

Harmony Korine's *Gummo*: The Compliment of Getting Stuck with a Fork

• J. J. Murphy

Harmony Korine's *Gummo* (1997) might be the most controversial American independent film of the 1990s. Although the film won major prizes at the Venice and Rotterdam film festivals, not only did Janet Maslin deem it the 'worst movie of the year' in her scathing *New York Times* review, but J. Hoberman, one of the most sympathetic critics of alternative cinema, was equally hostile in his response, calling the film 'genuinely disgusting' and dismissing Korine as 'the glue-sniffer's Jean-Luc Godard'.¹ The debut feature by the screenwriter of Larry Clark's *Kids* (1995), *Gummo* is a tabloid look at the dark underside of adolescence set amidst the decay of a small Midwestern town. Not only does the film ignore the conventions of mainstream plot, but it aims to provoke its audience by serving up a consistent dose of white trash chic – animal abuse, racist venom, prostitution involving a woman with Downs' Syndrome, child molestation, and murder – in a manner intended to be shocking and grotesque. *Gummo* pushes at the boundaries of acceptable good taste by raising issues about the presentation of the physically and mentally challenged and by blurring the line between documentary reality and scripted fiction. American independent films that have difficult content, such as *Bad Lieutenant* (1992), *The Living End* (1992), *In the Company of Men* (1997), *Happiness* (1998), and *Boys Don't Cry* (1999) often couch such material within a more conventional form in order to make it more palatable. To its credit, *Gummo* resists this temptation by employing a more experimental collage technique in which scenes are linked together, not by cause and effect, but by the

elusive logic of free association. *Gummo*'s real achievement ultimately rests on its unusual narrative syntax – the way Korine is able to weave together its disparate scenes and events to create a viscerally assaulting, Modern Gothic portrait of the notion of 'difference' in its various manifestations.

Most filmmakers who have attempted to work in this type of form have depended on editing to shape the material into a coherent finished film. *Gummo* certainly exploits the editing process, as well as the spontaneous, improvised, and serendipitous events that can occur during actual filming, but the film nevertheless relies heavily on Korine's engaging screenplay. Unlike so-called 'execution-dependent' films, such as Jim Jarmusch's *Stranger Than Paradise* (1984) and *Down By Law* (1986) or even Gus Van Sant's *Elephant* (2003), which didn't have a script, *Gummo* succeeds on the page as well as the screen, which no doubt helped to convince Fine Line to finance such an unlikely feature film.² On another level, Fine Line's interest in Korine and *Gummo* seems fairly transparent – the industry's obsession with teen culture stems directly from the demographics of its audience. At the time *Gummo* was produced, Korine was considered a certified youth-culture insider. He had already achieved notoriety and success, at age nineteen, as the screenwriter for Larry Clark's *Kids*, an independent film that walked a fine line between authentic, youth-culture expression and exploitation. Its graphic depiction of teen sexuality and drug taking caused *Kids* to get an NC-17 rating, and Miramax to distribute it under a different label, but the film nevertheless grossed \$7 million in domestic release.

The more provocative and disturbing aspects of *Gummo* – those elements that appear to have riled movie critics and reviewers like Maslin and Hoberman – are a bit less apparent in the screenplay. Korine, for example, describes the early scene of someone drowning a cat in seven precise sentences, yet the effect on the page is not quite the same as its visceral impact on the screen.³ Korine's screenplay nevertheless contains a remarkable level of specificity about its adolescent characters. It's apparent from reading the script that Korine has an exact sense of how each scene should look. Here is how he describes Solomon and Tumbler as they ride their bikes:

The two of them are riding their bikes down an empty street.
Rows of small houses surround both sides of the street.
Both boys have BB guns strapped to their backs. Solomon is wearing tight army pants with big pockets and an orange YMCA T-shirt. He has on a pair of generic high-top sneakers. His bike is red and simple, one wheel is a mag and the other is spoked. Tumbler is wearing a pair of blue jeans with patches on them. There are little holes in his pants. He is wearing a blue flannel shirt with grease stains. He has a green backpack on. His sneakers are old running shoes with soles worn down. His bike is more glamorous; it is painted silver and has stickers on it. There is a racing plate on the front of the

handlebars with the number 17 on it. He is sitting on a long padded banana seat. There is a skull and crossbones flag attached to the back of the bike. It flaps noisily in the wind.⁴

Not only does the above description help to reveal character – the difference between the two characters (clothes, shoes, accessories, types of bikes they're riding) – but 'authenticity' is also inscribed in the details. (As the industry well knows, kids – for whom style is everything – have the uncanny ability to spot a fake.) Korine also provides other levels of specificity in terms of the behaviour of his characters, such as the scene where Solomon and Tumbler break into Jarrod Wigely's house, and Solomon exchanges the dirty pair of socks he's wearing for a fresh pair of Jarrod's. Solomon's gesture suggests his poverty, but, on a symbolic level, it represents an unconscious attempt by the young burglar to take possession of someone else's home.

Korine's grasp of youth culture extends to his dialogue. Whereas Korine's dialogue in *Kids* attempted to replicate realism by being long, rambling, and highly verbose, the dialogue in *Gummo* turns out to be much closer to a kind of poetic realism. In capturing the innocent banter of teenagers – the types of stupid things kids actually talk about – Korine includes bits of nonsense, or what could easily be snippets of overheard, real-life conversation:



• Solomon and Tumbler on bikes.

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Tummler: Does your mom ever make you food?

Solomon: She makes me toast.

Tummler: Is that it?

Solomon: She cooks me lamb chops.

Tummler: You ever eaten crêpe suzette?

My characterization of the above exchange as 'nonsense' stems from the fact that what Solomon says doesn't prove true. Solomon's mother actually serves him spaghetti – not toast or lamb chops – when she shampoos his hair. After Tummler recites what amounts to an oral suicide note, which is followed by a 'Slayer' video clip, Solomon says in voiceover: 'Life is beautiful. Really it is. Full of beauty and illusions. Life is great. Without it, you'd be dead'. Solomon's statement seems ironic, if not downright odd, given what has just transpired. While this could be interpreted as another contrast in character between the world views of Tummler and Solomon, Korine confirmed in an interview that Solomon's statement is an old vaudeville joke.⁵ The inclusion of such materials represents Korine's enthusiasm for collaging together different bits of information, while completely disguising his sources. That proves to be part of the poetry and mystery of Korine's screenplay for *Gummo*, which confirmed Korine's substantial talents as a writer attuned to the subtle nuances of youth culture.

Fine Line's marketing campaign for *Gummo*, which emphasized the twenty-three-year old writer/director's youth-culture pedigree, took a distinctly auteurist slant. The press materials included a brief forward by Gus Van Sant (who was the Executive Producer of *Kids*), as well as an enthusiastic interview with Korine conducted by none other than the German director, Werner Herzog. Van Sant wrote: 'Harmony Korine has come up with a completely original creation, as far as I can tell. To categorize it would be hard because it is so new, there would have to be a new category'.⁶ The film's co-producer, Robin O'Hara, who, like Van Sant, acknowledged specific influences, also insisted on Korine's originality: 'The thing that's stunning about Harmony is he is an original, in every sense of the word'.⁷ Fine Line's publicity campaign and

Korine's own interviews about *Gummo* sought to situate the film within a tradition of European art cinema by citing the films of Herzog, Fellini, and Godard. (Korine would later align himself with the Danish Dogme 95 manifesto with his next film, *Julien Donkey-Boy*, with Herzog cast in one of the lead roles.) The improvisational elements of *Gummo* – the tension between spontaneity and scripted action – would also be likened to the films of John Cassavetes.

Whereas *Gummo*'s nonlinearity, lack of plot, and mixture of documentary and fiction might seem original in the context of commercial cinema, it is not without precedent within the non-commercial tradition of American cinema. The avant-garde pioneer Maya Deren, for instance, privileged what she later termed the 'vertical' (poetic) over the 'horizontal' (dramatic) in her psychodramas of the 1940s. Ten years later, Christopher Maclaine, the beat poet, took an amphetamine-inspired, nonlinear approach to narrative in films such as *The End* (1953) and *The Man Who Invented Gold* (1957), which were largely unappreciated at the time. In the 1960s, Jonas Mekas championed the idea of a plotless cinema as an antidote to what he perceived to be the stagnation of classical Hollywood, even going so far as to suggest that the only way to ensure a rebirth of American cinema would be to shoot all screenwriters.⁸ Ron Rice's underground classic *The Flower Thief* (1960) and David Brooks lesser-known *The Wind Is Driving Him toward the Open Sea* (1968) represent two important manifestations of this plotless impulse.

Not surprisingly, Korine attempted to distance himself from the American avant-garde tradition as well as American independent cinema:

I'm a hundred per cent commercial filmmaker. I have nothing to do with independent directors, alternative cinema, I make Harmony movies. It's a cinema of obsession and passion. But at the same time, I can't differentiate between notions of underground. Underground film, underground music, alternative culture, to me it doesn't exist.⁹

Korine's denial of the existence of alternative cinema no doubt allowed him to promote his own originality and to claim that *Gummo*



• Barry McGee, *Scribble and Scripture Print*, 20%⁶/₁₆ × 16%⁶/₁₆ inches.

represented a 'new aesthetic'.¹⁰ There's a bit of an irony here. Although Korine found himself financed by a subsidiary of a major studio and insists that he's a totally commercial filmmaker, his work, at least thus far, has proven much too avant-garde to attract a mainstream audience.

Just it is necessary to understand Korine's achievement within a larger cinematic tradition, it is equally important to point out that he did not create *Gummo* in a cultural vacuum. Korine's denial of the existence of an alternative culture is even more problematic given the fact that his artistic practice – he's written a novel, produced fanzines, and done installations in major art galleries – has undeniable roots in urban street culture. Korine has been associated with the artistic subculture centered around Aaron Rose's Alleged Gallery on the Lower East Side of New York City. His work, which exhibits a DIY rawness, shares aesthetic concerns with that of other artists who also base their art primarily on their own life experiences. These include neo-graffiti and skateboard painters such as Barry McGee, Margaret Kilgallen, and Chris Johanson, musicians, such as Tommy Guerrero, and artists who also work in multiple disciplines, such as Mark Gonzales (who even appears in *Gummo* as the guy who wrestles the chair). All of these artists, including Korine, were featured as part of a major exhibition in 2004 entitled 'Beautiful Losers: Contemporary Art and Street Culture', which opened at the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati and travelled to Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco and other locations

around the United States.¹¹ Korine's contribution to 'Beautiful Losers' includes a thirty-minute video on the street magician David Blaine. Entitled *Above the Below* (2000), it documents the performance artist's feat of being suspended above the Thames River in a plexiglass box for forty-four days without food, and includes scenes involving self-mutilation. When asked in Korine's video what motivates him to attempt such risky feats of endurance, Blaine replies: 'I love death. I hate life'.

Art critic Jerry Saltz has coined the term 'Modern Gothic' to describe the recent trend toward creepy, angst-ridden, and death-obsessed work by younger artists. Saltz cites several characteristics, notably, the 'ironic edge' and transgressive nature of such work. He writes: 'In the Gothic, the hero and the villain resemble each other; the wicked can be redeemed. Thus, fluid definitions of sexuality, self and subject matter are typical. This keeps the Gothic elusive, deluded and chic'.¹² Evidence of the Modern Gothic phenomenon includes the Winter 2004 exhibition 'Scream: 10 Artists × 10 Writers × 10 Scary Movies' (curated by Fernanda Arruda and Michael Clifton) at Anton Kern Gallery in New York City, and the inclusion of work by Banks Violette, Slater Bradley, Sue de Beer, Christian Holstad, David Altmejd, Hernan Bas, and Aida Ruilova (to cite several examples) in the 2004 Whitney Biennial. *Gummo*, with its fixation on death and the grotesque, and its references to the demonic via the band Slayer, clearly anticipates the Modern Gothic sensibility that seems to have become more prominent since 9/11.¹³

Korine's screenplay for *Kids*, of course, was about skateboard subculture. It employed the



• Mark Gonzales, right, in the chair fighting scene.

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very loose plot device of a young woman, Jenny, discovering that she has been infected with AIDS from a first-time sexual encounter with a skateboarder named Telly, who is obsessed with deflowering young virgins. Jenny searches to find Telly throughout much of the film, only to end up being raped by Telly's friend, Casper, at a drunken orgy. *Kids* sidesteps the real dramatic implications of this plotline, which would lead to a final confrontation between Jenny and Telly. Instead, it merely uses it as a pretext to explore the sex lives and drug habits of disaffected teenagers in New York City. (As a result, the film provides neither a sense of closure, nor of lessons learned.)

Korine dispenses with traditional narrative structure altogether in *Gummo*. He professes to be much more interested in individual scenes – slices of life – than in plot. According to Korine:

With *Gummo* I wanted to create a new viewing experience with images coming from all directions. To free myself up to do that, I had to create some kind of scenario that would allow me to just show scenes, which is all I care about. I can't stand plots because I don't feel life has plots. There is no beginning, middle, or end, and it upsets me when things are tied up so perfectly.¹⁴

Rather than employing a conventional plot, *Gummo* uses a collage technique that mixes together still photographs, stock footage, and documentary-like shots and interviews shot in other formats (such as super 8 and digital video) with scripted scenes. All of this material further upsets our sense of the film's continuity by being



• Mark Gonzales, *Schminx*; foam, fiberglass and enamel; approx. 46 x 96 x 108 inches.

shot in a variety of different styles – from home movies to staged television-like interviews.

Korine's technique of layering images and sound has been compared by at least one critic to 'the looping and sampling process of drum-'n'-bass'.¹⁵ The soundtrack includes many examples drawn from kids' folklore: foul-mouthed street lyrics, game songs, cheerleading songs, alphabet songs, religious songs, and animal-inspired songs such as 'My Little Rooster'. The film likewise incorporates different types of music – from death metal and Buddy Holly to Madonna and Roy Orbison. In voiceovers and dialogue, we hear a variety of oral forms. Korine peppers the film with suicide notes, what sounds like a grade-school essay, celebrity gossip and rumor, neighborhood gossip, standup comedy, overheard conversations, stupid jokes, sexual puns, and a personal confession about sexual abuse by a parent. The film also abounds in references and allusions to American popular culture.

If *Gummo* lacks a traditional plot, is it merely a succession of disconnected individual scenes, as Korine claims, or does the film contain some type of narrative logic capable of holding its various parts together? Korine creates a number of scenes involving characters who never reappear again, such as the albino woman without toes; the self-loathing adolescent who tries to get an African-American dwarf to kiss him; the locals who talk about torturing cats, prison, and racial hatred; the shirtless guy with shaved head who discusses his depression and desire to commit suicide; the mentally-challenged individuals who denounce lesbianism; and the deaf couple who argue loudly in the bowling alley. Other characters, such as Cassidey (the prostitute with Down's Syndrome), Eddie (the tennis player with ADD), the skinhead brothers who lift weights and get into a slugfest afterwards, Ellen (the mentally challenged woman who appears in several scenes), and the man who battles the chair are connected to one of the various story lines or through voiceovers by either Solomon or Tumbler. All these scenes add to the film's visual overload. Yet none of these scenes turn out to have quite the impact as the ones that involve the

six major characters and four different story lines, which connect indirectly through a black cat.

Solomon and Tumbler serve as the two protagonists in the film, thereby providing one story thread, as the two boys ride around town on mountain bikes looking for cats to kill with their BB guns. When we first meet Tumbler, he sits in a junked car. As he feels up a teenage girl, he tells her: 'You have a lump in your titty'. In a conventional narrative, this would create a potential plotline, but we actually don't see this girl again until much later in the film, when she sadly discusses how her impending breast removal will affect her subsequent relationships with boys. Instead, Dot and Helen, the attractive white-haired sisters, develop into potential romance characters, as we watch them apply strips of duct tape to their breasts and nipples in order to make them larger, before bouncing up and down on their attic bed to a Buddy Holly song. Dot has a crush on Eddie, but this story thread doesn't lead anywhere either. Jarrod Wigely becomes the antagonist to Tumbler and Solomon when the two learn that he's competing with them for cat carcasses, which can be exchanged for money at the local supermarket. Jarrod, however, doesn't provide much in the way of conflict. When Tumbler and Solomon track down Jarrod, they interrogate him about his methods and his sick grandmother. Later, the two boys break into Jarrod's house and discover photographs of him dressed in woman's clothes. Tumbler disconnects the grandmother's respirator as an act of revenge, but Jarrod doesn't reappear again, and no complications ever arise from Tumbler's actions. Meanwhile Helen and Dot's black cat, Foot Foot, disappears. A final character, Bunny Boy, who functions as a free-floating element disconnected from the other story lines for most of the film, ends up kissing Dot and Helen, and retrieves the carcass of Foot Foot.

Solomon, age fourteen, idolizes his sidekick, Tumbler, a suicidal and depressed older teen, whose face clearly reflects his inner turmoil. Solomon describes him: 'Tumbler sees everything. Some say he's downright evil. He's

got what it takes to be a legend. He's got a marvelous persona'. Even their names suggest the unlikely juxtaposition between the Bible (Solomon) and the Yiddish word for an entertainer who encourages audience participation (Tumbler).¹⁶ A study in contrast also in terms of their size, Tumbler and Solomon suggest a teenage version of Mutt and Jeff. Solomon, in particular, has cartoon-like features – an over-sized, misshapen head on a scrawny, pint-sized body, and large ears, which makes him look like a young Mr. Potato Head. Even before we meet either one, we hear Solomon's faint, slightly raspy voice over documentary-like images of a tornado and its aftermath:

Solomon (V. O.) 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 stickin' 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 neighbor was killed in half. He used to ride dirt bikes and his 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.¹⁷

Solomon's narration establishes natural disaster as the cause for much of what we will see in Xenia, an impoverished white-trash enclave full of broken families, alienated teenagers, racist hate mongers, die-hard homophobes, and physically and mentally challenged individuals.



• Glen E. Friedman, *Minor Threat at Dischord House, Arlington, VA, August 1983.*

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Solomon's voiceover suggests that many fathers have died in the tornado, including possibly his own. Physical deformity is also linked to the tornado – the leg found in the tree as well as the head of a neighbor that was never found. Although Solomon's narration is decidedly solemn and poetic, it's revealing of his character that he finds this gruesome detail to be humorous. The death of animals is also highlighted. Not only do we see an image of a decaying dog impaled on a TV antenna, but torturing and killing cats – a childhood trait usually associated with later deviant pathology – will become a major sport and diversion throughout *Gummo*, while at the same time providing the kids with money to buy strawberry milk shakes, airplane glue, and sex. Solomon reports seeing a girl fly through the air, but he includes the telling detail that he looked up her skirt. Not surprisingly, sexuality will become another prominent theme in the film.

The introduction of Bunny Boy – a skinny, androgynous skateboarder, who wears a pink hat with large rabbit ears, dirty Bermuda shorts, and sneakers – adds a surreal element to the story. In a series of shots, Bunny Boy shivers in the cold on a barbed-wire overpass overlooking a highway. He stares at the camera and then off to the side. Seemingly bored, he kicks at a puddle of water, and pees onto the oncoming traffic below. As Bunny Boy sits and smokes a cigarette, we see that he has the word 'Mac' tattooed on three of his fingers and a star on a fourth. Arms extended to form a Christ-like pose, Bunny Boy stares directly at us. He shivers again, spits, kicks the fence, hangs from the top of the enclosure, and rubs his rear end suggestively against the fence, before he spits some more. Over all of this, we hear Almeda Riddle's traditional children's song 'My Little Rooster'.

The film cuts from Bunny Boy to an image of a struggling cat being carried by the scruff of its neck and then drowned in a barrel of water. After the scene with Tumbler and the girl with the cancer lump, and an extended montage of Tumbler and Solomon riding their dirt bikes to the sound of death metal music, Tumbler almost shoots a black cat, but Solomon intervenes

because he notices that it has a collar. A young girl named Darby scoops up Foot Foot (whose name derives from a song by the naive-retro group The Shaggs) and takes the cat into the house, where her two sisters, Dot and Helen, examine the animal to determine whether it's pregnant. Meanwhile Solomon and Tumbler learn about Jarrod Wigely when they bring their bounty to the supermarket. In a subsequent scene where Tumbler and Solomon get high from sniffing airplane glue, Tumbler's dialogue exhibits a certain dreamy free association. He begins to talk about a house for sale, relates it to his brother shooting the mailbox, then connects this to the singer, Roy Orbison, who – like his brother – also shot things and wore dark sunglasses. The ensuing dialogue also reflects adolescents' love of sexual puns:

Tumbler: I saw a house yesterday . . . near my house. I think it was this lady's. I saw a sign, 'for sale'. It had a bullet hole in the mailbox.

Solomon: A hole?

Tumbler: A big old hole. I think my brother shot it down when I was younger. I think it was him. He always used to say Roy Orbison liked to shoot at things. Roy always wore these dark sunglasses. My brother always wore the same kind of sunglasses. He sang that song, 'Crying'. You know that song.

Solomon: What?

Tumbler: That song, 'Crying'.

Tumbler sings the chorus of the song and tells Solomon his brother used to sing 'Crying'. Tumbler confides to Solomon that his brother is gay, and describes him as a transvestite. When Solomon asks whether his brother was pretty, Tumbler indicates that he's 'pretty enough to have a boyfriend'.

Because he eschews a traditional causal structure in favor of an episodic one, Korine depends on the viewer to make connections between and among a number of thematic motifs. For instance, an association between Tumbler's queer brother and Bunny Boy becomes manifest in the next scene. As two kids with cowboy hats play in a junkyard by smashing the windows of cars, Bunny Boy strolls into the scene carrying his skateboard under his arm. The



• Tumbler and Solomon sniffing glue.

two kids shoot Bunny Boy with their cap pistols, and he collapses on the ground. The older boy yells: 'He looks like a queer rabbit! All queer!' The younger one chimes in: 'That fag! He can kiss my ass! Rabbits are queers'. The older boy comes over again: 'Ah, those queer-ass rabbits'. The older one hurls Bunny Boy's yellow skateboard into the distance. The younger one grabs one of Bunny Boy's long pink ears: 'Hey, look at those little fag bunny ears'. The two boys continue to spew foul language with incredible intensity – almost as if they're junior marines in boot camp – as they hover over Bunny Boy. They continue to shoot at him from up close. They poke at him, check his pockets for money, toss one of his sneakers, and eventually take off, leaving the crumpled body of Bunny Boy next to an old tire. Bunny Boy will later appear sitting in a public bathroom stall, while playing a toy

accordion – first listlessly, then frantically.

The film seems to trade on the conventional association between femininity (in men) and gay identity. After the junkyard scene between Bunny Boy and the two redneck cowboys, Dot comments on Eddie's new layered haircut: 'He looks pretty,' which recalls Solomon's earlier question to Tumbler about his gay brother. When Tumbler and Solomon later pay to have sex with a woman with Downs' Syndrome named Cassidey, she accuses Solomon of having hands 'like a girl', but he denies this. The issue of queerness resurfaces again in a series of interrupted takes between the self-pitying teen (played by Korine himself) and a gay African-American dwarf. Swigging a beer and pouring much of it over his head, the teenager laments his abusive upbringing and tries to persuade the dwarf to kiss him, but he only manages to



• Bunny Boy with skateboard in the junk yard scene.



• Bunny Boy playing accordion in the bathroom.

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extract a hug. Additional connections between queerness and transvestism arise in the character of sad-eyed Jarrod Wigely, who cares for his elderly grandmother, but also kills cats by placing glass in tuna fish and poison by the dumpsters. In the scene where Tumbler and Solomon extract revenge by breaking into Jarrod's house, Solomon finds photos of Jarrod in drag. The still photographs transform into a home movie of him dressed as a woman in various poses. Solomon also finds porno magazines, including 'a gay one'.

Sexuality as a thematic motif in *Gummo* also extends to scenes involving adults. A reference to lesbianism occurs in the scene where a mentally-challenged individual (whose features are fogged out to hide his identity) talks about a woman's marriage breaking up as a result of a lesbian affair. After a brief image of identical men twins taking a bath together – a title indicates that this footage is from Xenia in 1983 – Tumbler discusses a cocaine addict named Clifford Dumkin, who lives down the street. We see a series of pornographic Polaroids, with the eyes of the people blacked out. Tumbler claims that Clifford engages in wife-swapping and sex parties, where he likes to have sex with women in front of the neighborhood kids. When Foot Foot later ends up missing, a man approaches Helen, Dot, and Darby in the bowling alley with a copy of their flyer and announces that he's seen

their cat. The three girls then take a drive with him. The man purports to be Freddy Prinze's brother, but the three sisters turn out to be unfamiliar with the TV show *Chico and the Man*.¹⁸ The driver claims to be a gossip writer for a newspaper, and provides various examples:

Gossip writer: Tupac Shakur stuttered. Warren Oates swallowed his chewing tobacco spittle. Placido Domingo loves sherbet ice cream. Adolf Hitler had one testicle. P. T. Barnum had an ulcer the size of a small oyster. Henry Winkler is allergic to papaya. Satchel Page shot heroin down in Cuba. Dr. Robert Oppenheimer drank denatured alcohol.

After the gossip writer pulls into a parking lot, he tries to rub his hand on Helen's crotch while pretending to look for a map. Helen slaps him. Dot screams: 'Why'd you try an' touch her coochie?' The three sisters beat on the man, before fleeing his car. As they continue to curse at him, the pervert yells: 'It's nothing new for trash like you'.

There are also two bizarre scenes involving Solomon's mother that have decidedly incestuous overtones. In the first one, Solomon tapes silverware together and heads to the basement. Solomon stands in front of the mirror and lifts his homemade weights to the song 'Like a Prayer' by Madonna. When his mother comes downstairs, she complains that such exercise will stunt his growth. She tells him: 'I can see your



- Solomon and his mother in the tap dancing scene.

shoulder popping out . . . Look . . . The way it raises and gets smaller'. This references Solomon's earlier line – 'People's leg bones and neck bones were stickin' out' – in the opening narration. Solomon's mom takes out a pair of his dad's old tap shoes. She explains that, at her suggestion, his father took up tapping in lieu of getting hair transplants. Her dialogue lapses into further nonsense as she discusses the prospect of Marlene Dietrich falling in love with her husband if only she could have seen see him tap dance. Solomon's mom then starts to tap dance while Solomon continues to lift weights. She tries to get him to smile, but he refuses. She comes behind him, wraps her arms around him. She asks: 'Do you miss your dad? I do'. When she gets no response from Solomon, his mother reaches over and suddenly puts a gun to his head:

Solomon's mother: OK, you son of a bitch, if you don't smile I'm gonna kill you. OK? I've killed before, and I will kill again. I will pick up your brains all over the floor. You came out of my womb and I'll stick you right back in my womb. If you don't smile, I'm going to kill you.

She pulls the trigger. Solomon again has no reaction to her schizoid behaviour. She then goes back to tap dancing, while he continues to lift weights. The absurdist scene nevertheless establishes the effect that her husband's death has on Solomon's mother, which provides a context for the later scene where she babies Solomon while he takes a bath.

The bath scene has an even stronger sexual subtext. It occurs after a photo montage of Solomon, which then cuts to shots of him washing himself in a bathtub full of filthy water. His mother brings him a tray of milk and



• Solomon in the bathtub of filthy water.



• Solomon eating chocolate in the bathtub.

spaghetti. As he eats, she begins to wash his hair with shampoo. She twists his soapy hair into a point on top, so that he looks like a Kewpie doll.¹⁹ There's a knock at the door. His mother disappears from the frame, and we watch as the phallic point of soapy hair begins to droop to the sound of draining water, as a bunch of Barbie dolls (including one without a head) can be seen against the dark blue tiles of the wall. When Solomon's mom answers the door, she's greeted by two African-American twins, Terry and Phelipo, who ask whether she wants to buy a crunch bar. She buys one for a dollar and brings it to Solomon for dessert. As he opens it, it falls into the filthy water, but Solomon retrieves it and begins to eat it loudly. The chocolate becomes smeared all over his face. He stuffs a huge bite of chocolate into his mouth and takes a big drink of milk.

Jerry Saltz's comments about the fluid definitions of sexuality and identity in Modern Gothic works takes on particular relevance in terms of *Bunny Boy*. After a scene of the two candy-selling twins discussing their fantasies about what they'll do with their money, the film cuts to a shot of *Bunny Boy* kissing *Dot* in an outdoor swimming pool during a rain storm, as the Roy Orbison song 'Crying' plays on the soundtrack. Helen turns out to be there too, and *Bunny Boy* kisses her passionately as well, as the three splash together in the water. Meanwhile, *Tumbler* and *Solomon* shoot at a black cat with their BB guns in a field. They continue to empty their guns at the dead carcass. The film cuts to stock-footage shots of the tornado, as 'Crying' continues. Off in the distance of a field, we see *Bunny Boy*, his pink ears flapping wildly, as he runs toward us, carrying the carcass of a black

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- Solomon drinking milk in the bathtub.

cat. He holds it up to the camera. The scene then cuts to a shot of Ellen (who has previously shaved her eyebrows) in bed with another woman. She sings 'Yes, Jesus loves me. For the Bible tells me so'. The screen goes black. Off-screen, someone says: 'Dial it now. It's a bad dime'. Ellen sings again, as the final credits roll, and her religious song segues into death metal music, which creates another absurd or cruelly ironic juxtaposition.

These last several scenes, which are bracketed by Roy Orbison's 'Crying,' suggest the way various images and sounds, through Korine's collage technique, ricochet in various directions across the entire film. The song has, of course, been set up earlier in the glue sniffing scene between Tumbler and Solomon, when he creates the association between his brother shooting the mail box and Roy Orbison, and reference to 'Crying'. Tumbler's queer brother becomes connected with Bunny Boy and then with Jarrod Wigely. The sheer buoyancy of the scene of Bunny Boy kissing Helen and Dot in the rain ends up being tempered by the lyrics of the song, and shortly afterwards, we watch Tumbler and Solomon empty their BB guns into the carcass of a black cat. Bunny Boy's gallant effort to retrieve Dot and Helen's missing cat is rendered as a offering to the camera, thus allowing us to see the red heart-shaped name tag and to confirm the identity of the cat as indeed being Foot Foot.²⁰ We never do get to witness Helen or Dot's reaction, but Foot Foot's death becomes associated with an aching sense of loss through Roy Orbison's song. Irony gets piled upon irony as Ellen sings 'Jesus Loves Me. The Bible Tells Me So', which only provides a kind of mindless consolation. Yet, even though

Gummo provides a rather bleak view of the human condition, strangely enough, the film does express some degree of hope and redemption through the character of Bunny Boy. In Bunny Boy – the lone and mute skateboarder – Korine has found a heroic and emblematic figure that embodies the fluidity of both identity and sexuality necessary for survival in a world that seems out of whack. In an earlier scene, the camera follows Bunny Boy, arms extended, as he skateboards down the hill to the sound of clapping and toy accordion music. The figure of scorn has become transformed into a figure of triumph, and not surprisingly, it turns out to be Bunny Boy (the transvestite animal boy) rather than either Solomon or Tumbler, who gets to kiss the pretty young women.

In *Gummo*, Korine calls attention to the body through his inclusion of the physically challenged – the albino woman without toes, the gay African-American dwarf, and Cassidey – as well as through the olfactory sense. For instance, the bigoted response of the young redneck cowboys (in terms of American mythology it's certainly not a coincidence that they're dressed as cowboys) to Bunny Boy's 'difference' has everything to do with the sense of smell, especially as it relates to the body through repeated references to bodily parts and fluids. When the cowboys first spot Bunny Boy, the older one yells out: 'Damn you, rabbit! You smell like fuckin' piss'. Later, after they've shot him with their cap guns, the two cowboys continue to shout loudly at Bunny Boy, who lies motionless on the ground:

Older cowboy: This shitty-ass rabbit stinks!
Younger cowboy: I know.



- Profile shot of Solomon



- Bunny Boy kissing Dot in the fountain as Helen looks on.

Older cowboy: He smells like pussy! He smells like an asshole!

Younger cowboy: Motherfucker!

Older cowboy: Smells like wetback dick!

Younger cowboy: It smells like a pile of bullshit!

Interestingly, Foot Foot stinks when we first encounter her. When Darby scoops up Foot Foot after Tummmler nearly shoots her, she kisses the cat and remarks: 'You smell like a dookie, girl'. After she brings the cat upstairs, Dot greets her by saying: 'Foot Foot, you stink a bitch'. We later observe a scene where the three sisters wash Foot Foot, who doesn't seem to mind getting a bath. Jarrod's elderly grandmother is also distinguished by her foul smell, which we can only assume has to do with her bodily fluids. In the scene where Tummmler and Solomon enter her bedroom, Solomon twice tells Tummmler 'She stinks,' but he also associates her with food (considered 'unclean' by some religions and cultures), by remarking: 'She smells like baked ham'. When Solomon enters Cassidey's bedroom to have sex, she demands to know whether he's clean and has washed with soap:

Cassidey: Let me smell your wrist.

[*Solomon sticks his wrist out and Cassidey sniffs it.*]

Cassidey: It smells good.

Solomon: How does it smell like?

Cassidey: Like fruit. Like cherries.

Solomon : My mom gives me cherry shampoo.

Cassidey: I like cherries. I put cherries on my ice cream. I like the name of Cherry. Cherries.

Solomon's line about his Mom giving him 'cherry shampoo' – and its sexual implications in terms of the fact that his good smell makes him attractive to Cassidey – creates a connection to

the scene where we actually watch Solomon's mother shampoo his hair (including its phallic symbolism) while he takes a bath and eats his dinner.

Korine's inclusion of mentally challenged individuals serves an important function in the film as well. After Ellen does a cheerleading routine with a pair of pom-poms, she speaks directly to the camera, as if she's being interviewed. Ellen talks about her inanimate doll as if it's a real live baby; she then discusses the fact that her mother makes her do chores and the need to keep everything clean. Her monologue shifts to her getting in trouble for breaking a jar of spaghetti sauce, which then somehow segues into the need for prayer. Just as Korine fractures linear story, he often does the same to the voiceovers and dialogue of various characters. Eddie introduces the fact that he has Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) as a complete non-sequitur into a conversation about the velocity of his tennis serve. The dialogue of other characters in *Gummo* veers off on similar tangents, almost as if ADD has spread through the film like a contagious disease. Solomon's mother, for instance, provides an incoherent monologue about her husband in the tap dancing scene. The scene with Tummmler's father provides another example. As Tummmler and his father drive in a car, Tummmler asks his dad whether he misses his mother. His father indicates that he thinks about her every day. Tummmler comments: 'She's in heaven now'. His father agrees. The conversation, however, takes an odd turn, when Tummmler asks him: 'What was she like?' He responds: 'Oh, she's . . . brown hair. She dranked, you know, a little bit, but she was a good person. She was real nice, she was'. Tummmler's dad then launches into long, rambling and convoluted non-sequitur about being a kid and watching his boss's wife walk around in her underwear. He concludes: 'But you got to respect somebody else's wife, in other words'. The camera then focuses on Tummmler's reaction, which is to stare blankly at his father.

His dad's circumlocution nevertheless discloses as much as it conceals. Tummmler writes about his father in a notebook afterwards, and we hear his

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thoughts in voiceover: 'His dad didn't care for Mom much either or the little doggy'. The camera follows the movement of a blue ballpoint pen close up on the page throughout the voiceover. We can make out the words 'cancer' and 'disease' (presumably references to Tumbler's deceased mother), and then the word 'Dad,' which Tumbler crosses out. Despite his father's evasion, Tumbler nevertheless infers from his monologue that he didn't really love his mother. One additional example of a non-sequitur occurs in the scene where Tumbler and Solomon interview Jarrod about killing cats and his elderly grandmother. After Jarrod indicates that his grandmother is catatonic, the boy next to him asks: 'She used to throw darts, right?' Jarrod responds: 'Yeah, she used to have a dartboard'. Korine clearly delights in creating such illogical and absurdist moments. It's all done with a straight face, since Jarrod, Solomon, and Tumbler don't show any type of reaction to the boy's bizarre comment.

Korine seems to relish life's stream of absurdities – its contradictions, unpredictability, and strangeness. He's fascinated by the anomaly rather than the norm. He wants the meaning of images to remain open and fluid, rather than fixed, which is why he favors collage over traditional plot. Images in *Gummo* contain odd juxtapositions, such as Solomon, wearing a red fireman's hat and whipping the carcass of a dead cat; a skateboarder in a partial rabbit costume; an African-American dwarf who beats a huge pot-bellied redneck at arm wrestling. In such images and scenes, Korine seems intrigued by the imaginative sleight of hand in which the meaning of various images and events somehow gets confounded. It's a trait that perhaps springs from his love of American vaudeville, where such juxtapositions were common. Korine often tries the same tactic in interviews. He commented on the film's reception to one interviewer: 'After a screening of *Gummo* in Canada, this guy came up to me and called me a fascist. Then he tried to stab me with a fork. I took it as a compliment'.²¹ Even in the rhythmic cadence of its sentence structure, Korine's remark is not very much different from Tumbler's line: 'I knew a

guy who was dyslexic, but he was also cross-eyed, so everything came out right'.

It's hard to know exactly where Korine is coming from at times. Often it's deliberately from left field, which no doubt partially accounts for some of the hostile responses to *Gummo*. While I doubt that an angry viewer tried to stab him with a fork, Korine has certainly been castigated by mainstream critics who've found *Gummo* to be an offensive freak show that parades and exploits those less fortunate. Yet such criticism, as I've tried to show in this essay, fails to account for the way the film explores the various forms of 'difference' as its theme. In showing lower-class poverty – the endless clutter, filth, and bugs – Korine clearly shows that this, rather than Solomon's more literary conceit of blaming the tornado, has spawned the intolerance, hatred, racism, criminality, suicidal despair, animal cruelty, and the kind of inbreeding that would account for many of the physical disfigurements and mental problems in the film. At one point, as Tumbler paces back and forth in an agitated state, he laments: 'I'm sick of everything. I can't understand what the fuck is wrong with people in this world. They sit around. They don't know what the fuck is going on'. Not surprisingly, his condemnation is also tinged with bitter self-hatred, as he suddenly interjects: 'I fuckin' hate myself'. Although Solomon looks up to Tumbler, it's not an accident that Tumbler hangs out with someone much younger. Despite Solomon's admiration, Tumbler's future trajectory points in the direction of suicide or death row. Solomon's future is not much brighter. *Gummo* (the film takes its name from the one Marx brother who failed to succeed in show business) presents a rather grim portrait, not only of these two teenagers, but of Xenia as a whole. Through the ever shifting registers of the Modern Gothic and the rich associations created by Korine's collage technique, *Gummo* captures the poetry that resides in the gutter, as evidenced by someone like Bunny Boy, even if its perspective is as irreverent as the title of Korine's novel, *A Crackup at the Race Riots*. Not since Bunuel's *Los Olvidados* (1950) and Babenco's *Pixote* (1981)

has a film managed to capture the truly mind-boggling incongruities of such a milieu.

Notes

- 1 See Janet Maslin, 'Gummo', *New York Times*, 17 October 1997, E12. See also J. Hoberman, 'Parting Shots: The 37th New York Film Festival', *Village Voice*, 22–28 September 1999, 124; and J. Hoberman, 'Young Blood', *Village Voice*, 6–12 October 1999, 139.
- 2 Independent producer Christine Vachon defines the term 'execution-dependent' as 'meaning that there's no way for the average Joe to be able to tell what's going to happen between the script and the screen – the financiers have to take a leap of faith'. Vachon quoted in Oren Moverman (ed.), 'All is Well in our World – Making Safe: Todd Haynes, Julianne Moore and Christine Vachon' in John Boorman and Walter Donahue (eds), *Projections 5: Filmmakers on Filmmaking* (London and Boston, Faber & Faber, 1995), p. 225.
- 3 Harmony Korine, *Collected Screenplays 1: Jokes, Gummo, julien donkey boy* (London, Faber & Faber, 2002), p. 77.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 80. Such detailed description is usually considered bad form in conventional screenwriting. See Richard Walter, *Screenwriting: The Art, Craft, and Business of Film and Television Writing* (New York, Plume, 1988), pp. 83–4.
- 5 See Jefferson Hack, 'Harmony Korine', in Mark Sanders and Jefferson Hack (eds), *Star Culture: The Collected Interviews from Dazed & Confused Magazine* (London, Phaidon Press, 2000), p. 194.
- 6 Gus Van Sant quoted in Fine Line publicity materials, 'Forward, *Gummo*: About the Film', <http://www.finelinefeatures.com/gummo/topabout.html>.
- 7 Robin O'Hara quoted in Fine Line publicity materials, 'Gummo: About the Production', <http://www.finelinefeatures.com/gummo/topabout.html>.
- 8 See Jonas Mekas, *Movie Journal: The Rise of a New American Cinema, 1959–1971* (New York, Collier Books, 1972), pp. 6–7, 23–4.
- 9 Korine quoted in Hack, 'Harmony Korine', p. 195.
- 10 See Werner Herzog, 'Gummo's Whammo', *Interview*, 27: 11 (1997), 88. See also <http://www.finelinefeatures.com/gummo/topabout.html>.
- 11 Co-produced by the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati and Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, 'Beautiful Losers: Street Culture in Contemporary Art' was an exhibition of work by more than fifty artists inspired by skateboarding culture. A catalogue of the exhibition is scheduled for publication. For additional information on contemporary artists and skateboard culture, including Harmony Korine, see also the special issue 'The Disobedients', *Tokion* 29 (2002).
- 12 Jerry Saltz, 'Modern Gothic', *Village Voice*, 4–10 February 2004, C85. For another view of the same phenomenon, see Michael Cohen, 'The New Gothic: Scary Monsters and Super Creeps', *Flash Art* 36: 231 (2003), 108–10.
- 13 For an interesting discussion of the grotesque, see Marie de Brugerolle, 'Disparities and Deformations: Our Grotesque', *Flash Art*, 37:236 (2004), 75.
- 14 Korine quoted in Werner Herzog, 'Gummo's Whammo'.
- 15 Hack, 'Harmony Korine', p. 193.
- 16 The Yiddish word 'tumler' derives from tumlen 'to make a racket'.
- 17 Korine, *Collected Screenplays 1: Jokes, Gummo, julien donkey boy*, p. 74.
- 18 *Chico and the Man*, which featured Freddy Prinze, was a popular situation comedy that aired on the NBC network from 1974–1978.
- 19 Tad Tuleja, *The New York Library Book of Popular Americana* (New York, The Stonesong Press, 1994), p. 207. The entry for Kewpie doll reads: 'A child's doll manufactured since 1913 and modeled on figures created by Rose O'Neill (1874–1944). She accompanied a 1909 poem in *Ladies Home Journal* with a drawing of a 'Cupidlike' creature, explaining "Kewpie means a small Cupid, just as a puppy means a small dog". Inexpensive Kewpies appear as carnival prizes'. The carnival reference seems particularly relevant to *Gummo*.
- 20 While it's ambiguous in the film whether Tumbler and Solomon have killed Foot Foot, the screenplay clearly indicates that they have done so, despite Solomon's earlier refusal to kill a house cat (as indicated by its collar). This is another example of Korine undercutting causal connections in the film. More logically, we might assume that Foot Foot wound up being one of Jarrod's victims, since we've watched him mix glass with tuna fish at the dumpster. In the screenplay, however, Korine writes: 'Tumbler and Solomon are shooting Foot Foot to death with their BB guns'. See Korine, *Collected Screenplays 1: Jokes, Gummo, julien donkey boy*, p. 164.
- 21 Korine quoted in Rob Nelson, 'Imperfect Harmony', *City Pages*, 12 January 2000. See <http://www.citypages.com/databank/21/997/article8352.asp>.