

## Larry Clark's *Cinéma Vérité*

by Faisal Amin

Naked, made decent by conveniently located empty 40oz. bottles of malt liquor, the boy sits on a couch with his tattooed bicep resting on the arm. This is Casper. His hair is blown back, not salon-style, but more like the result of habitual hand combing – a subconscious tic of a highly-strung cokehead. His eyelids struggle to rise, trying to hide his pupils from the morning sunlight. He lifts his head to speak. “Jesus Christ, what happened?” As the scene cuts to black and the end credits begin to roll, everyone watching wonders the same thing. In *Kids*, Larry Clark's directorial debut, the camera follows Telly and his friend Casper through the span of roughly one day, cramming the extremes of teenage experimentation and defiance into 91 minutes.

The plot-driving premise is a two-part chase. The film opens with a cannibalistic French kiss that Telly shares with a girl minutes out of puberty. Telly then performs some well-rehearsed sweet talk chock-full of promises. “I think if we fucked, you would love it,” he says. The next shot shows sex so unromantic that it rivals divorce papers, while in a cocky voiceover he announces, “Virgins. I love 'em. No diseases, no loose as a goose pussy, no skank. No nothin'. Just pure pleasure.” Hours after leaving the girl's room, he starts telling Casper about his vision for the future: thirteen-year-old Darcy. “Two virgins in one day,” says Casper, “that shit's gotta be against the law or some shit.”

While Telly pursues another virgin, a girl named Jenny, one of his earlier tokens, looks for him. Jenny tested positive for HIV, and having had only the one partner, easily identifies the source. She wanders dazedly in search of Telly, somehow always steps behind him despite his

haphazard route. The only significant cuts in the film switch between these two characters, although the focus remains Telly-centric. Besides these jumps, and the infrequent voice-over, *Kids* eschews technical production devices. It features real locations, natural lighting, and is shot with lots of handheld cameras. The cast is almost entirely non-professional; many of the actors play roles almost synonymous with their lives (Maslin), making it all very “voyeuristic” (Giroux 33). Viewers are grateful to be behind a screen, but still feel the need to apologize for intruding on the blunt-smoking circle near Washington Square Park. But this makes it all the more real. The cinematic style of the film contributes to its authenticity; it’s almost as if in its honesty, *Kids* leaves you bewildered, naked on the couch next to Casper.

For all the parents out there, labeling *Kids* as an accurate depiction of youth is terrifying. The solid rap sheet of misdemeanors Telly and Casper accumulate throughout the day is never really a concern for them; rather, their second-nature attitude toward their delinquency suggests that it is a daily habit. Regardless of their background, most teens can in some way relate to the sex, drugs, and disregard for rules, because “although *Kids* is not about *all* kids, it’s not just about *these* kids” (Engdahl and Hosey 43). While the extent of the similarity may vary, there is a large subset of society that can closely identify with these characters. Cultural critic from Penn State University Henry Giroux notes the existence of this intentionally overlooked population: “American society at present exudes both a deep rooted hostility and chilling indifference toward youth, reinforcing the dismal conditions under which young people are increasingly living . . .” (31). While the characters may represent slightly exaggerated versions of reality, there is still an incessant truth to it, perhaps because of the style of filming.

Clark’s noninvasive cinematography is an example of *cinéma vérité*. The style steers clear of technical aspects of filmmaking, such as multiple, dynamic camera angles, as to

“captur[e] life as it is lived, rather than as it is re-enacted or re-invented...to be a representation of life itself,” (Issari and Atkinson 5). And so we sit as part of the circle at Paul’s graffiti-covered “flophouse,” the camera following natural eye movements. We watch the amateur skateboarding videos on a TV smaller than most computer screens. We see Casper suck in and regurgitate nitrous oxide from a whip-it-inflated balloon. We look at Telly as he gives a sex-ed lesson, speaking from experience: “Condoms don’t work. They either break, or they slip off, or they make your dick shrink.” Clark offers the viewer a brown-bagged Steel Reserve, a cigarette and a skateboard, and, avoiding cinematic devices, leaves them in the hands of these morally reprehensible youths.

This is the problem for most of the film’s critics. Larry Clark exposes viewers to sex, rape, shoplifting, drug use, and violence – all by kids. For all the controversy Clark puts on the table, his voice is nowhere to be found in the film. Rita Kempley staff writer for the Washington Post expresses her displeasure with the lack of Clark’s presence: “He doesn’t seem to understand the characters, nor does he link their wasted lives to economic circumstances, social failures or accidents of birth. He doesn’t tell us what he thinks, so other than revulsion, what can we feel?” Ms. Kempley is in search for in-your-face commentary and the “overt moralizing of a John Hughes film,”(Engdahl and Hosey 44). This is not Clark’s intention. Before *Kids*, Clark’s artistic vision manifested itself in photography. Both “Tulsa” (1971) and “Teenage Lust” (1983) are semi-autobiographical collections depicting “his fast-lived youth”(Rafferty 80). In keeping with this theme, Clark employs *cinéma vérité* “to make the viewer an observer of the drama as it unfolds... to bring an intermediary between the event and the viewer is against the philosophy of this style... For this reason, some *cinéma vérité* films can end up as only exercises in

photography” (Issari and Atkinson 17). The “ultimate effect” of *Kids* “is that of a photograph”: it allows the image alone to be the message (Rafferty 80).

Yet many critics, like Kempley, are not satisfied with the image. She calls the film “virtually child pornography,” citing the characters’ lack of “any real substance.” This reaction is the unintended consequence of *cinéma vérité*. Clark assumes that viewers will understand Telly and Casper because their adolescence will resonate with the viewers’ own past experiences, as it does with his. Without a lengthy background of the characters, “it is almost impossible to understand the absence of adults in the film, the at-risk sexuality, the rabid homophobia, or the random violence practiced by these teenagers” (Giroux 33). The couple in the Upper-East-Side apartment watching the film on Netflix could never understand the “deeper, broader needs”(Engdahl and Hosey 42) that spur Telly’s carnal desire for virgins or Casper’s high-chasing hedonism. They might as well be watching Animal Planet. But it is this couple that has the most to learn from this film, given they accept that these sort of kids exist.

Casper waits, with a stolen bottle of malt liquor concealed in his pant leg, while Telly distracts the Korean shop worker with a tap on the shoulder. As the clerk turns his head in reflex, Casper swiftly snags a peach from the neatly stacked pyramid of fruit in the outdoor stall. In the next scene, the pair waits for a friend, Paul, to buzz them into his building. Casper notices a girl holding a Black doll standing by the door. “What’s up little girlie, you like peaches?” he says. He hands her the stolen fruit and follows Telly in through the now unlocked door. If he had no intention of eating it, why did Casper take the peach?

Casper and Telly are kids. Nothing they do has evil intentions. This is what gives the characters dynamism and saves them from being “caricatures” of urban youth. St. Augustine, the philosopher and theologian credited with developing Western Christianity, discusses his

youth in the book in the *Confessions* about adolescence, where he argues that the desire to sin for sin's sake is characteristic of this age. In a similar episode, he recalls stealing loads of pears from an orchard, only to throw them later to the hogs. Augustine explains his motives not as a "desire to enjoy the things [he] stole, but only the [desire of] stealing them and the sin." "Such was my heart," he continues, "yet in the depth of the abyss [God] had pity on it" (29). Augustine acknowledges that the only motivation for his wrongdoing was his love of sin. It was because he didn't sin to benefit himself that God shows him pity and he is saved from evil.

All Telly and Casper's morally lax behavior comes out of boredom, a lack of guidance, and no better alternative. And they know it. Without breaking from the film's style, Clark offers glimpses of the causes behind the characters' twisted mentalities when Telly's mother breastfeeds an infant nestled in the crook of one arm and holds her cigarette in the other. Between coughs, she offhandedly tells Telly, as he walks out the door, she hopes he will be back before four in the morning. In an interview with *Salon Magazine*, Clark states his belief that with "Kids" he "got it right" (*Salon*): sure, it's a bit exaggerated, but it's a hell of a lot more real than other portrayals of teen life.