). *Harmony Korine on How Fatherhood Influenced His New Movie About Having Sex With Garbage Cans*. Available from: http://www.vulture.com/2009/10/harmony_korine_on.html (accessed 27/02/2013)
- Feaster, Felicia. (Winter 1998-1999). *Gummo*. *Film Quarterly*. 52(2)41-43
- Foucault, Michel. (2004). *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976*. Translated from the French by David Macey. London, New York, Victoria, et al.: Penguin Books
- (1992). *The Use of Pleasure: The History of Sexuality Volume 2*. Translated from the French by Robert Hurley. London, New York et al.: Penguin Books
- Fry, Paul. (2009). *Lesson 13: Jacques Lacan in Theory* (digital recording). New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University
- Garcia, Christien. (2010). General Queer; or, Lee Edelman and the Oppositional Meaning of Queer. In *Queering Paradigms*. Edited by Burkhard Scherer. Oxford, Bern, Berlin, et al.: Peter Lang
- Gates, Henry Louis. (1987). The "Blackness of Blackness": A Critique of the Sign and the Signifying Monkey. In *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the "Racial" Self*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Guthmann, Edward. (1998). 'Gummo' Stages a Freak Show of Kids and Rubs It In. Available from: <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/1998/05/21/DD68647.DTL> (accessed 02/02/2012)
- Hack, Jefferson. (1998). *Pure Vision*. Available from: <http://harmony-korine.com/text/int/hk/?p=82> (accessed 11/10/2011)
- Halligan, Benjamin. (2005). What Was the Neo-Underground and What Wasn't: A First Reconsideration of Harmony Korine. In *New Punk Cinema*. Edited by Nicholas Rombes. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press
- Haramis, Nick. (2009). *Mister Lonely-No-More: Harmony Korine Takes Our Quiz*. Available from: <http://harmony-korine.com/text/int/hk/?p=350> (accessed 19/03/2013)

- Harris, Keith. (2000). 'Roots'? The Relationship Between the Global and the Local within the Extreme Metal Scene. *Popular Music*. 19(1)13-30
- Hays, Matthew. (1998). *Welcome To My White-Trash Nightmare*. Available from: <http://harmony-korine.com/text/int/hk/?p=64> (accessed 11/10/2011)
- Hebdige, Dick. (1979). *Subculture: the Meaning of Style*. London and New York: Methuen
- Hirschberg, Lynn. (1997). *The Two Hollywoods – The Screenwriters: Shane Black; Harmony Korine*. Available from: <http://harmony-korine.com/text/int/hk/?p=40> (accessed 11/10/2011)
- Hjort, Mette and MacKenzie, Scott (eds). (2003). *Purity and Provocation: Dogma 95*. London: BFI Publishing
- Holquist, Michael. (2002). *Dialogism: Bakhtin and his World*. 2nd Edition. London and New York: Routledge
- Homer, Sean. (2005). *Jacques Lacan*. London and New York: Routledge
- Huddleston, Tom. (2008). *Harmony Korine Interview*. Available from: <http://harmony-korine.com/text/int/hk/?p=260> (accessed 01/01/2013)
- Jacobs, Diane. (1980). *Hollywood Renaissance*. New York: Delta
- Jamie, Cameron and Hainley, Bruce. (1998). *Kids in America*. Available from: <http://harmony-korine.com/text/int/hk/?p=62> (accessed 11/10/2011)
- Jones, Ellen E. (2008). *Harmony Korine Interview*. Available from: <http://harmony-korine.com/text/int/hk/?p=331> (accessed 19/03/2013)
- Kavka, Misha. (2008). *Reality Television, Affect and Intimacy: Reality Matters*. New York and Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan
- Kelley, Mike. (1997). *Mike Kelley Interviews Harmony Korine*. Available from: <http://harmony-korine.com/text/int/hk/?p=38> (accessed 11/10/2011)
- Kincaid, James R. (1992). *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture*. New York and London: Routledge
- Kitses, Jim. (1969). *Horizons West*. London: Secker & Warburg
- Kohn, Eric. (2008). *Harmony Korine Interview*. Available from: <http://harmony-korine.com/text/int/hk/?p=272> (accessed 01/01/2013)
- Korine, Harmony. (1998). *Barnes & Noble Online Chat*. Available from: <http://harmony-korine.com/text/int/hk/?p=72> (accessed 11/10/2011)

- . (2008a). *The Collected Fanzines*. Chicago: Drag City
- . (2002). *Collected Screenplays: Volume 1 – Jokes, Gummo, julien donkey-boy*. London: Faber and Faber
- . (2000). *Harm By Name, Harm By Nature*. Available from: <http://harmony-korine.com/text/int/hk/?p=364> (accessed 16/7/2012)
- . (2008b). *Harmony Korine interview*. Available from: <http://harmony-korine.com/text/int/hk/?p=295> (accessed 28/02/2013)
- . (1997). *On the Late Show With David Letterman*. Available from: <http://harmony-korine.com/text/int/hk/?p=46> (Accessed 11/10/2011)
- Korine, Harmony and Herzog, Werner. (1999). *Gummo's Whammo*. Available from: <http://harmony-korine.com/text/int/hk/?p=58> (accessed 11/10/2011)
- Kraus, Daniel. (2000). *Complete Harmony*. Available from: <http://harmony-korine.com/text/int/hk/?p=132> (Accessed 31st October 2011)
- Kristeva, Julia. (1982). *Powers of Horror: an Essay on Abjection*. Translated from the French by Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press
- LaBruce, Bruce. (1998). *Harmony & Degeneresy*. Available from: <http://harmony-korine.com/text/int/hk/?p=74> (accessed 11/10/2011)
- Lacan, Jacques. (1988). *The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis 1954-1955: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book II*. Translated from the French by Sylvana Tomaselli. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- . (1992). *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-1960: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book VII*. Translated from the French by Dennis Porter. London and New York: Routledge
- . (1998). *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XI*. Translated from the French by Alan Sheridan. London and New York: W.W. Norton & co.
- . (2006a). The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason Since Freud. In *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*. Translated from the French by Bruce Fink. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company
- . (2006b). The Purloined Letter. In *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*. Translated from the French by Bruce Fink. London, New York: W. W. Norton & Company

- . (1993). *The Psychoses: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book III*. Translated from the French by Russell Grigg. London: Routledge
- Lemaire, Anika. (1986). *Jacques Lacan*. Translated from the French by David Macey. London and New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul
- Levi-Strauss, Claude. (1969). *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*. Translated from the French by James Harle Bell, John Ruchard von Sturmer and Rondey Needham. London: Eyre & Spottiswoode
- . (1970). *The Raw and the Cooked: Introduction to a Science of Mythology I*. Translated from the French by John and Doreen Weightman. London: Jonathan Cape
- Levy, Eugene. (1997). *Gummo*. Available from: <http://www.variety.com/review/VE1117329547/?refCatId=31> (accessed 02/01/2013)
- Lippy, Todd. (2000). *Projections: Harmony Korine*. Available from: <http://harmony-korine.com/text/int/hk/?p=126> (accessed 31st October 2011)
- Lucas, Rod. (2004). In and Out of Culture: Ethnographic Means of Interpreting Schizophrenia. In *Schizophrenia, Culture and Subjectivity*. Edited by Janis Hunter Jenkins and Robert John Barrett. Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, et al.: Cambridge University Press.
- Lyons, Tom. (1997). *Southern Culture on the Skids*. Available from: <http://harmony-korine.com/text/int/hk/?p=52> (accessed 01/01/2013)
- Marx, Karl. (1990). *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy Volume One*. Translated from the German by Ben Fowkes. London, New York, et al: Penguin Books
- Maslin, Janet. (1997). *Cats, Grandma and Other Disposables*. Available from: <http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9907E6DA123FF934A25753C1A961958260&partner=Rotten%20Tomatoes> (accessed 07/02/2012)
- Mathijs, Ernest. (2008). *The Cinema of David Cronenberg: from Baron of Blood to Cultural Hero*. London and New York: Wallflower Press
- Mbembe, Achille. (2001). *On the Postcolony*. Translated from the French by A. M. Berrett, Janet Roitman, Murray Last and Steven Rendall. Berkley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press
- McKee, Robert. (1999). *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting*. London: Methuen

- McLean, Craig. (2000). *And the Ass Saw the Angel*. Available from: <http://harmony-korine.com/text/int/hk/?p=136> (accessed 16/7/2012)
- McRoy, Jay and Crucianelli, Guy. (2009). "I Panic the World": Benevolent Exploitation in Tod Browning's *Freaks* and Harmony Korine's *Gummo*. *The Journal of Popular Culture*. 42(2)256-272
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. (1962). *Phenomenology of Perception*. Translated from the French by Colin Smith. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul
- Metz, Christian. (1974). *Film Language: a Semiotics of the Cinema*. Translated from the French by Michael Taylor. New York: Oxford University Press
- Moore-Gilbert, Bart. (1997). *Postcolonial Theory: Contexts, Practices, Politics*. London and New York: Verso
- Morgan, Janice. (2004). The Social Realism of Body Language in *Rosetta*. *The French Review*. 77(3)526-535
- Mulvey, Laura. (1989). Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema. In *Visual and Other Pleasures*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press
- Murphy, J. J. (Winter, 2004). Harmony Korine's *Gummo*: The Compliment of Getting Stuck With a Fork. *Film Studies*. 5(?)92-105
- Neale, Steve. (1993). Masculinity as Spectacle: Reflections on Men and Mainstream Cinema. In *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema*. Edited by Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark. London and New York: Routledge
- Nochimson, Martha. (1992-1993). Desire Under the Douglas Firs: Entering the Body of Reality in *Twin Peaks*. *Film Quarterly*. 46(2)22-34
- O'Conner, Tom Austin (2009). Genre-Fucking: Harmony Korine's Cinema of Poetry. *Wide Screen*. 1(1)1-15. Available from: <http://widescreenjournal.org/index.php/journal/article/viewFile/18/19> (accessed 03/07/2012)
- O'Hagen, Sean. (2003). *Danger, Man at Work*. Available from: <http://harmony-korine.com/text/int/hk/?p=187> (accessed 18/01/2013)
- Parry, Benita. (Autumn/Winter 1994). 'Signs of Our Times: Discussion of Homi Bhabha's *Location of Culture*'. *Third Text*. 28(9)1-24
- Pride, Ray. (1997). *Disharmony*. Available from: <http://harmony-korine.com/text/int/hk/?p=27> (accessed 16/7/2012)
- Ramos, Steve. (1997). *Boy Makes World*. Available from: <http://harmony-korine.com/text/int/hk/?p=56> (accessed 11/10/2011)

- Said, Edward. (2004). *Adrift in Similarity*. In *From Oslo to Iraq and the Road Map*. New York: Vintage Books
- . (2003). *Orientalism*. London, New York, Toronto, et al.: Penguin Books
- Scheffler, Harold W. (1970). *Structuralism in Anthropology*. In *Structuralism*. Edited by Jacques Ehrmann. New York: Anchor Books
- Schwarzbaum, Lisa. (1997). *Movie Review: 'Gummo'*. Available from: <http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,290029,00.html> (accessed 21/10/2012)
- Sconce, Jeffrey. (Fall, 2007). *Indecipherable Films: Teaching Gummo*. *Cinema Journal*. 47(1)112-116
- Smit, Alexia. (2007). *A Strange Mirror: Realism, Ambiguity and Absence in the Work of Harmony Korine*. Unpublished Thesis. Cape Town: University of Cape Town
- Smith, Gavin. (1998). *Gummo*. *Sight and Sound*. 8(4)38-39
- Sobchack, Vivian. (2004). *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*. Berkley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press
- Sontag, Susan. (2001). *Susan Sontag, The New Yorker*. Available from <http://groups.colgate.edu/aarislam/susan.htm> (accessed 16/9/2012)
- Stam, Robert, Robert Burgoyne and Sandy Flitterman-Lewis. (1992). *New Vocabularies in Film Semiotics: Structuralism, Post-Structuralism and Beyond*. London and New York: Routledge
- Tatara, Paul. (1997). *Proof That Kids Should Not Play With Cameras*. Available from <http://harmony-korine.com/text/int/hk/?p=36> (accessed 02/02/2012)
- Taubin, Amy. (2008). *Harmony Korine in Conversation with Amy Taubin*. Available from: <http://harmony-korine.com/text/int/hk/?p=334> (accessed 16/7/2012)
- Thomsen, Christian Braad. (1997). *Fassbinder: The Life and Work of a Provocative Genius*. London and Boston: Faber and Faber
- Thomson, Rosemarie Garland. (1997). *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press
- Truffaut, François. (1980). *The Films in My Life*. Translated from the French by Leonard Mayhew. London: Allen Lane

- Turner, Graeme. (1988). *Film As Social Practice*. London and New York: Routledge
- Van Sant, Gus. (1997). *Forward*. Available from <http://harmony-korine.com/text/int/hk/?p=36> (accessed 11/10/2011)
- Vojković, Saša. (2009). Reformulating the Symbolic Universe: *Kill Bill* and Tarantino's Transcultural Imaginary. In *Film Theory and Contemporary Hollywood Movies*. Edited by Warren Buckland. New York and London: Routledge
- Walczak, Dantek. (1997). *Harmony Korine Interview*. Available from <http://harmony-korine.com/text/int/hk/?p=29> (Accessed 11/10/2011)
- Williams, Linda. (1991). Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess. *Film Quarterly*. 44(4)2-13
- Willoquet-Maricondi, Paula. (1999). Fleshing the Text: Greenaway's Pillow Book and the Erasure of the Body. *Postmodern Culture*. 9(2). Available from: http://muse.jhu.edu.ezproxy.uct.ac.za/journals/postmodern_culture/v009/9.2willoquet.html (accessed 20/03/2013)
- Wright, Will. (1975). *Sixguns and Society*. Berkley: University of California Press
- Zavattini, Cesare. (2000). Some Ideas on the Cinema. In *Vittorio de Sica: Contemporary Perspectives*. Edited by Howard Curle and Stephen Snyder. Translated from the Italian by Pier Luigi Lanza. Toronto, Buffalo and London: University of Toronto Press
- Žižek, Slavoj. (2008). *Fear Thy Neighbour As Thyself: the Antinomies of Tolerant Reason* (digital recording). Boston, Massachusetts: The Institute for Human Sciences at Boston University
- (2005). *The Metastases of Enjoyment: on Women and Causality*. London and New York: Verso