

GENRE-%!\$?ING: HARMONY KORINE'S CINEMA OF POETRY

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Abstract: This study analyses Harmony Korine's films according to the two distinct stages of his cinematic career thus far. The first phase incorporates his screenplays that were directed by Larry Clark—*Kids* and Ken Park. The second incorporates the films that he both writes and directs: *Gummo* and *Julien Donkey-boy*. All of Korine's films are evaluated in the context of how they satirise and disempower his characters' tendencies toward nihilism and alienation. The films that he both writes and directs, especially, are significant because they utilise Pier Paolo Pasolini's notion of the cinema of poetry, which presents the diegetic realities of the films from wholly-subjective perspectives which, because they allow for poetic re-mediations of our perceptual habits, can re-write and transform any tendencies toward disaffection and desensitisation. All of Korine's films reject common-sense and normalising representations for the perspectives of non-dominant voices or the poetic speakers of disenfranchised populations—especially the young, the poor, people with disabilities, and the mentally ill—which productively challenge their commonplace portrayals in the mass media.

“Jesus Christ, what happened?” (Casper, *Kids*)

Harmony Korine, who wrote *Kids* (1995) when he was nineteen, became a pop culture sensation with the box office success of Larry Clark's film. He was also critically praised for his insightful social criticism concerning the self-destructive/nihilistic trends in contemporary American youth culture that the film graphically depicts. However, Korine's later films *Gummo* (1997), *Julien Donkey-Boy* (2000), and the-as-yet-unreleased-in-America *Ken Park* (2002) (directed by Larry Clark & Ed Lachman from a Korine screenplay) have been dismissed by many in rather shocking and dramatic manners. For example, David Denby famously referred to *Gummo* as a “scuzzball atrocity” (qtd. in Fredericksen). Christopher Tookey even personally attacked Korine by calling him an “extravagantly untalented twit.” *Kids*, however, was likely embraced because it portrays its characters' lack of self-awareness and nihilistic desensitisation to life in a manner that audiences are familiar with, i.e., it bears similarities to other films—such as Nicholas Ray's *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), Tim Hunter's *River's Edge* (1986), and Catherine Hardwicke's *Thirteen* (2003)—that highlight the unsettling nihilistic tendencies inherent in teenage escapism and disconnection.

As I will explore below, none of Korine's films can be labeled nihilistic—even though many of the characters in *Kids* and *Ken Park* are trapped in nihilism's alienating logic. Korine's later films, which he wrote and directed himself (*Gummo* and *Julien Donkey-boy*), foreground the *social* causes and economic deprivations that lead not to nihilism, but to feelings of despair and a limited awareness of life's productive possibilities. Especially in the films that Korine both writes and directs, his characters' alienation arise primarily from their *environments*, which are saturated with poverty, racism, domestic violence, animal abuse, environmental pollution, sexual assault, lack of nutrition, addiction, etc. Korine presents such alienation as “a

weak, diminished, reactive life” that is incapable of poetic becoming/transformation or effective problem-solving (Deleuze, *Nietzsche & Philosophy* 69).

In order to productively transform this rampant social alienation, Korine utilises Pier Paolo Pasolini’s theory of “the cinema of poetry,” which simulates a film’s narrative/diegetic reality entirely from the wholly-subjective perspectives of the film’s writer/director as well as its main character(s); in the cinema of poetry, the film’s poets (the writer and director) filter the reality production of the film *through* the poem’s speakers’ (or the characters’) unique ways of perceiving/constructing the world. Such transformative/poetic perceptions are the thematic answers to nihilism and alienation in all of Korine’s films *when they become problem-solving operations* that provide actual-world (i.e. non-ideal) solutions to those alienating, reactive forces. Korine’s poetic sensibility is the likely reason why Robert Sklar states the following: “Harmony Korine, for all the inescapable ambivalence even his most steadfast admirers feel about his work, stands out [in American independent film] as artistic royalty” (261).

Gilles Deleuze, analysing Pasolini’s often-reviled and banned films like *Salò* (1975), notes that exploring the horrific or base aspects of “dismodern” (i.e. non-ideal or non-standard) reality can provide us with *artistic royalty* whenever they strip us of our repressions or alienating illusions (Davis:32). To reiterate: the term “dismodern” was coined by Lennard Davis in his disability theory, and it attempts to replace the normalising/ableist logic that often plagues both modernism and postmodernism. In this sense, dismodern subjectivities are based on the partial, disabled, limited, and interconnected or interdependent natures of all our identities in a wholly-contingent world. Deleuze directly addresses the cathartic potentials of the non-ideal, the sublime, and the contingent within the context of Pasolini’s “The Cinema of Poetry”:

Pasolini’s cinema is a poetic consciousness, which is not strictly aestheticist or technicist, but rather mystical or ‘sacred’. This allows Pasolini to bring the perception-image, or the neurosis of his characters, on to a level of vulgarity and bestiality in the lowest subject-matter, while reflecting them in a pure poetic consciousness, animated by the mythical or sacralising element. It is this permutation of the trivial and the noble, this communication between the excremental and the beautiful, [...], which Pasolini had already diagnosed in free, indirect discourse as the essential form of literature. And he succeeds in making it into a cinematographic form, capable of grace as well as horror. (Cinema I: 75)

It is my contention, then, that both Korine and Clark (as the poets of their films) present characters or poetic speakers as experiencing horrific consequences which, because we audiences experience them as art, become the sublime or cathartic moments that permit us to re-invent our perceptual powers a la the re-mediating potentials of the cinema of poetry.

Although Korine doesn’t author films in the horror genre as it is stereotypically defined – there are no monsters that can be magically/heroically exorcised – his depictions of social pathologies often disrupt our cognitive categories/classifications as quality horror films do. As I will explore below, Korine’s cinema of poetry is primarily engaged with the poetic or productive logic of “the dynamical sublime,” as Kant phrases it in the *Critique of Judgment*. According to Daniel W. Smith: “the sublime takes place when the edifice of synthesis collapses: I no longer apprehend parts, I no longer reproduce parts, I no longer recognise anything. Instead of rhythm, I find myself drowned in a *chaos*” (xix). However, such a chaotic experience need not end in trauma or nihilism because “chaos itself can also be a germ of order or rhythm [...]” (xx). Hence, what turns chaos into poetic perception or apprehension is engaging the world itself as *the cinema of poetry*—which stipulates that all perceptions must be creatively called into being through self-consciously constructed *events*. A la Deleuze and Pasolini’s conceptions of the

sublime, Korine's films foreground the poetic rhythms inherent in this chaos (or what Robert Sklar calls a "surreal spirituality"), which many of his characters in *Gummo* and *Julien Donkey-boy* use to successfully create dismodern or non-ideal solutions to their alienation (264).

As *Kids* also reveals, Korine's films stand out because they undermine and poetically re-mediate the seductive natures of personal/cultural ideals – like the norms/illusions inherent in sensationalised mainstream and popular media forms – which illuminate, a la Nietzsche's philosophy, the reality that *nihilism is the disillusioning end-result of attempting to make the world conform to reactive, larger-than-life ideals*. Thus, *Kids* is a striking example of how Korine and Clark satirise their characters' nihilistic choices. The film's extremely nihilistic characters believe that they are *above the contingent world; hence, they do not care how their actions affect either themselves or others*.

Kids' narrative centers on Telly (Leo Fitzpatrick) and Casper during one summer day in New York City: they smoke weed, drink forties, skateboard in Washington Square Park, beat a kid nearly to death, go swimming, and then end the day with a big party at a friend's house whose parents are away. However, what is most significant about these everyday events in these teenagers' lives is how Larry Clark films them. All these moments of hanging out are portrayed as if they were a McDonald's commercial; in other words, these kids perceive their everyday lives like magical ideals, as if any and all of their experiences were vehicles for perfect bliss. These kids' expectations, thus, are shockingly out-of-sync with how non-ideal ordinary reality actually is. To edify this notion, Casper contracts the HIV virus, which Telly had previously passed on to Jenny (Chloë Sevigny), by night's end.

The film's tragic ending is thus a direct outcome of Telly and Casper's belief that they are indestructible, i.e., these kids embody the cultural ideal/belief that problematically fetishises youth. To mock this fact, Korine and Clark portray Telly as someone whose ideals are so grandiose that he will only sleep with virgins. Casper, unbeknownst to him, contracts the HIV virus when he rapes Jenny while she's passed out. In this extremely dismodern ending, Casper and Telly's lack of awareness is poetically presented *as both contagious and deadly to their peers*. *Kids*, which is dedicated to Teen Crisis Organisations, is not pessimistic at heart because all the social horrors depicted in Korine and Clark's film are *self-created*; hence, because they arise from specific personal choices, they can potentially be re-written/re-mediated by others. In the end, *Kids* has value precisely because it *portrays the young from their own particular perspectives*, i.e., it reveals that youth culture should not be idealised or repressed; rather, it needs to be openly evaluated, challenged, and critiqued.

Korine further fleshes out the social criticism inherent in his films on the animated photo gallery of the *Gummo* DVD: "like Bresson has said: if there's no image there that existed before that you'd want to see, then you create your own image. That's kind of a self-fulfilling prophecy of sorts. To me, there [weren't] those images, so I made them." Korine's aesthetic philosophy, therefore, foregrounds why the tragedies in *Kids* happened in the first place: everyone's relations to the contingent world are based on how one perceives that world, i.e., one's own powers of creative simulation (a la the cinema of poetry) help to create the world's possibilities. Hence, if we, a la Casper and Telly, cannot accurately perceive the dismodern world with all its non-ideal elements, our tendencies toward neurosis, narcissism, and/or nihilism will only strengthen our alienation. Hence, the only solutions in such a world are poetic ones that can dispel (in cathartic manners) our idealised mis-perceptions.

Ken Park, Korine's follow-up screenplay to *Kids*, is a character-study that also explores alienated and disturbed adolescents from the perspective of the cinema of

poetry. *Ken Park* situates its social commentary within a dysfunctional suburban context: Visalia California. The film, most importantly, reveals how adult immaturity and self-hatred has become these kids' greatest threats. In this sense, the film extends Korine's critique of nihilism to adult society, which is wholly absent in *Kids*. The film, directed by Larry Clark and Ed Lachman, deserves critical attention for its unique critical perspective, i.e., it refuses either to blame or fetishise young adults. In effect, Clark/Korine/Lachman's film portrays adult society as so corrupt and purposeless that the film's adolescent characters will do *anything* not to resemble their parents/ care-givers.

The narrative structure of *Ken Park* is revealingly circular, which implies that destructive/abusive patterns of adult behaviour are what threaten to enclose the young protagonists in nihilistic or non-self-aware world-views. The main characters of the film are a loosely-affiliated group of high school friends that includes Ken Park (Adam Chubbuck), a young man who starts off the movie by skateboarding to a park to videotape his suicide: in front of many young kids, he shoots himself in the temple with a handgun. The fact that *he films* his death can be read as *a mocking jab at the media*, since mainstream media often fetishise and sensationalise such horrific or tragic events. Below, Deleuze comments on why challenging sensationalism is aesthetically and culturally vital:

I don't think the [mainstream] media have much capacity or inclination to grasp an event. In the first place, they often show a beginning or end, whereas even a short or instantaneous event is something going on. And then, they want something spectacular, whereas events always involve periods when nothing happens. It's not even a matter of there being such periods before or after some event, they're part of the event itself: you can't, for example, extract the instant of some terribly brutal accident from the vast empty time in which you see it coming, staring at what hasn't yet happened, waiting ages for it to happen. The most ordinary event casts us as visionaries, whereas the media turn us into mere passive onlookers, or worse still, voyeurs. [...]. It's art, rather than the media, that can grasp events [...]. (*Negotiations* 159-60)

For Deleuze, dismodern media simulations render us poets, whereas idealised 'representations' cast us as fetishists of ideals or nihilists. Hence, *Ken Park* is best read as a film that fills in all that the mainstream media fails to explore concerning adolescents in contemporary America.

Since *Ken Park* ends with the reason for Ken's suicide, the narrative structure of the film plays with the philosophical logic of nihilism: Ken Park may at first appear to have killed himself for no meaningful reason; however, we learn at film's end that Ken Park was trying to escape adult responsibility, i.e., he found out that particular day that his girlfriend was pregnant. As if to convince Ken that she should not get an abortion, she tells him: "aren't you glad your mom didn't abort you?" Korine/Lachman/Clark's film then ends with a portrait of a smiling Ken Park – i.e., this exact moment is when he realises that "aborting himself" is an alternative to living in a world in which adulthood is basically equivalent (in his eyes) to a living death.

While some may be understandably disturbed by this ending, what must be emphasised here is that the film is a cautionary tale not for young kids, but for *adults*. To reinforce this, Clark/Lachman play *The Shaggs'* song "Who Are Parents?" over the end credits, which ironically mocks the fact that the only people who are always there for kids are their parents. In Korine/Lachman/Clark's film, the truth is the exact opposite, i.e., *the only thing these young protagonists can rely on is each other*. This realisation would no doubt be a painful thing for most adults to acknowledge, but that is Clark/Lachman/Korine's point: such *adult* problems must be directly confronted in

a non-idealised/repressively-bourgeois manner, or nihilistic/senseless tragedies like Ken Park's suicide will keep occurring.

Furthermore, if we take a close look at all the main protagonists' predicaments in the film – especially Shawn (James Bullard), Claude (Stephen Jasso), Tate (James Ransone), and Peaches (Tiffany Limos) – their adult role models' unrealistic demands on their still-forming identities and desires are the film's central conflicts. Parental demands for uncritical/ unquestioning devotion in their children often damage their kids' self-esteem: for example, Shawn holds down his little brother (Seth Gray) and tells him near the film's beginning, "say I'm the master, say you love me, say I'm the master." This scene foregrounds the abusive cycles of behaviour that kids often learn from older people like their parents, i.e., parents often desire to be loved as masters whose unchecked authority can become completely illogical or irrational. Hence, "love" for Shawn is something indistinguishable from the domination of other people.

Echoing such a horrific distortion of family love, Shawn's friend Claude also receives abusive lessons from his caregivers. Claude's alcoholic father (Wade Williams) lambastes Claude for his identity as a skateboarder, thus trying to disempower his son's burgeoning identity:

sometimes I look at you and I feel ashamed. I look at you [looking] like that and I feel sick. I get up in the morning, and I see you, and I have a bad day. 'Cause I'm ashamed. [...]. Your mother thinks you're a fairy. [...]. You can pick your friends, but you can't pick your family.

However, Claude's father's disdain for Claude is revealed later to stem from his repressed homosexuality and paedophilia, which leads to a twisted sense of remorse: Claude's father enters his son's bedroom and attempts to give his sleeping son oral sex. Claude, however, leaves home quickly after this unsettling encounter, which Korine/Clark/Lachman portray as a positive thing in the sense that Claude's only possible chance at a meaningful future is to leave his family completely behind him.

Claude's choice is a more positive option than the one taken by Tate, who chooses to get violent revenge on his adult caregivers. Tate lives with his bourgeois grandmother (Patricia Place) and grandfather (Harrison Young), whom he constantly complains are phony and oblivious to life-at-large. Tate is undergoing a psychotic meltdown throughout the film, but his grandparents choose to stay willfully ignorant of Tate's psychological problems. At one point, Tate becomes enraged when his grandfather cheats at *Scrabble*. At first glance, it may be hard to understand his fury, but Tate is, in part, responding to the fact that his grandfather's cheating is childish. Hence, Tate's frustrations in life are only aggravated by the obvious lack of values and honour in his adult role models, which is thematically reinforced when his grandparents just ignore all of Tate's tantrums to go play tennis. This adult "repression" does not work at all because Tate becomes violently psychotic by film's end: he stabs his grandparents to death (à la the serial killer Ed Kemper), thinking that he is doing something ethical by putting them out of their misery. In this sense, he imagines that he is punishing them for their phoniness.

This tragic ending, however, could have been avoided had his grandparents confronted Tate's psychological problems as mature adults. Revealingly, the only time Tate is presented as happy in the film is when he leaves his grandparents' house to go jump rope with two black girls from his neighbourhood. This scene foregrounds the cinema of poetry in the sense that the only true contentment in life often comes from such subjective moments of the contingent sublime, which only the dismodern world of the here-and-now can provide. However, Tate cannot learn from his own experiences of such sublime, poetic transformation. His nihilistic murder of his grandparents implies that he will spend a significant amount of time in either jail or a mental institution. Like Ken Park, Tate will do anything to avoid what he perceives as the *living death* of adult society.

Peaches, who is the only female protagonist in *Ken Park*, is also burdened by a destructive adult figure in her life, her father (Julio Oscar Mechoso). Her father, who has never accepted the death of his wife, Peaches' mother, holds Peaches to an impossible standard of purity that, in effect, robs her of both her individuality as well as her burgeoning sexuality. Hence, Peaches' father, because of his inability to accept the contingent nature of the world, escapes into a pathological form of Catholicism. His contempt for non-normative, anti-patriarchal sexuality becomes overtly obvious when he walks in on Peaches tying her boyfriend to her bedposts. It appears that Peaches' father is not only disturbed by his daughter's sexuality, but by the fact that Peaches wants to be *sexually powerful*.

Although many fathers would be understandably upset over such a scene, Peaches' father responds in a disturbing manner by making her wear her dead mother's wedding dress so that she can go through a mock wedding ceremony with her father and, therefore, feel ashamed for not living up to the virginal-ideal of her mother at the time that her parents were married. As he makes Peaches kiss him after the "I-do's," she breaks down weeping; Peaches' father not only reveals an element of incestuous desire for his daughter because he is sexually jealous of her boyfriend, but he also refuses to see her as a young woman with a life of her own (he views her solely as a surrogate for his dead wife); in effect, he can be considered a nihilist in the sense that he refuses to see that everyday reality isn't an ideal. In this sense, Peaches' father foregrounds (through a counter example) the reality that *the cinema of poetry is the answer to anti-contingency fantasies and ideals*. Because the adults in the film like Peaches' father cannot provide what their children need, Peaches and her friends Shawn and Claude devise their own poetic catharsis to the suffering they've incurred at the hands of adults throughout the film.

As if to empty-out the anti-contingent-life control of Peaches' sexuality that her father has tried to force upon her, Peaches has a loving threesome with Shawn and Claude. Clark/ Lachman film this typically-censored subject matter as a lyrical/poetic solution (a la the cinema of poetry) to the adult failures in the film. Clark comments:

[In] most films that I see when kids are so devastated and they have no hope, they're just fucked. I wanted to show that the kids are ok and have each other. They have sex in the purest, most innocent and most appropriate way as kind of a redemption. (Interview w/ Daniel Robert Epstein, *SuicideGirls.com*, 2003)

Clark's statement edifies the notion that the key hope for the adolescents in *Ken Park* is their own creative/poetic capacities for self-creation outside of the adult's repressively-violent myths and self-deceptions. In effect, Shawn, Peaches, and Claude cathartically re-claim their sexuality as symbolic of their own abilities to *author* for themselves what will make them happy in a dismodern world.

While some viewers would likely refuse to see *Ken Park* as embodying a positive message because of its graphic teen-sex-scenes, this only highlights adult-society's repressive perceptions of sexuality—especially adolescent sexuality. The film to this day has no American distribution¹ because of its simulated portrayals of teen sexuality, and this is unfortunate because many young adults may see a positive message inherent in Claude, Peaches, and Shawn's choice to reclaim their individual destinies in their own poetically-constructed manner. Moreover, the film's three-way is thematically juxtaposed to another scene in the film that likely caused many to view the film as solely pornography: in one scene, Tate engages in auto-erotic asphyxiation while listening to female tennis players' grunting in the background. This scene, however, is vital to the logic of the film since it foreshadows Tate's psychotic break-

¹ At the time of writing this article, the only way to see the film is to order a Russian version that is not region encoded for American DVD players.

down, i.e., Tate views sexuality as destructive – not healing. Tate's only desires in life at this point are oneiric and solipsistic. Hence, Tate possesses no consistent poetic potential to re-create his life and thus falls into the same nihilistic pitfall as many of the adult authority figures in the film. Therefore, *Tate suffers the consequences of his inability to view his friends and peers as the solution to his alienation.*

While Peaches, Shawn, and Tate all sit around talking after their threesome, they even bring up the memory of Ken Park. This scene implies that these friends' ability to work things out *together* outside of adult influences is the answer to Ken Park and Tate's tragic world-views. Ken Park's nihilistic wish to abort his own life is therefore a direct result of *the inability or the refusal to find creative solutions to adult alienation.* Peaches, Shawn, and Claude, by remembering what happened to Ken Park, edify another key message of the film, i.e., learning from others' mistakes or tragedies is the way *not* to repeat them. The friends, this scene implies, break the cycle of abusive/ignorant adult behavior in their lives and thus have hopeful futures because they can perceive themselves *independently* of the horrific things they've seen and experienced in the past (a la the re-mediating potentials of the cinema of poetry). Hence, *Ken Park* is anything but nihilistic or mindlessly pornographic; the fact that it was never released in America is culturally problematic since it offers dismodern solutions to these young adults' alienation. Furthermore, since *Kids* and *Gummo* both got NC-17 ratings, they too could not be seen by the adolescents who might have perceived these films' poetic messages independently of the adult repressions and denials that only dismissed and banned them.

Directing the Dynamic Sublime

I wanted to put an end to realism – people's idea of what realism is.

–Harmony Korine, from *Ifilm*, 2001.

Since Korine has expressed in many interviews that he has no interest in intellectually reducing his films to an essential message or meaning, I only seek clarify here the ways that his poetic films present simulated/creative processes of perception that are cathartic – not nihilistic. Korine explains his artistic aims in the second phase of his artistic career (as a writer *and* director) in an interview concerning *Gummo*:

Gummo is like America, even though when people say 'oh it's documentary or it's real', it's definitely not. There's no such thing as realism in film or there's no such thing as truth. I'm only concerned with the poetry of realism, a supposed realism, and that's what *Gummo* is. [...]. [...] everything seems like it's really happening but at the same time I'm tricking and I'm manipulating everything. It's made up. I'm genre-fucking... (Steve Ramos, *City Beat*)

The America of *Gummo* is one that we never see portrayed in the mainstream media. In line with Korine's aesthetic rejection of essentialist or literal meanings as well as common-sense norms, Deleuze's following statement easily applies to Korine's aesthetics-as-genre-fucking:

thinking is always experiencing, experimenting, not interpreting but experimenting, and what we experience, experiment with, is always actuality, what's coming into being, what's new, what's taking shape. (Negotiations: 106)

Hence, it is illuminating to consider the fact that *Gummo* is named after the unknown Marx brother "Gummo," which exposes the reality that Korine's film is a self-conscious exploration of the phenomena that are *hidden* or *repressed* by the normalising ideals that inform much of American media culture. Alternatively,

Deleuze and Guattari call the non-ideal, dismodern logic of simulation “schizoanalysis” or “pragmatics,” and it is an attempt to replace all reductive, circumscribed meanings with experimental becomings a la the cinema of poetry (*A Thousand Plateaus* 146).

According to Pasolini, the cinema of poetry de-familiarises any and all technological or formal aspects of cinema’s construction of meaning:

The first characteristic of [the] signs which constitute a tradition of the cinema of poetry consists of that phenomenon that is normally and banally defined by persons in the business as “allowing the camera to be felt.” [...]. The camera [in a cinema of poetry] is felt for good reasons. The alternation of different lenses, a 25mm and a 200mm on the same face; the proliferation of wasted zoom shots, with their lenses of very high numbers which are on top of things, expanding them like excessively leavened bread; the continuous, deceptively casual shots against the light, which dazzle the camera; the hand-held camera movements; the more sharply focused tracking shots; the wrong editing for expressive reasons; [...] the interminable pauses on the same images, etc.—this entire technical code came into being almost out of impatience with the [traditional] rules, out of a need for an irregular and provocative freedom, out of an otherwise authentic or delicious enjoyment of anarchy. (183-4)

In *Gummo*, Korine allows the camera to be *felt* especially when he switches constantly between hand-held and traditional camera set-ups, DV and traditional film stock, as well as invisible or continuity editing and awkward/disruptive juxtapositions between disconnected scenes or contexts. He also uses non-synchronised sound in certain scenes as well as voice-overs from a plethora of the film’s characters/narrators. Korine’s film, therefore, makes us question *everything* that we’re witnessing in his film precisely because subjective perceptions are what generate the film’s diegetic reality. In this key sense, Korine’s *Gummo* is not a linear narrative but a poetic gallery of a small, middle-America town (Xenia, Ohio) and its mostly poverty-stricken, sedentary, and bored population.

Gummo, perhaps more so than any of his other films, foregrounds how Korine’s portraits of cinematic-becoming (or the lack thereof) highlight the dismodern nature of his cinema of poetry. Deleuze describes how exceptional artists overcome social norms and ideals by experimenting directly with the never-ceasing poetic rhythms inherent in a contingent world:

[artistic] signs simply imply ways of living, possibilities of existence, they’re the symptoms of life gushing forth or draining away. But a drained life or a personal life isn’t enough for an artist. You don’t write with your ego, your memory, and your illnesses. In the act of writing [or filming] there’s an attempt to make life something more than personal, to free life from what imprisons it. [...]. It’s organisms that die, not life. Any work of art points a way through for life, finds a way through the cracks. (Negotiations:143)

This passage helps to elucidate how Korine’s work, which explores nihilistic actions as well as extreme feelings of despair, can do so in an existentially-affirming, sublime manner a la the cinema of poetry. For Deleuze, in the most drained-away forms of life the artist, especially, must call forth “infinite quantities of progressiveness” (162).

To elucidate this key point, I want to draw two distinctions in the aesthetic logic of *Gummo* that are poetically-sublime a la Pasolini’s sacramental consciousness, i.e., Korine’s comedic/mockery self-portrait in the film that serves as a poetic commentary on media sensationalism, as well as his outright aesthetic-refusal to repress what dominant culture always tries to disown from its overly-idealised myths, i.e. the apathetic lives that we can witness everywhere in contemporary American life. The positive corrective to normalising or idealised desires in Korine’s films is daring

to stare directly at the *actual* state of people's alienation and to see *why* it's such a common personal/social trap.

Gummo's Xenia, Ohio carries its own mythic status, since it had been permanently marked/transformed by contingent fate, i.e., a tornado had earlier wreaked havoc on the town and killed many of its residents. Solomon (Jacob Reynolds), one of the film's main protagonists, narrates all this information to us in the film's opening montage. As if still wearing that mythic/ cinematic mark of devastation a la the Kansas scenes in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), many of *Gummo*'s characters openly flaunt this artistically-transformed relation to contingent life in rather humorous contexts; in fact, Solomon even states that when the tornado sent a girl flying into the air, he "looked up her skirt." In this naively-humorous context, Solomon reveals that the town has not succumbed to nihilism. Hence, the tornado's destruction is not an irreversible, anti-contingency symbol of a fallen world that can never be redeemed; it is, rather, a reminder that a dismodern world is always unpredictable, exciting, and re-formable through contingent/ provisional metamorphoses – ones that can be both negatively as well as positively destructive.

Korine's poetic-portraits allow his characters (most of whom are played by non-professional actors) to express their identities/perceptions freely from any idealised-narrative structure. In addition, Korine's film can have potentially-sublime effects on us viewers since we commonly see that these characters, even though they are trapped in extreme poverty and socio-economic deprivations, do not become nihilistic even though their options in life are extremely limited. Hence, what rescues many of the characters from hopelessness is their *imaginings* (a la the cinema of poetry), which they use to stage their own sporting events, comedy shows, and so forth. In this sense, a key irony arises from *Gummo*'s character-studies and slice-of-life narrative: since many of Korine's characters pose themselves *for a dismodern media gaze*, they envision that their only hope is *a new or alternative use of the media*. The fact that Korine's film even exists is proof that the mainstream media, as well as its bias that ignores or represses dismodern perspectives, *can be challenged and overcome aesthetically*.

Korine's film's series of ethnographic portraits, which conjure up how its characters suffer not from nihilism but poverty and ignorance, highlight the film's cinema of poetry: a scantily-clad, bleached-blond Dot (Chloë Sevigny) seductively licking her lips like a Courtney Love-esque rock star in a slow-motion close-up; the overweight, toeless albino-woman (Donna Brewster) who is filming a personal dating-profile because she wants to find someone like Patrick Swayze; the macho skinhead brothers (Jason and Casey Guzak) who jokingly beat each other up in their kitchen in a mock boxing match; the cowboy kids (James Lawhorn and James Glass) who destroy old cars in the junkyard while calling a boy wearing rabbit ears "queer"; the cross-dressing hunter of neighbourhood cats Gerald (Daniel Martin); the ADD-suffering tennis player; the prettied-up young woman with Down syndrome whose brother Cole (Max Perlich) pimps her out to his friends; the young girl Helen (Carisa Glucksman) who wants a moustache like Burt Reynolds; the deaf couple (William Dickinson and Kristi Faye Randolph) fighting in sign language in a bowling alley; the man (Mark Gonzales) who loses to a black dwarf (Bryant Crenshaw) in arm wrestling and then takes out his rage WWF-style on kitchen furniture, and so forth.

During all of these scenes, we spectators become acutely aware of the fact that Korine is *not making fun of his characters* because only through an ideal media gaze would these characters become objects of mockery; this is elucidated by the fact that many reviewers like Janet Maslin in the *New York Times* cruelly and demeaningly referred to Korine's cast as "freakish individuals." Elspeth Haughton also called Korine's cast "subnormal characters" (www.rottentomatoes.com). Contrary to such simplistic, surface-level reactions, Korine's dismodern use of the media in *Gummo* is

an implicit argument that the media is not *the sole problem* in American culture; instead, it is the judgmental/non-self-aware habits of perception that only perceive the world in the terms of normalising ideals. Alternatively, if more non-ideal, dismodern characters were portrayed in the media, it would lead to more exposure/awareness of the *social causes* of many peoples' miseries in life.

As a corrective to such socio-economic deprivations, there are several characters who continually weave in and out of *Gummo's* dismodern narrative, and who are acutely aware of life's creative/transformational potentials. One such character is Bunny Boy (Jacob Sewell) who dresses up in rabbit ears, skateboards around town, plays the accordion and even finds Dot's missing cat at film's end: he emphatically holds it up in front of the camera, which further implies that there is no reality to nihilism in Korine's art; a la Walt Whitman's poetry, *death* (a.k.a. *an affirmative transvaluation*) rescues life from such incoherence or meaninglessness. Had Bunny Boy found the cat alive he would have surely brought it back to its owners since he is characterised in the film as helpful and non-violent. In this sense, he is the character who most embodies the cinema of poetry since he lives in his own imagination and can sublimate any problems that he faces through his own artistic sensibility. For example, when the cowboy boys shoot him with cap guns and call him names, he just lies there silently, never reacting negatively. He thus symbolises a positive solution to the alienating machismo that the young kids are flaunting in this scene. Moreover, the fact that he is holding up the dead cat to the camera at the film's end, like Ken Park who films his own suicide, is *a challenge* for the audience to stare at the disturbing images in the film, all of which would be censored or repressed in the mainstream media. A la Pasolini's cinema of poetry, it is only through experiencing horrific phenomena that we can access our transformative powers of the sublime and thus be stripped of our alienating illusions/repressions.

In line with the film's critique of the mass-media's denials and repressions, its two central protagonists were discovered on a Sally Jessy Raphael episode titled "My Child Died from Sniffing Glue." The glue-sniffers Solomon and Tumbler (Nick Sutton) spend most of the film hunting down stray cats for the local Chinese restaurant. It is well documented that many of the film's viewers were understandably horrified by the fact that these characters kill cats. However, *it is because of their poverty that they do it*. Since our society kill cows, chickens, pigs, etc. for food, the film implicitly asks: is it wrong to kill other animals for food if one has no money and limited options? These characters, contrary to many peoples' expectations, live by a self-created, noble code in the sense that they do not kill housecats. Yet, the most disturbing scene in the film is surely when Solomon and Tumbler hang up a dead cat and then whip it with sticks. The most important point to make here is that all the violence in the film done to cats is *simulated*, and Solomon and Tumbler *are getting out their frustration on a dead cat*, which cannot be called animal abuse. Moreover, they take pity on Gerald's grandmother (Rose Shepard) by unplugging her from a breathing machine since she is in a vegetative state and has no chance at living a *meaningful* life. This last act especially foregrounds why Korine's film is not nihilistic because *even Solomon and Tumbler believe that life should be productively meaningful or purposeful for the ones living it*.

Korine's unsettling portraits/character-studies in *Gummo* extend his satirical take on nihilism and social horrors beyond the youth-culture of *Kids* and *Ken Park*; thus, his films are provocative attempts to de-familiarise common societal assumptions that often repress the *actual effects* of ignorance on all segments of American culture. A la Deleuze and Guattari's theory of *schizoanalysis* (or pragmatics), Korine's movie highlights how artistic production is "not a matter of escaping 'personally', from oneself, but of allowing something to escape, like bursting a pipe or a boil. Opening up flows beneath the social codes that seek to

channel and block them” (Deleuze, *Negotiations* 19). At the Venice Film Festival in 1999, Korine commented:

It isn't true that my films are nihilistic. I [just] think I'm apolitical. When I work on an idea, my aim is to create something innovative. [...]. My myths are David Lynch and Michael Powell. (Domenico Monetti, *All Korine's Transgressions*)

Instead of being apolitical, Korine is better described as a dismodern or “micropolitical” filmmaker who wants to re-energise the inert, libidinal economies of individuals that are too often territorialised by social deprivations as well as overly-static, mass-media myths/ideals (*A Thousand Plateaus* 208). Micropolitics, for Deleuze and Guattari, concerns the releasing of “quantum flows” that can “elude or escape” hegemonic codes so as to inject them with unforeseen and unheard-of becomings a la the re-mediating power of the cinema of poetry (217, 19). This quantum or micropolitical propensity also exposes why many people don't like to watch Korine's films, i.e., Korine takes fearless looks at the social effects of poverty and ignorance, and he doesn't attempt to re-structure them into the exclusionary or repressive terms of dominant-culture ideals. Since he rejects any Hollywood-endings, he refuses to make the unsettling issues that he foregrounds *safe* in a mythically-bourgeois manner.

In a curious scene in which he plays a young man whose desire for love/affection is open to everyone, Korine parades himself as *the spectacle* of the entire film. In this scene, he makes a fool of himself by trying to seduce a gay, African-American dwarf who wants nothing to do with him. A drunken Korine whines about his tragic life story in such an over-the-top manner that it should make us question his story's validity: he was supposedly beaten and sexually-abused as a child, his mother went into menopause at thirty, but nonetheless his horrible home life hasn't made him give up on life. Korine appears to be serio-comically mocking “abuse culture” here in that suffering sexual abuse when young can become a rationalisation for all problematic future behaviour. Like the Menendez brothers who claimed that they murdered their parents because of sexual abuse, Korine echoes a key piece of their trail testimony: “I was beaten. I was abused. I had people stick shit up my rectum.”

Korine's self-portrait in this scene is admittedly absurd, and it has been assumed by many to be shamelessly exploitative. However, it also satirises the fact that many people think that *a disabled person will accept any kind of problematic behaviour because of their sheer desperation to be accepted by a so-called normal person*. Hence, the more we see people with disabilities in other contexts besides vulnerability, the less we audiences will assume that they are being automatically made fun of. While many people have objected to this particular scene as mocking people with disabilities, the dwarf has all the power, and he respectfully declines Korine's advances. Alternatively, this scene can be interpreted as a critique of *the metaphysics of appearances*, i.e., appearances must be critically engaged *because they do not automatically brand one a freak*; Korine brands himself as freakish by *his actions*: the African American dwarf rejects him in a calm and collected manner. If anything, *Gummo* shows that film-art does not have to prescribe to any a priori ideal that determines what film should contain, and innovative/ sublime perspectives can still break open the processes of perception that too often result in only ignorance, nihilism, and intolerance. As the above-examples show, Korine often disempowers normalised habits of perception by making them situations that can conjure the dynamic sublime *through* absurdity and horror (a la the cinema of poetry).

The narrative logic of *Gummo* foregrounds many disparate and disconnected events, which always unfold independently of a unifying, idealised narrative-arc. *Gummo's* non-linear narrative often focuses on the moments or events (like Solomon

and Tumbler riding bikes or drinking milkshakes) when nothing heroic/idealised is advancing a Hollywood plot. Thus, Korine's films can create non-idealised, poetic meanings that the mainstream media often completely ignores or represses (a la *Ken Park's* satirical take on the mainstream media). This is likely another reason why people become uncomfortable when watching *Gummo*, since they perhaps only understand art in the terms of mainstream media-indoctrination which, as Deleuze claims, can render them unthinking and uncritical voyeurs in overly-determined/predictable narratives. A la the ending of *Kids*, *Gummo's* final scene mocks Hollywood endings with a non-idealised appeal to a "sacramental consciousness": a woman Ellen (Ellen M. Smith) with Down syndrome is saying her good night prayers, which is a *sincere* act that may confuse those who write Korine off as a "scuzzball" because they believe the false logic that any portrayal of people with disabilities is a fetishistic act. Since Korine's films unfold according to the figurative logic of the cinema of poetry, it is absurd to read his films literally.

Moreover, this woman with Down syndrome is best understood as *praying to the audience for a change in Western culture/media that will allow more dismodern subject matters to come to light*. Hence, Korine's ending implies that the only people who have a real chance at experiencing the sublime/sacramental in life are outsiders who have not been rendered voyeurs or fetishists by a too-often uncreative media environment. Thus, one of the key ways to experience such life-affirming desires/powers is to creatively experiment with all the forces that the mainstream media represses, ignores, or chooses to hide from in a dismodern world.

"Midnight Chaos, Eternity, Chaos..."

Korine's follow-up film to *Gummo* foregrounds his "schizo-analytic impulses" to an even stronger degree since *Julien Donkey-boy* is centred on a schizophrenic young man; in effect, Korine's film shows the debilitating nature of this mental-illness in a much more graphic and unsettling manner than Richard Kelly's schizophrenic protagonist Donnie Darko. Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy posits schizophrenia as not solely a mental disorder, but a productive model for those who do not suffer from it, i.e., schizophrenia can also be seen as operating independently of normative social codes, which can then allow one the power of "freeing flows, going further into contrivance;" furthermore, "a schizophrenic is someone who's been decoded, deterritorialised" (*Negotiations* 23). A Deleuzian "schizoanalyst" is therefore one who is comfortable with the "dynamical sublime" or the infinitely-dynamic flux of an unmasterable, contingent world. Julien (Ewen Bremner) has been de-coded in both a social and aesthetic sense because social laws (like those barring incest or violence) are not fully understood by him as wrong, i.e., he doesn't relate to the world around him in the terms of ideological or social/mythic rules (see below).

Julien Donkey-boy, which concentrates on Julien's dysfunctional family life, offers us viewers jarring/disjunctive P.O.V. shots and non-idealised events from Julien's schizophrenic/ non-normative perspective a la the *cinema of poetry*, which, furthermore, can positively transform our perceptual capabilities in equally non-normalising capacities. *Julien* was even awarded the *Dogme '95* seal of approval since it was made in accordance with the Danish groups' technological criteria for ensuring realism in film: all shots in *Dogme '95* movies must use natural light, actual-life mise-en-scène (i.e. no constructed sets), digital cameras, and nothing at all can be added to the film's images in post-production.

Because *Dogme '95* rules allow filmmakers to utilise free-form filming, *Julien Donkey-boy* offers many insightful moments of social criticism. For example, Julien's dad (Werner Herzog) demoralises his two sons throughout the film, especially Julien's younger brother Chris (Evan Neumann), because he does not live up to an idealised standard of physical strength and emotional resilience; Chris even tells the

camera in one of the film's many soliloquies: "can't ever fuckin' win. I gotta be a winner. Tired of fuckin' losin'." A la *Ken Park*, the death of a parent has rendered a single male parent emotionally distant and incapable of assuming a nurturing role. Julien's father never offers his children any meaningful advice; rather, he goes on solipsistic diatribes about parrots, Pizzaro in Peru, Dirty Harry films, and why the only good poetry is rhyming poetry (which shows that those with limited artistic views are often limited in their ideas about life as well!).

In one key scene during dinner time, Julien's dad demeans Julien for reading a poem to his sister Pearl (Chloë Sevigny). Julien's poem is an accurate account of how he experiences the fragmented world around him; a portion of the poem reads as follows: "midnight chaos, eternity chaos, morning chaos, eternity chaos, noon chaos, eternity chaos, evening chaos, eternity chaos, midnight chaos, eternity chaos, morning chaos, eternity chaos, noon chaos, eternity chaos," etc. Julien's poem is significant in that it portrays the dismodern world as it really is: chaotic, contingent, and not structured according to any positivist logic. However, since Julien's dad wants rational order, he only dismisses Julien's poem for repeating "chaos" too often and for writing "artsy-fartsy" poetry, not realising that the poem is a symbolic cry for help. In Kantian terminology, a schizophrenic like Julien lives in a world in which *chaos threatens to envelop the poetic rhythms* of the contingent world so completely and absolutely that he requires a nurturing energy to help him process that world more effectively.

In one of the most emotionally-gripping scenes in *Julien Donkey-boy*, Pearl and Julien talk on separate telephones in their house so Pearl can pretend to be their dead mother, which is an action that works to calm Julien down and alleviate some of his schizophrenic symptoms; a portion of their conversation happens as follows:

Julien: I love you mom, I miss you mom, I wish you were still here like when I was a little baby mom.

Pearl (in their mother's voice): I love you too Julien, and I'm watching you. And all those voices you are hearing – those are just friendly voices. No one's out to get you. No one wants to hurt you, right?

Pearl, who's also pregnant, is the only character who feels compelled to help alleviate Julien's paranoia; hence, Julien is allowed to express vulnerability to her instead of having to live up to his father's machismo ideal. Pearl also helps him transform the symptoms of his disability into the domain of the poetic where they can be dealt with figuratively a la the cinema of poetry.

Revealingly, the only meaningful support Julien receives is from the people with disabilities who embody the limitations inherent in a dismodern world. Julien's social life is full of role models who accept themselves as positive agents in the world (although they do not fit any normal or idealised form of bourgeois or mainstream social-empowerment). Julien spends much of his time in the movie with support groups for people with disabilities, including going on social outings like ice-skating and bowling with a school/social-club for the blind; in fact, one of the most interesting scenes in the film portrays how thrilling it is for Julien to help blind people experience bowling. Korine films these scenes in a uniquely poetic way to capture how blind people experience the world: these scenes present static photographic images that appear like a slide show over the real-time sound of the scene. Such a cinematic and poetic effect illustrates the free-flowing, abundant virtual energies outside of normal or common-sense perceptions. Here Korine's film shatters the able-bodied assumption that blind people can get nothing out of such a sport, hence highlighting the non-determined, simulated meanings that arise from the cinema of poetry.

According to this poetically-empowering scene, cinematic sound (especially) can exceed the limited architectures of solid/concrete visual-spaces, thus occupying

greater virtual and sensory possibility. Cinematic sound also envelops people more fully and can, therefore, extend beyond any frontally-focused, limited directionality of a specific camera-image. As we viewers experience the phenomenon of bowling as primarily an auditory experience, we see how incredibly joyous bowling is for the blind people. To edify the fact that disabilities are potentially new avenues for experience and knowledge in a dismodern world, one young blind girl Chrissy (Chrissy Kobylak) states at one point that she thought she could see “a lot” until a doctor told her she could see very little. Thematically, this scene implies that 20/20 vision has no ideal capacities and thus people with perfect vision may not see radically more than those who cannot see at all. It is perhaps obvious that Korine is directly commenting here on how joy or pleasure in the world is not limited to the able-bodied experience.

Alternatively, Korine edifies the free-flowing capacities for experiencing a contingent or dismodern world of abundant sensory phenomena—regardless of whether one is mentally-ill, physically disabled, or otherwise. *Julien Donkey-boy* offers us viewers, a la *Gummo*'s aesthetic logic, many poetic snapshots and character-portraits that come from Julien's immediate surroundings; they include: the black albino rapper “straight from Alabama” (Victor Varnado) and the armless drummer who hangs out with Julien's dad. A la *Gummo*, these poetic portraits express how the experience of difference does not have to be demeaning or exotic as in a circus or freak show; rather, these portraits offer chances to experience the world from empowering viewpoints that many people have never experienced before and, which, can also expose how the fear of difference is an irrational, illusory fear of life—one that deserves to be laughed at more than anything else.

In addition, Korine's film never romanticises schizophrenia, since he also shows its harsher sides in unsettling manners that bring its horror and potential violence directly to the fore. The most challenging/potentially-confusing moments in the film surely include Julien's actions at the film's beginning and ending. The first scene of *Julien Donkey-boy* entails Julien trying to wrestle a turtle out of a young boy's hands, and in the commotion he either knocks out the boy or kills him—it's hard to tell what has actually taken place. However, since Julien thinks the boy is dead, he covers him with handfuls of dirt while saying a prayer. It is perhaps obvious by such a beginning that Korine is offering a rather non-normative/non-moralising perspective on the dismodern/disabling condition of schizophrenia, i.e., Julien doesn't fully understand actual-life consequences like a mature adult.

By presenting Julien as having a child-like, non-rational perspective, the film rigorously avoids taking a moral, reductive standpoint on Julien's actions, which allows for an all-encompassing cinema of poetry. Also, it is unclear if this scene happens in reality or it is taking place in Julien's head according to the logic of a “psychosocial moratorium” (Erik Erikson's term for any space-time of imaginary identity experimentation). According to the philosophy of the cinema of poetry, it doesn't matter if the events depicted in a film are meant to be read as real or imaginary because film is never limited solely to a plausible, rational logic. For Korine, schizophrenia becomes a medium through which he can invent new modes of perception and communication (a la schizo-analysis) for experiencing the non-rational forces of the world. Moreover, the cinema of poetry or a psychosocial moratorium affords us the opportunity to avoid actual-world consequences when we explore violence *as fantasy or art*.

Without a doubt, the film's ending risks alienating audiences because it reveals that Julien is the father of his sister Pearl's baby. As in the film's opening scene, this part of Korine's film also echoes the blurring of the real and the false in the cinema of poetry because it is unclear if these are occurring in ordinary reality or in his head. When Pearl has a miscarriage, Julien demands to see the dead baby and

explains to the nurse: "it's mine" (however, we cannot be sure if he is indeed the father; since he understands the world through his schizophrenia, what we are witnessing may be his own self-created distortion of the reality around him). Nonetheless, he intends to show this child care and love, so he steals it from the hospital and gets on a bus to go home. According to the subjective perspective of the cinema of poetry, Julien doesn't care if the baby is alive or dead; he runs up to his room and cradles his dead child in his arms under his bed-sheets, basically recreating a protective womb for him/her. He lies under the covers for a long time, rocking the baby and whispering to him/her in a loving manner. Hence, love and compassion in these scenes is not subordinated to a rational or reductive logic.

While this scene is dealing with a difficult subject matter, it is done in a touching emotional context. Herein lies one of the key messages of Korine's film, i.e., all contexts become dependent on how we perceive the dismodern world, and *we cannot use the same criteria for everyone*. Surely Korine's film achieves a gripping, emotionally-intense finale that is not reducible to pre-conceived cinematic clichés. Edifying the poetically-sublime nature of this finale, Korine presents us with a startling image: a female ice skater spinning in perfect balance, which implies that life itself is a balancing act between the creation of beautiful images/events and the annihilation of the predictable or monotonous ways of perceiving the world that make us numb to life's aesthetic pleasures. In this dynamic sense, the ending foregrounds why Korine is a micro-political filmmaker, i.e., he is unconcerned with judging Julien and, furthermore, the film successfully releases quantum becomings (à la the cinema of poetry) that can infect—in the Deleuzian sense—the illusions of nihilism and normalcy with new powers of perception. Contrary to Korine's view of himself as apolitical, his work, in fact, possesses a striking and subversive political bent that surely makes him "artistic royalty."

Harmony Korine's ability to tackle unsettling themes in his poetic film-art should be read as a cathartic-break from life-negating propensities. In the words of Nietzsche:

Someone once remarked: "I can tell by my own reaction to [this art] that [it's] harmful..." Let such a person only wait and perhaps one day he'll admit to himself that this same [thing] has done him a great service by bringing out the hidden sickness of his heart. Altered opinions do not alter a man's character; they do, however, illuminate individual aspects of the constellation of his personality which, with a different constellation of opinions, had hitherto remained dark and unrecognizable. (*Assorted Opinions & Maxims* 58)

According to this Nietzschean logic, the best way to read Korine's films is as a challenge for us to see our problems within a transformative/sublime light. Korine always portrays social horrors not as unchangeable evils, but as the unfortunate outcomes of our capacities to mis-perceive our creative/artistic-relations to a dismodern world. Therefore, Korine can perhaps be best described as a modern-day Rimbaud who possesses a photographic sensibility akin to Ralph Eugene Meatyard. Like these predecessors' works, Korine's films embody positive messages in the sense that they hint at how all negative/destructive tendencies can be re-written/overcome as long as we can create our own powers of perception according to the cinema of poetry. Hopefully, Korine, as well as others like Ed Lachman and Larry Clark, will keep creating independent films that fearlessly attack the *actual* causes of alienation and self-hatred in contemporary American culture. Although their films commonly provide uneasy or even painful experiences, they have value in the sense that they attack and destroy repressive social mores in the artistic spirit of the dynamic sublime.

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