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Masters Thesis in Film and TV

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When Life Comes Early: Larry Clark's *Kids* (1995) and *Bully* (2001)
An enquiry into the loss of innocence

ABSTRACT

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Abstract

Independent films in the 1990s boomed larger than they ever had before offering ambitious filmmakers like Larry Clark to flourish with Grimm-like fairy tales that told the raw and unadulterated truth of what it was like to be part of a sub-culture of urban disaffected youths from poor to working and middle class backgrounds. Looking back twenty years ago, it becomes quite clear how his films namely, *Kids* (Clark, 1995) and *Bully* (2001), seemed to upend the very bedrock that the coming of age genre was built on.

This thesis sets out to engage with who Larry Clark was, how he engaged with the young subjects of his films in the way that he did, and how he tackled the exploration of a marginalised youth of 'mall-rat wannabes' who have no conception of consequence. The above mentioned films of Larry Clark were chosen as an appropriate study to investigate the watershed moments in which adolescents come of age and therefore, lose their innocence through sexual debut and violence. This thesis, however, attempts to offer a more nuanced understanding that goes beneath the surface reading of the sensationalist aspects of Clark's films by taking a multi-disciplinary approach.

The central argument of this thesis revolves around a genre that evolved out of a long literary tradition of the *Bildungsroman*. In cinema, this has offered a vast and varied field of inspiration for fictional representations of various teenagers, which in Clark's films can be read as a challenge to narrative conventions in subverting the established themes and codes of the coming of age film, and in their place creating a new set of narrative devices which roots sexual debut and violence at the psychological centre of the transitional narrative from adolescence to adulthood. Central to this aim is the question of whether or not the coming of age narrative is predicated upon a causal relationship in which encounters with sex and violence result in the loss of innocence, which may, in actual fact, be a necessary rite of passage in Clark's work.

Over and above this, Clark's use of narrative strategies relating to the work of Robert McKee plays a vital role in not only decoding how coming of age films represent meaning through recurring patterns or thematic opposition, but also in illustrating how different narrative strategies give rise to ethical concerns that present audiences with a responsibility to reflect and question what the moral consequences are. This offers an opportunity to examine the

relationship between film and ethics in terms of how Clark's voyeurism, grooming, and exploitation exemplify the notion of losing one's innocence, especially in terms of his expression of realism.

Clark's expression of realism is not only reflected in the outer world of the characters, in the props, locations, dialogue and actions, but also in the interior world; the psychological world of the characters, which is clearly grounded in Sigmund Freud's Theory of Psychoanalysis surrounding the psychosexual years of early development, particularly the last stage, which begins in puberty. Following on from this, Erik Erikson's posited theory surrounding the psychosocial stages of ego development are also considered. This opens up an understanding into the psychological aspects of how Clark's adolescent characters are represented within the coming of age narrative.

Finally, through Clark's lens, this thesis contextualizes how the characters in Clark's films lose their innocence and come of age as part of a rite of passage that is inextricably caught up in sex and violence. In doing so, it illustrates how this threshold characterizes the aimless wanderings in which adolescents try to find themselves and are forced to grow up. That being said, through this theoretical inquiry into Clark and his films, and the application of its conclusions, this thesis ultimately proffers, that in spite of arguing that Clark's films are predicated on sex and violence as necessary precursors to coming of age, it is possible to explore and achieve a similar, and yet less violent representation of the loss of innocence on screen.