

Youth Culture as a Social Class:

Larry Clark and his Influence on American Social Realism

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Declaration of Originality

This Thesis is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art Design & Technology, Dun Laoghaire in partial fulfilment of the examination for the BA (Hons) Film Production. It is entirely the author's own work except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.

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Abstract

This Thesis will examine Photographer & Film Director Larry Clark and how he redefined the American Social Realism Genre, highlighting his role in redefining the genre through the focus on youth culture. Social realism traditionally centres around working-class adults, however Clark shifts the focus onto the struggles of youth culture. He examines the personal hardships and oppressions of youth culture, arguing that youth is a social class in and of itself.

Clark's work addressed issues of marginalization, sexuality and teen addicts. His photography books *Tulsa* (1971) , *Teenage lust* (1983) as well as his controversial first feature film *Kids* (1995) served as social commentaries, providing a personal honest portrayal of youth culture.

Through textual analysis of Clark's work, this study explores how his choice of stylistic elements such as non-professional actors, documentary-like filmmaking and taboo subject matters both supports and contradicts social realist norms.

Clark's influence on social realism and the ongoing debate between exploitation and realism is evaluated in this thesis. Ultimately, it contends that Clark's contributions expanded the genres constraints, forcing audiences to confront controversial realities and reconsider the ethical constraints of social realist filmmaking.

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Introduction

Larry Clark is a well-known name in the photography and film industry. His work delves into the complex complicated world of adolescence. He is renowned for his raw unfiltered portrayal of youth, using his camera to capture moments of intimacy and controversial events. Larry Clark is an influential figure in social realism in his ability to shed light onto the realities of youth culture in America.

Larry Clark occupies a unique space in American social realism, due to his emphasis and representation of youth culture where he has successfully created a new sub sub-genre within social realism. The social realism genre has been a tool in reflecting the social issues in working class society, exposing the struggles of marginalized communities and focusing on topics such as crime, poverty, and other working- class hardships.

To understand Larry Clark's influence in realism I will explore the origins and elements of social realism and briefly discuss the works of other realist filmmakers. Traditionally, social realist filmmakers depict social issues of working-class adults, capturing their economic social oppression. Larry Clark occupies a unique position in its movement by shifting the focus from working class adults onto youth culture. I will explore his early work as a photographer and discuss his personal experiences that inspired his photography. By analysing Clark's photography work, one will gain a greater understanding to why Clark presents youth culture as a separate social realist genre.

To understand how Clark's works still aligns with social realist traditions I will analyse the social realist techniques in his film "Kids" to stylistic similarities of Italian neo-realist filmmakers. Clark's work challenges the boundaries of realism provoking both admiration and an ethical debate.

After discussing Clark stylistic similarities to realism, I will then explore the ethical debate around whether it is realism or exploitation in his film Kids. This involves great consideration in the understanding of social realism and Clark's representation of adolescence in his film Kids.

After examining the ethical debate surrounding "Kids" I will explore Clark's influence on realism and other directors and look at how Clark's controversial choices redefined American social realism. In doing so I will argue Clark's unique position in the realist movement and how the taboo elements in his storytelling forced the social realist movement to evolve.

Chapter I: Social Realism

The rise of the social realism genre

The portrayal of social issues within cinema has always been a powerful tool for reflecting the societal realities of the time in which the film is created. Through the lens of social realism, filmmakers have the ability to shine a light on the struggles and triumphs of individuals navigating complex socio-economic landscapes. In this chapter I will explore the origins of social realism in cinema and the genres' cultural and historical contents.

The term social realism branches beneath a variety of art forms such as film, photography, paintings, writers and printmakers. The art form's purpose is to expose the actual social political circumstances that the working-class face, in order to challenge the power structures that underlie these situations.

Scotsman John Grierson is considered to be the father of British documentary film. This British documentary movement of the 1920s has paved the way for British social realism, allowing a movement of raw, real, representations of the working class and common culture. Documentaries were not only an entertaining form of public observation, but they also provided a social function by educating the public about social issues.

In John Grierson's essay "First principles of documentary" (grierson) Grierson states "The principles of the documentary were that cinema's potential for observing life could be exploited in a new art form; that the "original" actor and "original" scene are better guides than their fiction counterparts". Grierson wanted to represent real people and important social issues, using the media to educate the people rather than to solely entertain them.

"Drifters" (1929) John Grierson's first and last film is the widely successful product of his radical beliefs. A silent documentary about North Sea herring fishing captures the rhythm of the everyday worker's life. Grierson admired the works of Sergei Eisenstein a soviet screenwriter and director. Sergei use of montage in his film, influenced Grierson's making of "Drifters", which ended up becoming a ground-breaking documentary of its time, which played an essential influential role in the documentary film movement.

After discussing the origins of documentary, I will now look at how the documentary movement paved the way for the birth of the social realism genre. Samantha Lay gives an overview of the arguments that claim social realism is a direct offshoot of documentary :

Firstly, the documentary idea posited a different role for film in society. For the documentarists, film had a social purpose and a role to play for the betterment of society rather than just as mere entertainment. Secondly, and allied to this point, it did so through a belief that it could benefit British society, helping to forge a sense of national identity and belonging. Thirdly, the documentary movement brought issues and representations to British screens which portray working class caricatures rather than full-bodied characters in their own right, and as plot ancillaries rather than as the central focus. Fourthly, the documentary pioneered practices which would become the markers that distinguished its output from mainstream film. These practices helped to determine the practice of future filmmakers working within the social realist mode. (Lay)

The main takeaway point of Lay's account is that social realism is defined by its dedication to portraying real people in their real environments. The context of this genre's purpose is to help create visibility and a political voice for the working class. Documentary filmmaking was an art form that went against the Hollywood aesthetics and meshed the entertainment aspect of film with an educational role of representing common social issues.

The core elements of social realism

Social realism films do not depict Hollywood's polished protagonist in an aesthetic form. Hallam and Marshment stated that social realism is distinguished by the attention it pays to characters who usually figure as background presences in the generic mainstream, i.e. those marginalised by virtue of their social status. (Julia Hallam)

The genre took inspiration from the principles of documentary on how it focuses on representing the marginalised communities, portraying real people and their everyday lives. The British social realism genre has generally focused on closely representing the working class, a social class which have often lacked authentic representation in film.

British filmmaker Andrea Arnold frequently focuses on the authentic representation of individuals in her work. She particularly focused on the female experience within working class society. Her protagonists are frequently multidimensional characters with obvious flaws. The women in her films are emotional and complex, they regularly make poor decisions however they always emerge with a greater self-awareness.

Her short films *Wasp* (2003) and *Milk* (1998) portray imperfect mothers who make bad choices that cast them in an unfavourable light. However, Arnold still succeeds in making us feel sympathy for them.

In the film *Wasp* (2003), a single woman and her four kids live in a council estate. She leaves her kids outside of a pub to see her ex-boyfriend after their meeting awakens her desire. The symbolic scene of a bee crawling into her baby's mouth symbolises her psychological conflict as a young woman attracted to a guy and a being a mother of four.

In *Milk* (1998), Arnold holds nothing back in showcasing an untraditional, but painfully accurate depiction of a woman in a firm state of “well fuck it”. Following a miscarriage, Hetty decides not to attend the funeral for her child despite her husband's pleading. She meets Martin wandering around town, and together they embark on an impulsive, drunken joyride in his car.

At the Cannes Film Festival in 2024, Arnold was asked how does this sense of kinship extend, if at all, to her films and characters and where she felt a particular bonds between them? Arnold said

“I see them as very real. Sometimes I challenge myself with the characters and make them not very easy to know. It’s almost like I make it more difficult every time; I don’t know why.” (Arnold, *A Whole World: A Conversation with Andrea Arnold*)

She went on to say “ I’ve always had this idea that if you look at anyone long enough, you’ll find the humanity in them and you’ll have empathy for whoever they are, no matter what they might have done. (Arnold, *A Whole World: A Conversation with Andrea Arnold*)

By choosing to go for authentic multidimensional characters Arnold succeeds in continuing on the primal element in social realism, the portrayal of real people and their real problems in their everyday lives.

Another core principle in the social realism genre is how the genre typically eschews glamorisation, to aim for raw, honest portrayals that bring attention to societal issues, like poverty, addiction, and social injustice. Lynne Ramsay is another film maker who examines social issues of poverty, brutality and mental distress, through the social realism genre. Ramsay's films frequently feature characters on the margins of society, dealing with topics like abuse, addiction, and mental illness. By immersing the audience in these characters' daily lives, Ramsay fosters empathy and sympathy for their situations. Her films are frequently set in metropolitan surroundings, where poverty and misery are visible, contributing to the reality of her narrative.

The locations in Ramsay's films are frequently used as symbolic elements that support the plot of the characters as well as backgrounds. To achieve an honest and immersing narrative she uses a visual and symbolic storytelling method, to deal with the serious subjects matters in her films. Her film “*Morvern Callar*” (Ramsay, *Morvern Callar*) explores socio economic issues in Britain, through the characters’ struggles with poverty and with the goal of individual liberty. It’s a story about a low-paid employee,

Morvern Callar, who works in the local supermarket and wakes one morning to find her boyfriend dead on the kitchen floor, after taking his own life.. Morven's laconic reaction is both intriguing and immoral. The film questions established gender roles and societal expectations, presenting a nuanced picture of a rich and dynamic female protagonist who defies preconceptions and expectations.

According to Professor David Forrest Ramsay's films *Rat Catcher* (Ramsay, *Rat Catcher*) and *Morvern Callar* are distinguished by an unerring attention to visual details, which bear little or no relation to narrative delivery. Instead they are evoked like in slow motion montages in meadows- as poetic invitations for the viewer to engage with the wider discourses, distinct from the immediacy of story and characters. (Forrest, *New Realism : contemporary british cinema*)pg-304

Forrest explains how Ramsay explores complex socioeconomic topics without compromising creative integrity. She achieves this by using subjective narration, symbolic imagery, and compelling sound design. Her capacity to universalise the personal guarantees that her films have a strong emotional impact and entice viewers to interact with the films socio-political themes.

Andrea Arnold's film *Fish Tank* (Arnold, *Fish Tank*) is another example of a social realism film which explores life in an underprivileged, socially challenged world. Unlike Lynne Ramsay, Arnold uses a slightly more personal approach in creating a greater understanding for the socio-economic challenges in her films.

Arnold's approach to filmmaking is strongly anchored in empathy and a keen sense of observation, allowing her to create pictures that are both socially important and emotionally moving. *Fish Tank* delves into the world of Mia, a 15-year-old girl living on a council estate who attempts to escape her claustrophobic environment by winning a dance competition. The film highlights how low-income families experience a lack of opportunities due to the impact of poverty, which in turn dampens their aspirations for their lives.

Fiona Handyside explains in her article on *International Cinema* and *The Girl* (Bolton) how Arnold creates an raw authentic depiction of the experience of a working-class teenage girl.

She suggests that in *Fish Tank*, the treatment of the main character Mia is not just a gritty exposition of her environment and the limits of her choices; nor is it a straightforward vision of a teenage girlhood in broken Britain. It is an evocation of her individual personality and experiences, through an immersive cinematic phenomenology of her space, time and movement. This existentialist phenomenological approach enables us to understand how *Fish Tank* evokes the experiences of what it is like to be a modern girl in modern Britain, rather than presenting a more conventional story of what happens to her

within her social and cultural context. (Bolten, *A Phenomenology of Girlhood: Being Mia in Fish Tank*)
pg. 76

Handyside's chapter on Andrea Arnold's *Fish Tank* explores the representation of girlhood in the working classes. She uses the phenomenological analysis to prove how Arnold creates empathy and understanding when watching the film. She claims, for example, when viewing *Fish Tank*, rather than engaging morally or psychologically with the main character Mia, we are immersed into her world and forced to join it. We don't just observe Mia's life; we also experience it. Handyside uses this phenomenological approach to investigate how the film portrays Mia's experiences and subjectivity, drawing on theories of embodiment, perception, and interpersonal interaction.

An example of how this is achieved is the close-up tracking shot Arnold employs, following Mia's feet and her determined, aggressive footsteps, and the close-ups of her worldly wise but young and hungry face. The camera picks up on Mia's energy through its urgent, unsteady, hand-held motion and the accompanying sound of her exercised breathing. We know where we are: we are with Mia in her time and her space. If it takes Mia a few minutes to get from one side of the estate to the other then it will take us a few minutes too. (Bolten, *A Phenomenology of Girlhood: Being Mia in Fish Tank*) pg. 77

Andrea Arnold creates a raw personal experience with the use of naturalistic cinematography including elements of documentary filmmaking. This brings me to what I believe is the final core element of social realism being, how social realist films often use techniques like non-professional actors, handheld cameras, and real locations to heighten the sense of authenticity and give viewers a sense of "being there." Seeing as the birth of Social realism genre was essentially inspired by the documentary movement, there is no surprise that it attains some of the same core elements in documentary used to authentically portray a character and their environment. Camera movements in the realism genre play a crucial role in the immersive authentic quality that the genre possesses.

David Forrest in his book "New Realism: Contemporary British Cinema" discusses what techniques Arnold uses in order to achieve a successful embodiment of the human experience in the working class. Arnold's characters all are somewhat outsiders whose experiences are shared with over-the-shoulder camera shots, which creates this personal cinematic experience. Arnold also tends to use the 4:3 aspect ratio in her films for immersive portraiture, which her films typically focusing on a single individual's experiences in the world. (Forrest, *New Realism: Contemporary British Cinema*) pg. 84

In order to depict an authentic experience of the working class, realism directors tend to favour non-actors as the use of ordinary people from the location they are trying to portray enhances the

authenticity of the story. Ken Loaches' film "Cathy Come Home" (Loache) is a film which was initially turned down as being "too political" for its realistic depiction of a young family being evicted from their home. His use of non-actors, shooting on location and naturalistic lighting successfully emulated a common real scenario working class families face.

Joe Ursell discusses the results of Loaches film techniques. Using a very naturalistic, observational style of filmmaking, Loach is known for his meticulous preparation. Rarely disclosing details of a script, he regularly uses non-professional actors and improvisation, all designed to draw out a more instinctive emotional response. He thinks of his camera as an observing person, bringing out the humanity in the characters, allowing the audience to believe they are in the same room. It is perhaps through this technique that Loach is able to draw out such feelings of raw anger in his audience, whether or not they agree with his politics. (Ursell)

By understanding these core elements of the social realism genre, one can have a greater understanding of how Larry Clark's photography and film work align with the challenges of employing traditional social realist approaches. It can be said that the intense intimacy and occasional uncomfortable closeness in his work is especially relevant with the authentic elements of the social realism genre.

Chapter II: Larry Clark

The Youth Social Realism in Larry Clark Photography

Larry Clark is a well-known figure with his unique contributions to the American social realism genre. With his raw and innovative photography and film work he is most famously successful for its emphasis and representation of the youth and adolescence culture. His most popular work includes his feature film *Kids* (Clark, *Kids: Skating the Edge*) and his photography book *Tulsa* (Clark, *Tulsa*), which shifted his focus in social realism to include groups and individuals who were frequently left out in the earlier stages of the genre.

Larry Clark broadened the definition of social realism, to include the complex dynamics of youth and teenage life, portraying its culture with the societal pressures and injustices. Clark's outspoken portrayals of youth implies that youth culture itself can be seen as a separate social class with its own particular struggles and oppressions.

Larry Clark was born in Tulsa, Oklahoma, USA. He published his first photography book entitled “Tulsa” in 1971, a book compiled of black and white unfiltered images exposing the reality of teenage American suburbia life. The collection of photographs taken throughout Clark's earlier years display graphic content of sex, drugs usage and personal unfiltered relationships.

What sets *Tulsa* apart from other photographers' work is Clark's portrayal of ordinary people, using an honest empathetic lens. The photographer's intimate capture of personal uncomfortable subject matter has been praised for its honesty and unique style.

Following a new edit of his photography book *Tulsa*, Clark gave an interview to the site *AnOther*, Clark explained on the inspiration for his controversial work.

“This was not the image of America that people were interested in portraying,” says the controversial photographer and filmmaker over email. “At the time, it was all about selling this idea that everything was like a Norman Rockwell painting. This was what I was witnessing though, and I thought it was important to show a more realistic viewpoint of the world.” (Whitfield, *50 Years On, Larry Clark Makes a “Delicate” New Edit of Tulsa*)

The genre and tone of Clark's photography book *Tulsa* will go on to shape a generation of photographers and directors, most notably informing Gus Van Sant's 1989 film *Drugstore Cowboy* (later, Van Sant would be credited as an executive producer on Clark's notorious debut film, *Kids*) (Whitfield, *AnOther*).

"Once we had put out *Tulsa*, it was flying off the shelves," recalls Clark. "I think it sold out in maybe two days, something like that. Once that happened, it made sense to keep photographing the things I was interested in, as it seemed others were also interested in seeing those things." (Whitfield, 50 years on Larry Clark makes a delicate new edit of *Tulsa*)

The success of Larry Clark's photography book *Tulsa* was down to the originality and honesty of the pictures. For the first time people from all different social classes got to see first-hand such raw vulnerabilities of the American youth culture. The American people responded positively to Clark art, resulting in Clark further exploring and exposing the unseen side of American adolescence.

"*Teenage Lust*" (Clark, *Teenage Lust*) is Clark's second photography book, which took him almost 10 years to publish due to his previous heroin addiction. *Teenage Lust* isn't just an analysis of adolescent society, it delves into themes of identity, vulnerability, and rebellion. In addition to offering an honest glimpse of the lives of teens, navigating the challenging terrain of drugs, sex, and alienation, the book builds on the thematic and visual language that Clark developed in *Tulsa* (Clark, *Tulsa*).

The visual style of *Teenage Lust* further reinforces the idea that youth can be separated social identity. Clark's use of black and white film adds a documentary quality, further adding to the personal candid compositions. Clark captures personal private moments of teenagers experiencing lust, drugs and sex, the universal themes of such teenage experiences speaks for the youth. It highlights the connection between personal and universal experiences.

Teenage Lust was published during the Reagan era, a time which was marked by the marginalization of alternative people and perspectives. This book challenges how we view the youth, presenting an honest and sometimes uncomfortable picture of the adolescent society. Clark's youth photography is built on their lived experience. Real life rather than a glorified tainted fiction. Both "*Tulsa*" and "*Teenage Lust*" invites the viewer to observe the uncomfortable truths and overlooked aspects of the youth society.

It can be argued that Clark's challenging societal culture stems from the thematic purposes of the social realism genre. Larry Clark's youth photography broadens the attributes of the social realism genre, with his work providing us with visual proof that youth culture can be seen as a separate social class.

The influence of Larry Clark's personal experiences on his realist works

Like many social realists Larry Clark's work was shaped by his own lived experiences, which have profoundly shaped his photography and film work.

Born in 1943 and raised in Tulsa, one can see how his upbringing in the Midwest served as an influence for his raw capture of the youth culture. His personal teenage experience's became part of the central themes in his work to date.

Larry Clark grew up learning and developing his photography skills from his mother. A door to door baby photographer, who he would often work for as an assistant from a young age. Unlike his mother's work Clark gritty black and white photography documented the unseen side of Clarks early drug addicted years. (Frais, Larry Clark and his unadorned view at youth culture)

Growing up Clark was surrounded by the troublesome youth of Tulsa, experimenting with drugs and reckless behaviour. Clark got involved in the usage of Amphetamines, exposing him to the darker side of the consequences of addiction. Clark captured life in Tulsa between 1963 to 1971 focusing on the amphetamine use in his community.

In a 2008 interview with the Guardian newspaper (O'Hagan) Larry Clark delves into his autobiographical inspiration, and the backlash he experienced with the publication of both *Teenage Lust* and *Tulsa*. Clark's photographic themes of sex and drugs was a direct snapshot into Clark's years of adolescence.

"When I was 16, I started shooting amphetamine. I shot with my friends every day for three years and then left town, but I've gone back through the years, once the needle goes in, it never comes out."

Clark was capturing his troublesome surroundings, documenting his unsettling chaotic childhood. Clark went on to explain

"I knew in some way that I was photographing things that were not supposed to be photographed. Forbidden things. It just happened to be things I was doing myself as an 18-year-old. In a way, it's a record of my secret teenage life."

Teenage Lust portrays youth as a moment of transition between teenage years and adulthood, where personal desires often clash with societal standards. Themes like drug use, sex experimentation, and rule breaking are examples of this tension. Clark portrays these actions as opportunities for young people to take charge of their life and cope with the limitations placed on them by adults, even though society may view them as irresponsible or immoral.

Clark and his work have been known for being controversial and sometimes seen as immoral due to the recurring naked imagery of teenagers. Clark however believes otherwise.

“A lot of adults see my work and go, "Oh this is Larry Clark's fantasy. Teenagers don't live like this," he says.

“But, hey, read the papers. All teenagers have a secret life and it's always darker than what their parents think. The thing is, the kids themselves always get it. They can always tell if it's real or not.” (O'Hagan)

Controversial or not, Clark work is inspired by what he knows, growing up in Tulsa, Oklahoma being one of them. Larry Clark used photography as a medium to record groups of marginalised societies, expanding people's exposure to drugs, violence, sex, aids and fetishism. Larry Clark grew up being a part of these marginalised groups experiencing first-hand the lawless aesthetics of his now famous works.

Dr Hannah Alter explored the effect of Clarks drug usage in his work in her journal article of 2021, (Hannah Alter) In it we learn that in Tulsa 1963 methamphetamine was easily accessible and could be bought for 75 cents of the counter in the form of Valo inhalers. Clark injected daily with his friends.

The first part of Tulsa was taken during Clark's drug fuelled teenage years, where he photographed drug usage without having a political outlook on his subjects. This allowed his work to be personal and real. The later work of his book Tulsa is less personal and more observational as Clark grew distant from his teenage surroundings.

His personal approach when photographing his subjects successfully enables the authentic portrayal of American youth culture. Clark provides an insider view into his subject's world not just by observing but also having lived the experiences of his subjects in his photography.



fig 1. Tulsa, Larry Clark

Megan Bradley discusses in a Volume 3 of the Concordia Undergraduate Journal of Art History how Clark achieves this authentic portrayal of American youth culture by consistently surrounding himself with the youth of the present, in order to retain an authentic representation of the American adolescence. “The Tulsa images are, in a sense, doubled by the younger brothers and sisters of his friends emulating their older siblings. As Clark’s original subjects slowly slip into adulthood or die along the way, Clark maintains his adolescence by picking up with a new set of young ones.” (Bradley)

Larry Clark rebels against an adult society as he attempts to surround himself in a youth culture that no longer belongs to him. Clark has an almost Peter Pan like view on adulthood, the age group in which he surrounds himself with stays the same in turn preserving the authentic quality of his work.

Catherine Keenan states that “photographs do not only supplement memory but actually configure it.” Bradley expanded on Catherine’s statement saying “She discusses the personal photograph and, in this sense, I would argue that Clark’s photos are personal because of the commonality of adolescence, which allows for the familiarity that Keenan establishes to be a trait inherent to memory.” (Bradley)

Whether you are entering teenage adolescence or have already experienced it, Clark’s dedication in preserving and representing youth culture has in turn created an understanding and compassion in the viewer as they experience his photography/film work.

Larry Clarks Techniques within the Realist Traditions

Larry Clark is not one to shy away from documenting the harsh realities of under privileged youth in suburbia America, his photography in “Tulsa” is proof of that. However, Clark soon decided to separate himself from his photography and delve into exploring filmmaking.

In a 2016 interview with WM magazine Clark says

“I knew that I wanted to make a film about teenagers. but by the time I was finally able to make one, I was much older. Most of my work had been autobiographical until then; I wanted to do something different. I had no idea what was going on with kids at the time, and I wanted to find out.” (Sagansky)

His ongoing fascination for youth culture would soon lead Larry Clark to make the 1995 cult classic film *Kids*. *Kids* is a story following a group of New York city teenage skateboarders over a 24-hour period, indulging in sex, drugs and violence. Telly, the protagonist of the film carelessly has unprotected sex with virgins while unknowingly infecting them with HIV. The release of the film sparked controversy surrounding the documentation of minors indulging in illegal and taboo activities.

There are many elements in “*Kids*” which can be a factor for not only the film’s success but also to its controversy and backlash in which Clark received upon its release. Clark states the reasoning for its controversy was its real and truthful documenting what is really going on in youth culture.

Before I discuss the films controversy I must look Larry Clark’s stylistic choices and how they closely align with social realist techniques.

Clark’s use of non-professional actors, natural lighting and real setting in “*kids*” all aligns with the social realist tradition of filmmaking. His strive for authenticity and truthful documentation was successful however in turn became the reasoning for the film’s controversy.

Screenwriter Harmony Korine wrote *Kids* at 19 years old, after striking up a conversation with then photographer Larry Clark at the skatepark. One week later the screenplay was written. Harmony Korine wrote the story from closely observing kids from troubled backgrounds hanging around at Washington Square skatepark. The natural authenticity of the dialogue in the film seems as if it improvises, however all of it is scripted. The creative inclusion of 19-year old Harmony Korine enhances the captivating naturalistic aspects of the film, as he is merely writing what he knows.

Clark cast teenagers from the skateboarding scene, all non-actors. Many of the main cast members, including Justin Pierce (Casper), Leo Fitzpatrick (Telly), and Harold Hunter, were skaters from Washington Square Park whom Clark encountered while photographing young skaters in New York.

Clarks process for casting the desired elusive skaters of New York City proved difficult, as just like in the film they were always on the go. Casting director Alyssa Wishingrad stated that the casting process seemed more like a scavenger hunt compared to the typical Hollywood casting procedure.

Casting director Alyssa Wishingrad, Clark and Korine went around NYC handing out casting call flyers which read; “Real NYC kids, all backgrounds and colours”. In bold NO PREVIOUS ACTING EXPERIENCE NECESSARY.

The producer of the film Lauren Zalaznick said “We couldn’t simply text the cast in 1995, we couldn’t find them. They didn’t live at home, they didn’t live in one place. (Taylor, <https://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/25649/1/the-secret-history-of-kids>).

Lauren the producer of kids then goes into detail about how the crew and cast members would use pagers to help each other locate the actors during filming.

Clark wanted fresh faced street kids, all who had no previous acting experienced. Finding with non-actors with reliable acting skills proved challenging for Clark. Harmony Korine helped locate the right Teens, scouting the individuals from Korines old hang out spots.



fig 2. Casting Call Poster for the film Kids

Clark's choice to use non-actors helped depict realistic performances between the actors as they already knew one another, their line delivery felt raw and unfiltered. By casting genuine skateboarders and street kids, the film authentically reproduced the language, manner, and behaviour of 1990s youth, making it feel unscripted and real.

Clark's choice for casting non-actors stays true to the Italian neo-realism tradition of filmmaking. The cast in kids are authentic to the characters in the film. They stay true to Clark's intended depiction, which is an unfiltered version of youth culture in New York city. Following Roberto Rossellini casting process, Larry Clark's film *Kids* becomes a significant cult classic in the youth genre. Italian neorealism films use non-actors to bring a sense of genuine emotion and spontaneity to their performances, Clark follows this approach resulting in the film's hyper-realist effect.

Clark's on location shooting with naturalistic lighting and a handheld camera are further examples of social realist techniques used in creating the film's authentic visuals. By using these techniques Clark succeeds in depicting an unseen side of American youth culture of the 90s in step with the social realism genre.

Intentionally controversial or not, Clark followed the social realist traditions of cinema for producing a realistic depiction of 90s youth culture in New York. Viewing the film *Kids* stylistic elements, it appears that Larry Clark's style shares the rawness of the Italian Neorealists, such as Roberto Rossellini, whose films invite viewers to observe rather than be directed.

It can be said that all of Clark's films mimic the neorealist attitude in relation to using non-actors, documentary-type stylization, dark and pessimistic plots, and observing real-life social problems under what seems to be a less-than biased lens. (ShowDonaMajic)

There is no denying that Larry Clark's "*Kids*" is shocking and in some cases emotionally overwhelming as it tells the engaging story of New York street kids. However, the question remains, is it realistically authentic in depicting truthful commentary on the New York youth subculture? Or, are the critics correct in stating the film is unrealistic and offensive?

One could be argued the lack of censorship for the underage kids engaging in sexual activities on film is for shock value and lacks purpose. On the other hand, it can be seen as Clark following the social realist handbook of using non-actors and real dialogue. *Kids* has real teenagers playing real teenagers, having sexual relationships with each other. Clark depicts youth in a real gritty way which is something Hollywood doesn't come across often.

Realism or Exploitation?

Larry Clark's work is associated with social realism, particularly in his work depicting troubled youth and its cultural change throughout the years. However, Clark work often pushes beyond realism into hyper-realism or voyeurism. The subject matter of his work can be taken as exploratory or unethical. His depiction of the youth in *Kids* is so raw and shocking one could argue it does not belong in the social realism genre and is merely cinematic voyeurism for the disturbed. Social realism allows space for observing the content in the film, often having a documentary like feel allowing the audience to make up their own mind about the material. However, in *Kids* the audience is almost forced to witness shocking content close up, perhaps leaving the audience conflicted about Larry Clark's stylistic choices.

Larry Clark discussed the authenticity of *Kids* in a 2008 interview with Damon Smit in the *Bright Lights Film Journal*.

"Well, I think *Kids* was that movie, which was also a reaction to all the films I'd seen growing up, where all the actors were much older than the kids they were portraying, and a lot of bullshit. I wanted to make a film that kids could look at and say, Well, at least this ain't BS." (Smith)

One of the controversial aspects of *Kids* was using real teenagers engaging in sexual activities in the film. Clark's choice to shoot actual kids with frequent close ups in intimate scenes without a doubt, sparked controversy and effected the film's age rating receiving a NC-17 from the Motion Picture Association (MPA).

Clark's choice to use real teens in *Kids* was to be truthful in representing 90s youth culture. In his book *Tulsa* he photographed real teenagers actually engaging in drugs and sexual acts. But, where is the line between truthful representation and exploitation? When does capturing realism in photography become creating voyeurism for publicity? This ongoing controversy of Larry Clark's work will always be relevant when using social realism to document youth culture.

The actor Hamilton Harris, who starred in *Kids* discusses his personal feelings with the film

"From an ethical standpoint, yeah, I wouldn't do it that way. I'd do it differently. It's not my place to say whether or not Larry is right or wrong. I think each of us can decide what that is for ourselves." (Lattanzio)

Although using actual teens adds realism, Clark's usage of them also presents ethical concerns. Due to their inexperience, many of the Kids cast members were ignorant of the long-term effects of their participation. Many scenes in the film contained drug usage, sex and violence. Regardless of the drugs being props or not, exposing underage kids to the 90s rave culture of pill popping and wippet canisters became an ongoing ethical confliction between the crew during filming.

In the party scene towards the end of the film, three underage kids pass a joint between them – a totally improvised and serendipitous moment that cinematographer Eric Edwards just happened to catch on camera. To this day, Clark is unsure whether or not it was real marijuana they were smoking, but some of the crew members, thinking they had gone a step too far, reportedly walked off set after that scene was filmed. (Taylor, *The Secret History of Kids*)

Clark responded to a further Damon Smith question: *How do you respond to people who accuse you of contributing to the exploitative nature of the images of youth that surround us?*

“I don’t pay any attention. It’s ridiculous. That’s not what I’m doing at all, I’m showing a reality, and I’m showing what’s really going on. I’m a visual artist and a storyteller.” (Smith)

Cinematographer Eric Edwards defended the controversial scenes in *Kids*, stating.

“I knew that the movie was going to be pretty controversial and that we were tackling a lot of new stuff like underage sexuality. I knew when we were beating up this African American kid in the park that that would be pretty controversial. Larry’s whole position was that this is what kids were fucking doing, and parents don’t know this, and they should know, so Larry was going to show – I don’t want to say the darker side, but just a more truthful side of what kids were about, what kids were doing. He just wanted to expose it and explore it in a raw way.” (Taylor, *The Secret History of Kids*)

Larry Clark and his work forces his audience to investigate the unfiltered lives of marginalized youth culture. The raw aesthetics of his films force you into the world he is trying to represent. Clark shows the uncomfortable truth of what teenagers do behind closed doors.

In all of his artistic endeavours, Clark aims for the most authentic portrayal of adolescent culture. It is debatable if his approach of reproducing that culture is ethically sound. It may be argued that he is only illustrating what teens attempt to conceal, and that the offensive nature of the film's material stems from the audience's ignorance of what is actually happening.

On the other hand, it seems unacceptable to replicate such taboo activities with minors, even if these street kids engage in them already. His film techniques align with social realist traditions however, the shocking hyper-realism challenges the audience to find a balance between the honest and exploratory side in his work.

Chapter III: Larry Clark's Legacy

Larry Clark's Influence in Social Realism

Larry Clark has become a seminal influential figure within the American social realism genre. The entirety of his work strives to present an unfiltered honest portrayal of American youth culture. His unique style centred around the restricted side of adolescent culture, influencing many artists and directors today. His artistic approach encourages and inspires filmmakers to depict overlooked communities documenting them through an honest unfiltered lens.

Larry Clark's raw style is evident in his photography book *Tulsa*. The black and white images of teens and drug usage set the tone for Clark's future exploration in the realist genre and his representation of youth culture. "Tulsa" and its voyeuristic images have reportedly influenced the works of Martin Scorsese (*Taxi Driver*, 1976) and Francis Ford Coppola (*Rumble Fish*, 1983).

Unlike traditional coming of age films, Clark portrays an unfiltered version of youth, stripping back the romanticised side portrayal of first kisses and lost virginity that we often see in Hollywood. Particularly in the film *Kids*, the teens behaviour and language are often paired with constant references to blood, sex, disease, cum and urination.

Clark's depiction of youth culture serves as metaphor for the taboo side of adolescence culture that people try to ignore. The first scene in *Kids* is an uncomfortably close shot of a teenage boy, "Telly" the protagonist, kissing a half-naked girl on her bed. She tells him she is a virgin, and he then talks her into having sex. The kissing is not fetishized or glamorised, it's uncomfortable and gross. Why? Because it is underage kids having sex, shot up close with a shallow focus and goes on for what seems like forever.

"The 15 second scene gives us time to become self-conscious about our own response as we confront the activity that adult America, as it were, wants to shove out of sight, or at least turn into an abstraction. Pubescent sex, that's what we're looking at." (Taubin)

Clark's commitment to realism and authenticity extends into not only the way the film scenes are shot but, also in his casting choices, visceral sound design and the length of the action taking place in front of our eyes. Amy Taubin writes about the importance of sex scenes and uncomfortable behaviours in the film. "Kids is a cautionary tale about teenage sex in the age of AIDS. Twenty years ago, one might have labelled the connection it makes between sex and death as romantic or puritanical. Today, the connection is a fact of life".

Larry Clark always intended to spread the message about the dangers of unprotected sex and Aids in his film *Kids*. Clark talking to one of the skaters found out no one is using condoms anymore, and the safe sex practice during the time would be to “have sex with a virgin”.

Clark goes on to ask “and when I’d say, ‘What if she gets pregnant?’ they’d just say, ‘That’s not meant to be.’ But the girls do get pregnant and they have abortions and their mothers never know. And some of them get herpes the first time they have sex.” (Clark, *Kids: Skating the Edge*)

Two Characters the film, Ruby and Jennie sat in a doctor’s office waiting to get tested. Jennie, who’s only had sex with one guy, learns that she has HIV. Ruby, who’s had sex with many more, learns that she doesn’t. The film *Kids* serves as a reality check, showing sheltered Hollywood that HIV isn’t a gay man virus, it can be caught by children too. *Kids* illustrates this social reality with a frankness that was at once both refreshing and hard to swallow. (Sen)

Henry Giroux opposes Clark’s realism “The consequences of portraying youth through the “transparent” lens of realism is a viewpoint marked by the absence of a reflective moral perspective, and one that offers critics and viewers a dose of media sensationalism that serves as an apology for a specific view of reality by making it appear natural, matter-of-fact and outside of human control” (Giroux)pg206

While Henry Giroux argues that Larry Clark’s portrayal of youth lacks moral reflection and leans into sensationalism, his realism serves a crucial role in countering Hollywood’s glamorized depiction of teenage sexuality and reveals the uncomfortable truth that kids do have sex. The complexities, risks and power dynamics associated with teenage intimacy are frequently overlooked by mainstream media, which portrays it as romantic, and consequence-free. Viewers are forced to face the occasionally disturbing aspects of youth culture- issues of peer pressure, drug culture and absence of guidance with Clark’s uncensored style. Clark’s intention with his realist style isn’t to depict AIDS as natural and inevitable, it sparks necessary conversations about possible consequences with having unprotected sex.

Harmony Korine, the writer of *Kids* was only 19 years old at the time when asked by 48-year-old photographer Larry Clark to write him a screenplay. Harmony had skated for 5 years before he met Clark in the Washington Square Park. During a discussion about the 35-page script written by Harmony, Clark asked him to write a scene about a father who takes his kid to see a prostitute on his 13th birthday. Clark asked Harmony to write a skater film about a kid who has sex with virgins as a form of safe sex, as well as making Aids a topic in the script.

After *Kids* Harmony went on to co-write *Ken Park* (Ken Park) with Clark in 2002 and *Gummo* (Harmony, Gummo) which he would direct himself. *Gummo* is a movie that follows two cat-killing boys, the escapades of three girls, the wandering path of a bunny boy, and the complicated motions and

emotions of two mentally retarded girls, while at the same time getting high on seemingly documentary hits of the casually grimy hypnotic substance called 'contemporary life in suburban America'. (Hainley).

After writing *Kids*, Harmony knew he wanted to continue exploring and curating films, and the success of *Kids* helped him jumpstart his film career at an very early age.

"I wrote all the characters based on the *Kids* that I knew, their exact dialogue. *Kids* was a success, and I realised I wanted to make films that were tricky and complex, more like a novel, maybe." (Harmony, *Kids in America*)

There are many similarities in Clark and Harmony's filmmaking style. Both draw inspiration from the people around them, the same writing process in *Kids* can be seen in *Gummo*. Harmony took on a realist filmmaking approach, using non-professional actors and documentary style cinematography. Clark's influence can be seen especially in Harmonies exploration of taboo topics using a non-traditional narrative structure.

Both *Kids* and *Gummo* received a NC-17 rating due to their hyper realist depiction of drug use nudity and further explicit content. In a 1998 interview with Bruce Hainley, Harmony said that *Gummo* had no nudity, or "dirty" words and little to no violence. Stating

"What they were responding to was realism. I was holding shots, sustaining images and they were responding to that." (Hainley)

It can be said that Harmony explores American suburbia through a documentary realism and surrealism. He explores the marginalized youth and the outcasts of America, as both films *Kids* and *Gummo* explore the illicit experiences of the young offenders. The characters in *Gummo*, much like those in *Kids*, are living in a world where grownups are either non-existent or equally dysfunctional.

"People either say *Gummo* is not real or too real. But I am manipulating it, I'm making it into a movie. I'm adding things, telling people to do certain things to act out and perform. For me the best work is when you can't explain why you are enjoying it". (Harmony, *Kids in America*)

Aside from Clark and Harmony's shared passion for realism and youth culture, *Gummo* preserves a lot of *Kids*' fundamental ideas while occasionally mirroring Clark's darker tendencies, especially in its poor treatment of sexual assault. Lalia Alderson wrote in her 2023 article how both directors fail abjectly in handling it.

Larry Clark's treatment of sexual assault has been critiqued as voyeuristic, as the camera lingers on the victim, presenting the act with a lack sensitivity, resulting in the viewer feeling exploited.

Gummo includes a similar problematic scene where a female's voice narrating her sexual assault plays over a young girl playing outside. Lalia describes this scene as "incredibly tasteless". She explains how this scene reflects a common trope in men's views with sexual assault.

"They bemoan it only as a "loss of innocence," when that is, at most, an item halfway down the list of things that make sexual assault horrible." (Alderson).

The juxtaposition is unsettling as it reduces the issue to merely a metaphor about the "loss of innocence". Alderson scorns Harmony saying "The "Gummo scene makes you wonder if Korine perhaps didn't take enough lessons (or perhaps took too many lessons) from his work with Clark on "Kids."

Although both directors claim that their films offer an uncensored view of youth culture, their films often blur the line between social commentary and exploitation. Through Gummo, Harmony shows that he can both expand on Clark's work and draw attention to the ethical issues associated with their similar style of raw, controversial storytelling.

Larry Clarks position in the American Realism

Larry Clark occupies a unique space in American social realism. He pushed ethical boundaries of documentary style storytelling, challenging audiences to grapple with uncomfortable conversations about what's going on in youth culture today. He sheds light onto the underrepresented issues of marginalised youth and ultimately redefines the American social realism genre.

Clarks space in the realism movement is due to his focus on the representation of youth culture and the cultures controversial topics. Clark emphasises the overlooked difficulties of adolescents, challenging the conventional social realism themes of poverty, working-class adults, and criminality.

Clarks film work still surrounds the reality of the American dream, however the class in which he represents are a new generation of kids in which the media had yet to speak for.

"The group of adolescents that Clark focuses on are the first generation of 'Latchkey kids' who were mostly left to their own devices; no parental guidance, no rules, and living for the moment, not thinking about anything beyond that." (Steinberg, When Life Comes Early: Larry Clark's Kids (1995) and Bully (2001) An enquiry into the loss of innocence)

Clark captured a new society of youth whose culture is embedded in drugs, skateboards and a lack of parental supervision.

Clark forced the viewers to confront the uncomfortable topics in his work. Clark offered social commentary on the AIDS pandemic which had been denied during Reagan's presidency till 1989. With his documentary style Larry Clark presented an issue which used to be deemed as prohibited issues, associated purely with homosexuality. In turn Clark's work has been labelled as exploitative and voyeuristic, while Clark describes it as an honest reflection of youth culture.

Clark's work focusing on the sexual experiences of youth culture raised ethical questions surrounding his filmmaking approach. However, the viewers' reactions to Clark's realism and subject matter suggests that he has successfully created a world that is believable and captivating.

"The nature of Clark's sexually explicit scenes in the case study films are not for the purpose of gratification. They are intended to offer audiences privileged access to a world they wouldn't normally access." (Gibey)

Clark is dedicated in truthfully depicting the unseen side of youth culture, going so far as befriending local skaters and learning how to skateboard while in his late 40s.

"So, what may appear as an exploitation of youth for many, may be something more akin to an exploration of a "marginalised youth". (Steinberg, *When Life Comes Early: Larry Clark's Kids* (1995) and *Bully* (2001) An enquiry into the loss of innocence)

Although often criticized by his controversial approach, Clark's commitment to authentic representation in youth subcultures demonstrates his dedication to realism and truth rather than exploitation. His films and photography remain a powerful, if controversial mark to evolving American social realism, ensuring that the voices of marginalized youth are both recognised and acknowledged.

Conclusion

As described in the Oxford languages dictionary, social realism is the realistic depiction in art of contemporary life, as a means of social or political comment. Larry Clark's work achieves a realistic depiction of youth by confronting the audience with the incomparable and often uncomfortable aspects of youth's culture.

As I stated in the introduction of this thesis, I intended to explore Larry Clark's position within the social realism genre and how through his often-controversial depictions of youth he created a sub-genre within social realism. I investigated and discussed the origins of social realism and explored the technique's social realist filmmakers use to depict an authentic representation of everyday lives of the working class.

By understanding the core elements of realism, I was able to transition into an analysis of Larry Clark's photography work, particularly Tulsa and how it aligns with realist traditions. After analysing Tulsa's outspoken and raw images of youth culture in American suburbia, I discussed Clark's implication that youth culture can be seen as a separate social class, understanding that youth culture has individual struggles that don't align with the traditional oppressions of the adult working class.

The success of authentic portrayal can be influenced by one's level of knowledge and personal connections to a subject. To understand Clark's success in realism I researched his early life and how his personal experiences influenced his work. In turn I was able to show how Clark provides an insider view into his subject's world, not just by observing but also having lived the experiences of his subjects in his photography. Additionally, by understanding his personal experiences of youth culture I briefly discussed Clark's reasoning behind surrounding himself with adolescence. His authentic portrayal of American youth culture is due to his personal approach and relationship with the subjects.

I discussed stylistic similarities between his work and that of social realist directors such as Roberto Rossellini. By doing so I was able to show the differences that sets Larry Clark apart from other realist directors and critically discuss the ethically challenging aspects of his works. This allowed me to explore a two-sided review on the controversy surrounding possible voyeurism in Clark's work. There is a changed perception of ethical filmmaking compared to 30 years ago. On one hand I understand and agree with the controversy surrounding Larry Clark and his work. On the other hand, I understand Clark's dedication in depicting youth culture and staying true to the social realism genre.

I explored Clark's legacy and influence on social realism and how his unfiltered documentation approach on youth-centred stories influenced directors such as Harmony Korine. I discussed how the

film “Kids” opened the discussion of Aids and the dangers on unprotected sex, a topic which has been under-represented in American cinema. I briefly discussed how both Harmony Korine and Larry Clark offer an uncensored view of youth culture, and how their films often blur the line between social commentary and exploitation.

I concluded my thesis by exploring Clark’s position in the American realism movement. I discussed how Clark pushes the ethical boundaries of filmmaking to challenge audience’s acknowledgment with controversial conversation regarding youth culture. I identified that Clark consistently tests audiences’ tolerance for reality ensures that realism will always be a pro-active force in cinema.

In closing, I believe I have illustrated the reasoning behind Clarks success and controversy in the realism movement. I have investigated the genre of social realism and established Clark’s place within the genre. I have discussed the ethical concerns surrounding Clark’s work and analysed the arguments regarding the voyeuristic aspects of his filmmaking. Through this thesis I have proved how that by Larry Clark depicting youth culture without social constraints and inequalities, he expanded the concept of social realism and implied that youth culture itself can be seen as a separate social class with unique struggles and oppressions.

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