UNCOMFORTABLY CLOSE TO HOME

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The trio of lovers arrive at the dock. They are all clad in neon; the two girls wear bikinis and pink balaclavas. Alien, their leader, leads the way toward the mansion of his rival drug dealer, Big Arch. Alien’s voice repeats “it seems like a dream,” over and over, as if on a broken record. The music lurks in the distance, a melancholy orchestral version of one of the dubstep songs played over the many scenes of gratuitous partying earlier in the film.

As the three walk up the dock, a distant figure runs toward them, shoots once, and Alien falls dead. The two girls start their killing spree. They move slowly and surely through the mansion’s yard, shooting guard after guard. They kill at least a dozen men before they get to the house.

One of the girl’s voices can be heard, a replay of a voicemail she left earlier in the film to her mom about the joys of spring break. She tells her how they have “found themselves” here, “saw beautiful things,” “made friends that will last [them] a lifetime.” She reports that they “are different people now,” that they “see things differently. . . . It feels as if the world is perfect, like it’s never going to end.” Now, at the end of their vacation, they continue to slaughter everyone in sight. They finally reach Big Arch’s bathroom, where he is taking a bubble bath, clad only in his gold ice cream cone, pendant and chain watching two naked women shower. The killers shoot him in the head and leave. They steal one of Big Arch’s luxury cars, and begin their drive home. They are both solemn. The last shot shows the two of them bending down to kiss Alien’s body one last time.

When I stepped out of the theatre with the three friends I had dragged along to see Harmony Korine’s Spring Breakers (2013), none of us knew what to say. We continued in our stunned silence: from the opening montage of teenagers partying on spring break to the film’s final shot, I had been uncomfortable, both horrified and intrigued by the images Korine had decided to show us. In the theatre, you could hear a few laughs during some of the more ridiculous scenes of young, bikini-clad girls toting machine guns and
teenagers indulging in hedonistic sex and drinking. But mostly, there was just silence. Was it a rapturous silence, proof of the power of the art, or was the silence one of disappointment? The fun crime movie promised us in advertisements turned out to be something completely different. To me the movie felt like a trance, or a drug-fueled trip, more than a story. How were we all supposed to take in this film? Writer and director Harmony Korine is no ordinary filmmaker; he would never have provided clear-cut answers. His films provide the viewer with everything but a guide telling you how to feel.

In that last scene of Spring Breakers, Korine leaves the audience with a puzzle. Following the ninety minutes of breasts, guns, repeated slogans and nonlinear plot, this ending proves that Korine will not give his viewers any foothold from which to analyze the film. The tone of the scene ranges from tragedy to self-referential comedy. We see the death of Alien, the charming criminal we have loved, hated, and looked down upon. The girls say they’ve changed, yet the only change we see is that they now indulge in their own fantasies.

Spring Breakers and the rest of Korine’s works are distinct because they encompass an awareness of how the audience will react, and embrace uncomfortable emotions. As opposed to the century of Hollywood films that have preceded it, Spring Breakers has no obvious genre (it only makes allusions), it has no character arc, and does not move forward linearly. His films are not comedies, yet a sense of satire and irony abounds in his work. The massacre scene in Spring Breakers feels comedic, crass, but also deeply affecting. Should you laugh, feel moved, or be shocked? From small things like Big Arch’s pendant, to the larger irony of juxtaposing the voiceovers with the visual gore and brutality of the murders, to the fact that two petite girls in bikinis manage to kill a whole gang of hardened killers, there exists always a double meaning, a curving labyrinth of intentions. Korine’s films defy classification, and seem to scoff at the idea of easily identifiable meaning. What could have become a powerful yet expected ending in another director’s hands here becomes the viewer’s conundrum.

Korine has been confusing his audiences since he first entered the artistic world at nineteen years old, after dropping out of NYU Tisch. He wrote the script for Kids (1995), and only two years later he made his directorial debut in Gummo (1997). He was raised in Nashville, where his father made docu-
mentaries about the city’s strangest subcultures, especially circuses and freak shows. Korine would accompany his father on these excursions. He has spent his adult life partly secluded from the public eye, and many only know him from his bizarre appearances on *The Late Show with David Letterman*, in which he often appears drugged out and anxious. He was always seen as an *enfant terrible*: a young “genius” who is rebellious, unorthodox, and challenges authority.

Korine’s films are highly experimental, and fit the moniker given to him. He seems to be continuing in the tradition of directors such as Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Lars von Trier, and (especially) Werner Herzog, who became his mentor. Korine’s nonlinear, provocative films have much in common with the techniques of these prominent directors, who reject traditional notions of how the viewer connects to film. In his essay “On Reading a Video Text,” Robert Scholes theorizes the elements of film which most strongly provoke thought and effect enjoyment in viewers. He explains that “[v]isual fascination,” “narrativity,” and “cultural reinforcement” are the three “matrices of power and pleasure that are organized by video texts” (205). Scholes measures “visual fascination” by a film’s ability to appeal to the eye, while “narrativity” creates a clear story to follow. He defines “cultural reinforcement” as the film’s affirmation of the beliefs held by its audience.

Korine’s films actively work against Scholes’s tenets. *Trash Humpers* (2009), for example, is shot entirely on an old VHS camera, making the film appear outdated and visually unappealing. We see splotches of color where we shouldn’t. The images are grainy. Many times, we can barely recognize the characters. This is not what Scholes would classify as a film that offers “a kind of power through the enhancement of our vision” (205). Rather, *Trash Humpers* works to break down our vision. Korine also breaks down any semblance of a linear narrative in his films. He is less concerned with a clear story arc than with giving his audience a visceral experience, often jumping jarringly in time from scene to scene. Korine works to make his audience look inward to consider the implications of their reactions to his images. My shame and stunned silence were obvious to me as I walked out of that movie theater. My values and my culture’s values, particularly our fascination with sex and violence, had been poked at and prodded. Korine’s films do *not*
“culturally reinforce” the audience’s values, as Scholes claims they should. Korine’s films outright dismantle them.

While experimental film directors generally tend to reject all three of Scholes’s “matrices,” Korine goes a step further. He clearly has a larger, more complex and perhaps more revolutionary venture in mind. He does not just reject the mainstream, but seems to be fighting against experimentalism itself. While experimental films have always broken the established language of film, they have remained an exploration of its tradition, albeit a twisted and contrarian version thereof. Korine is trying to wholly break free from that tradition. Perhaps he is trying to bring the two opposing forces—Hollywood and experimental film—together in a new way, to create a tradition that does not hold your hand or offer you comfort. While other experimental directors use their films to get at the core of film’s function and role in our society, Korine seems to be headed in a direction all his own.

Korine’s unique experimentalism may be best understood through a consideration of his use, without derision, of elements of mainstream film and popular culture. This is particularly obvious in the way that Spring Breakers was marketed to its audience: as a fun romp of the American teenage spring break fantasy. The trailer, removed from the context of the film itself, feels like any other crime-action film aimed at a young audience. With its dubstep soundtrack, Disney star cast, and bubble-lettered neon posters, everything about Spring Breakers seemed fun. I had never heard of Korine before I went to see Spring Breakers. That promotion brought me and my friends to watch it, literally, on our spring break. When Hollywood-loving audiences like ourselves watch the full film, we are forced to question the meaning of “mainstream film,” as well as that of Spring Breakers itself. Many rejected the film—all of Korine’s films have been very widely contested and often dismissed as works of art. While many critics deride Korine’s movies as riding on pure shock value, I see them more as shock therapy. His films have gotten under my skin, and the puzzles with which his body of work has left me are more important than my individual reaction to each of his films.

It is possible that Korine may be playing to an audience that has yet to arrive. Suzan-Lori Parks, in her essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” expresses the belief that an artist and her work should be seen as part of a larger context. She states that artists are governed by three things: the

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existing tradition, their personal experiences, and what she describes as “the Tradition of the Next New Thing” (26). Parks says that one of the main forces at work in an artist’s mind is the innate desire to be a part of the next generation’s formation of a new tradition. I can see how Korine is trying to create a new paradigm in film which is neither controlled nor restricted by narrative forces, and does not require a genre label or conform to the expectations of either mainstream or experimental filmmaking. For Korine, “[it] is an interest in this Tomorrow, and a love for it, that moves [him] to send things out”: he makes films not simply to make films, but to help create and to be a part of a new creative process (30). The whole of the film world as it stands today has been boiled down to a science of making good genre pieces. Out of this kind of environment we get the first wave of experimentalists, whose sole goal is to break down such barriers. Korine seems to be of another generation that is actually expanding the possibilities of how film should engage with the audience.

Part of this new tradition is his creation of unique and enigmatic characters, and the clever way he portrays them. Korine’s content largely focuses on the poverty-stricken, the morally bankrupt, and the socially outcast. With such subject matter, one might expect films that delve into the sadness of these characters’ lives, portraying them as victims to their fates, tragically forced down one path or another. Instead, his films celebrate these marginal individuals. He neither shies away from their darkness, nor does he seem to excuse or moralize them. We are not given traditional character arcs of redemption. In Gummio, for example, we are shown a portrait of the young adults of Xenia, Ohio, an impoverished city recently devastated by a tornado. In the disaster’s wake, we see kids without families or homes. They stalk the streets in gangs, killing cats for dollars. They solicit mentally handicapped prostitutes, sniff glue in decrepit cockroach-filled houses, and break into the homes of their rivals. We are given a window into the dark deeds these characters commit. In the final scene, we see the two main characters—just kids—shooting a dead black cat. The two solemn figures shoot pellets systematically, one after another, into the animal’s carcass. “Crying” by Roy Orbison can be heard over the raindrops. We have followed these two boys through their lives, yet we’ve learned almost nothing about them. It seems that they have learned nothing about themselves—or life—either. The film is not meant to
be a morality tale, or to offer up some easily digestible and comprehensible philosophy; it offers us a sense of shame and anger at these characters’ lives and actions. It doesn’t matter if it’s an exaggerated or a wholly fictional world—the emotions elicited are painfully real. Korine’s films delve into the heart of our own morality by exposing us to these deeply flawed characters without trying to “fix” them for our moral satisfaction or viewing pleasure. Perhaps, like Korine himself, these characters don’t even care what anyone thinks of them.

Korine treats these characters in a vastly different way than most traditional filmmakers would portray them because he allows you a certain sympathy—even love—for them. You may feel upset with their actions, but never is there a sense that these people are evil. Korine doesn’t just show us a tragic world of horrible deeds and situations; rather, he allows us into a world that we realize is uncomfortably close to home, where people are not one dimensional—neither good nor bad—nor possess the self-consciousness and strength to understand and change themselves. We are privy to the context that has led the characters to where they are; we see their devastating home lives and the social pressures that engulf and affect them. The way Korine handles his characters never highlights their darkness, but the light that exists in spite of this darkness.

In *Spring Breakers*, we are mostly given broad shots of a culture of debauchery, yet when we focus on the main characters of the film—the four girls on spring break—we are shown moments of intimate bonding and love. In one scene, three of the four girls are alone in a pool, sharing secrets and wishes for the future. They haven’t yet been influenced by the darkness and crime outside the resort where they are vacationing, but two of these girls will soon become the aforementioned ruthless killers. Here, we see another side of them. While they swim in the pool together, the fourth girl is partying upstairs. A man has taken an interest in her, and is preying on her with increasing aggression. When he tries to force himself on her, she fights him off with strong language as she backtracks through the party. What could have become a scene showcasing her vulnerability instead becomes an example of her strength. These are the moments in which Korine allows his viewers an emotional payoff. Without this foundation of love and strength, the audience would not react to and sympathize with the girls’ eventual descent.
into crime. But even in these scenes highlighting the girls' love for one another and their strength, our senses are bombarded by provocative images and music. We are put off guard, and at any given moment we aren't sure whether these characters deserve our empathy.

Empathy is the foundation upon which all traditional stories are built. Our empathy for a film's characters helps us to identify with—and gain catharsis from—their actions and transformations. When we watch a movie, we are ready to feel empathy. Korine knows this and uses it to his advantage. His films seem to prove the ease with which a director can get an audience to watch a character or an event they would never otherwise watch. *Trash Humpers* (2009) serves as a good example, as it features a cult of demented elderly people who spend their days and nights literally humping trash. They are scary and disturbing, and do horrifying things, yet we feel a compulsion to keep watching, as if the film will eventually reveal to us some justification for their actions. *Trash Humpers* requires viewers to suspend their desire for entertainment and their demand for catharsis through empathy with a fictional world. For in this film, a cathartic experience never comes. Throughout *Trash Humpers*, there are moments that seem to be leading toward a grand idea or metaphor—something an audience can hold onto and seek to understand—yet Korine upends this expectation through his pursuit of raw emotion rather than philosophy.

Many of the individual moments in Korine’s films are enacted by enigmatic characters, who take our empathy and challenge us with it, making us instinctively try to understand what is, Korine seems to tell us, not made to be wholly understood. We are not supposed to wholly see ourselves in these people, but perhaps only a part of ourselves that cannot change, a part that defies all understanding, a part we might fear. Many scenes in *Gummo* invoke, and then deflect, our empathy. One scene portrays a group of parents, most of whom we have seen previously, having a small party in a white, dirty kitchen—binge drinking and arm wrestling. Slowly but surely, everyone grows angrier and angrier, culminating in the men smashing all the furniture in the room. These men were playful and empathetic minutes ago; it’s a shocking moment. It exists solely to throw you off guard, and to let you experience the same kind of instant, shocking rage that these men experience.
But Korine doesn’t merely want his audiences to sit in sadness or discomfort. He also wants people to laugh. His films, however, are distinctly not comedies, nor even truly camp. This is a strange challenge that Korine puts to his audience. Many of Korine’s scenes inhabit the gray area between comedy and solemnity, without any indication of how we are supposed to watch or interpret them. In Gummo, we see Solomon, one of the boys, bathing in dark brown, murky water. The bathroom is unbelievably dirty. A piece of bacon is taped to the wall. The setting is absurd and horrific. Solomon’s mother brings him spaghetti, which he eats as she shampoos his hair. His dessert is a soggy bar of chocolate, fished out of the black water. It’s a bizarre scene. In one director’s hands it could be depressing, in another’s almost slapstick. Korine is challenging us to laugh at the boy and his bathing, but as we realize the degradation at which we are laughing, the scene takes on a much darker context. Korine’s filmmaking always implicitly challenges his audience, asking us to laugh without knowing what kind of laughter it is. We never know whether Korine is on our side, laughing with us, or sitting on the other side of the screen, laughing at us.

If audience enjoyment is the ultimate goal of filmmaking, then Korine has surely failed. His films do not grant enjoyment; rather, Korine seems to take pleasure in the confusion with which he leaves his audience, derided pawns of American culture. As Scholes explains, “cultural reinforcement” has fallen to “mass media,” as artists like Korine “have become more estranged from their own culture and even opposed to it” (205). Film has become a tool of mass culture—a new way for us to define ourselves and reinforce our cultural beliefs. Korine seems to be actively resisting this new school of movie-making. His films do not align well with Scholes’s claims about film, but they do work well as art. One could argue that art, in its self-alienation from the rest of society, has lost its purpose and appeal. Maybe Korine’s concept of film, then, is more “art” than “movie.”

At the very least, the very existence of Harmony Korine can help us to see ourselves and our culture more clearly. Movies and other forms of mass media have become our gauges as to how the rest of our culture feels. What Korine has done is found a way to be an enfant terrible indefinitely. His films break down everything we know about movies and how to watch them. They tear at the moral fiber within us. But Korine himself is still a mystery. Maybe
Korine’s main aspiration is to reveal the churning gears behind mass media. Or maybe he just wants us to feel bad. Then again, it is possible that his films are truly satires, even satires of “art house” cinema. All of these are possibilities, and truly, we cannot expect answers from Korine himself, a man as enigmatic as his characters. The only answers come from our reactions to his work. All we really know is that Korine has an amazing ability to make us walk out of his films unsure of what we’ve just seen, with a million questions forming on our lips and a hunch that this art is something completely new and immeasurably valuable.

WORKS CITED


