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## Pansy Duncan

Bored and Boringer: avant-garde and trash in Harmony Korine's *Gummo*

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While bearing all the formal stamps of the realist avant-garde, Harmony Korine's *Gummo* (1997) is animated not by the powerful, oppositional emotions of 'shock' or 'anger', but by a morally and politically devalued 'boredom' – a vacuous, trivial affect long associated with the consumer culture that the avant-garde traditionally pits itself against. It should come as no surprise, then, that *Gummo* was widely greeted as an avant-garde failure. Contending, however, that recent radical shifts in the status and dominion of emotion convert boredom from consumer culture's signature affect to consumer culture's emotional trash, this article re-reads *Gummo*'s tedium as a function not of the film's avant-garde failure but of its effort to repurpose the avant-garde for changed economic and social coordinates. Exploring the convergence of emotional and literal trash through a semiotic analysis of the film's junk-filled, over-stuffed frames, I will suggest that precisely as a trivial, vacuous and a-political feeling – as our emotional trash or affective waste – boredom possesses an unexpected utility to a newly configured avant-garde project.

### Keywords

Affect theory; avant-garde; cinema; boredom

## Textual Practice

An emotion we might provisionally characterize as the painful, recursive feeling of feeling nothing at all, boredom seems to leak through the pores of what one reviewer called the ‘poverty-stricken, numbingly boring’ town of Xenia, Ohio, to saturate every aspect of the film – Harmony Korine’s *Gummo* (1997) – that takes Xenia as its setting.<sup>1</sup> The dominant mood of the slackers, loners and misfits that make up *Gummo*’s motley cast of characters, boredom also permeates the film’s narrative, which replaces the worthy, dramatic endeavours in which anger or fear might find expression with the trivial, inconsequential mini-projects more appropriate to apathy and ennui: a tawdry trio of sisters (Darby Dougherty, Clarisa Glucksman and Chloe Sevigny) bathe their house-cat in the bathroom sink; the feeble-minded Ellen (Ellen M. Smith) shaves her eyebrows; delinquent teens Solomon and Tumbler (Jacob Reynolds and Nick Sutton) break into a rival’s home and riffle through his photographs.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, as much a critical metonym for artistic failure as it is a dysphoric emotion, boredom is as omnipresent in *Gummo*’s critical reception as it is in the lives of its characters and the turn of its plot. For Walter V. Addiego, in a curiously mixed metaphor that combines the ‘off’ and the ‘overcooked’, ‘Korine’s trying to offer a radical vision of rotten America, but the whole thing seems warmed over’; for David Denby, the film is ‘boring and redundant’; for Dennis Schwarz, ‘I found myself becoming bored and tuning the film out’; while for Ed Scheid, ‘the film loses interest because Korine never gets beneath the surface of his troubled characters’.<sup>3</sup> While the intensity of the emotion varies considerably in these reviews, from Addiego’s resentful frustration to Schwarz’s mild ennui, the structure of the emotion seems remarkably consistent, in doggedly gauging the gap between an urgent desire to feel and the lack of occasion for feeling, between the promise of cultural ‘rot’ and the reality of culture ‘warmed over’.

In itself, of course, a boring film is far from unusual in a mainstream cinematic landscape dominated by practices of recycling, sequelisation and pastiche. What affords *Gummo*’s tedium its profound if paradoxical critical interest, however, is the fact that advance endorsements by directorial luminaries Bernardo Bertolucci, Werner Herzog and Gus van Sant sought to position the film outside this mainstream cinematic order by annexing it for the realist avant-garde.<sup>4</sup> Relying heavily on an avant-garde rubric notorious for conflating artistic with political progress, ‘experimental art’ with ‘historical change’, Bertolucci dubbed the film ‘a revolution in cinema’, van Sant called it ‘a completely original creation’, and Herzog claimed, rather dramatically, that ‘it knocked me off my chair’.<sup>5</sup> The rub here, of course, is that as a film almost universally decried as boring, *Gummo* seems a remarkably weak example of an aesthetic mode so long identified with shock. Shock’s significance to the avant-garde

enterprise is well-established. While decidedly at odds in their accounts of the avant-garde's status and destiny, critics in the field, from Peter Bürger, Clement Greenberg and Renato Poggioli to Fredric Jameson, Marjorie Perloff and Hal Foster are almost indistinguishable in their accounts of the mode's animating affect, the emotional 'stimulus' through which its vaunted social and political aspirations are actualised.<sup>6</sup> At the heart of this argument are two assumptions: first, that in propagating the illusion that 'the institution of art [is] autonomous', 'bourgeois' art short-circuits art's ability to effect social transformation; second, that avant-garde shock can work to rupture this illusion, 'break[ing] through the aesthetic immanence and . . . usher[ing] in (initiate[ing]) a change in the recipient's life practice'.<sup>7</sup> To insist on shock's centrality to avant-garde practice and criticism is not, of course, to discount the prominent role that boredom has played in historical avant-garde endeavours. From cinematic experiments such as *Sleep* (1963), Andy Warhol's five-hour, single shot document of his slumbering friend John Giorno, and *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975), Chantal Akerman's unrelenting record of domestic tedium, to what Sianne Ngai calls the 'systematically recursive' art of 'Robert Ryman, Jasper Johns, John Cage and Philip Glass', boredom has been an ingredient in manifold avant-garde exercises in serialisation and repetition.<sup>8</sup> Yet as Ngai's own distinction between these works' "shocking", innovative and transformative' critical status and their 'tedious' spectatorial effect suggests, the drudgery they demanded of their readers and viewers was offset by the symbolic 'shock' they administered to the artistic and critical norms of the day. Whether manifest at the level of form, as a tactical utilisation of non-normative representational strategies, or at the level of content, as a representation of dispossessed populations resisting the social structures that oppress them, shock remains the dominant emotional idiom in which the avant-garde's artistic and political agenda is articulated.

Shock's powerful sway over avant-garde theory and practice makes Bertolucci, Herzog and van Sant's efforts to negotiate a place for *Gummo* in this tradition seem worthy of scrutiny. Boredom, after all, is more than just *not* shock. Rather, the emotion dismissed by psychologist Haskell Bernstein as 'a trivial and unworthy feeling' and by the *Situationiste Internationale* as 'always counter-revolutionary' has emerged as shock's would be obverse, a prime contender for the emotion 'least likely to play a role in any kind of oppositional praxis'.<sup>9</sup> While some critics have begun to float the idea that a newer avant-garde programme might peddle in more muted, deferred or complex emotions – with John Richardson, for example, arguing that a 'neo- or even post-avant-garde practice' might deploy 'wonder' in place of shock – boredom is not readily recuperated as an accessory to radical artistic practices.<sup>10</sup> Indeed,

this essay will avoid the temptation to try its hand at such a recuperation, triumphantly revealing the emotional profundity and moral worth of an emotion long denounced, as Patricia Spacks puts it, as ‘superficial, frivolous and atomistic’.<sup>11</sup> Should we conclude that Bertolucci, Herzog and van Sant are simply mistaken in celebrating *Gummo* as a belated entry in the history of the avant-garde? Or does their enthusiasm for *Gummo* suggest that the avant-garde has learned to harness this most ‘superficial, frivolous and atomistic’ of affects?

In answering these questions, we must set *Gummo*’s distinctive formal and affective agenda against the backdrop of a more recognizable avant-garde rubric. Though strongly disagreeing on the subject of the avant-garde’s status and future, critics have reached a certain consensus on the subject of avant-garde form – that is, on the stockpile of aesthetic strategies that predicate its ability to shock or *épater la bourgeoisie*. Isolating as the mode’s guiding formal precept a resistance to ‘the bourgeois principles of an autonomous art and an expressive artist’, critics from Bürger to Foster have cited its use of everyday, found or industrial materials, its practice of collage or fragmentation, and its aggressive assault on ‘beauty’, as the formal strategies around which this resistance has crystallised.<sup>12</sup> Michael O’Pray’s three-pronged model of avant-garde film, meanwhile, adapts this paradigm for a cinematic context, where the resistance to ‘bourgeois [aesthetic] principles’ manifests as the use of ‘different distribution and exhibition circuits’, the rejection of the formal protocols of ‘mainstream cinema’, and the engagement with ‘radical social and political ideas’.<sup>13</sup> Of greatest significance for this essay’s argument, however, is the fact that, despite *Gummo*’s overwhelmingly dreary tone and effect, it bears all the classic formal stamps of the shocking avant-garde. The use of alternative production and distribution channels is clearly in evidence, for while financed and backed by FineLine features, *Gummo* was made on a modest \$1.3 million budget by a director whose vision pervades every aspect of the film. The formal resistance to ‘mainstream cinema’ is there, too. Not only does *Gummo*’s mixture of film-stocks, formats and media privilege the strategy of ‘collage’ or ‘fragmentation’ that Bürger dubs ‘the fundamental principle of avant-gardiste art’ over the coherence of Hollywood continuity editing, but its use of found and stock footage calls to mind the trademark avant-garde ‘embrace [of] everyday objects’.<sup>14</sup> And *Gummo*’s apparent allegiance to the filmic avant-garde is rounded off by its ‘radical social and political ideas’, namely an investment in the depiction of dispossessed and marginalised populations that resonates powerfully with Brazilian avant-garde director Glauber Rocha’s commitment to ‘draw[ing] the audience’s attention to . . . poverty in order that it should be capable of revolutionary action’.<sup>15</sup> Reminiscent of the impoverished thugs of Pier Paolo Pasolini’s *Porcile* (1969) and the cruel street-children

of Luis Bunuel's *Los Olvidados* (1950) – both realist avant-garde classics – the film's menagerie of wasters, outcasts and delinquents seems handpicked to fulfill the aesthetic and political mandates of the filmic avant-garde.

Yet if *Gummo*'s reliance on a battery of avant-garde strategies is indisputable, these strategies seem to fall, as if inevitably, under the lack-lustre sign of boredom. Though the film's fragmented, episodic format and use of found footage is an avant-garde signature, for example, it can hardly be called radical, for not only have avant-garde film-makers been exploring the possibilities yielded by anti-narrative, mixed media film-making for several decades, the techniques have migrated into advertising, television and mainstream cinema. Far from inspiring shock, then, they seem old-hat, even cliché. Likewise, though a degraded, impoverished setting is a realist avant-garde mainstay, *Gummo*'s scenes of poverty seem divested of both urgency and extremity. A montage of grainy stock footage of Xenia locals, the film's opening sequence clearly telegraphs the flavour of these lives: a skinny, bare-chested boy shows off his puny pectoral muscles; an obese woman reclines on the steps of a cheap, clapboard house, petting a cat; a man with a goatee and a death metal t-shirt grins toothlessly from the front seat of a wrecked car; an adolescent boy races by on a bike. Pettily cruel rather than brutally violent, poor rather than dying, structurally disenfranchised rather than violently downtrodden, these are, as Wall puts it, 'the *ordinary* poor: the vulgar, the vernacular, the most innocuously impoverished of the socially overlooked'.<sup>16</sup> The signature effect of this 'poverty-stricken, numbingly boring place', then, is less hardship or suffering than yawning ennui.<sup>17</sup>

Boredom's antagonism to the classical avant-garde agenda is foregrounded only too clearly by *Gummo* itself, a thematic and visual set piece in which shows a group of Xenia locals gather for a drinking session in a typically derelict kitchen, only to find themselves palpably, manifestly bored. One character leans against a fridge; another sits slumped at the table; a third watches lazily from the doorway. Whereas, as Philip Fisher has argued, 'strong' or 'vehement' passions like shock and anger 'fill up awareness' and possess an 'outward-streaming energy' that expresses itself in powerful and potentially revolutionary action, boredom seems to empty out – and consequently immobilise – its sufferers. On the one hand, the figures are touched by an internal emptiness that finds external expression both at the level of *mise-en-scene*, in the barren, formica-clad kitchen that is the scene's setting, and at the level of characterisation, in the film's failure to afford them the depth or backstory traditionally granted filmic character. On the other, postures stultified and dialogue atrophied, they are living embodiments of boredom's colloquially attested power to immobilise and fatigue, their conspicuous lack of the 'desire' that customarily propels a narrative's 'move forward' a linchpin

of *Gummó's* air of narrative exhaustion and repetition.<sup>18</sup> Unsurprisingly, perhaps, boredom's lack of subjective force – and its consequent inhibition of powerful action – is key to its critical theorisation. The sociologist Bernstein, for example, identifies a kind of 'hollowness' or 'emptiness' at the heart of the bored subject, while the psychoanalyst Otto Fenichel attests to its 'lack of instinctual impulses' that makes powerful action impossible.<sup>19</sup> Given this notoriously 'empty' emotion's vexed relation to action, then, boredom's conscription to an aesthetic mode inextricably bound up with action seems incongruous to say the least.

To say that the bored subject's internal emptiness forecloses strong political action is not, of course, to say that the bored subject does not act at all. If inert stupor is boredom's minor key, a restless, giddy search for distraction is its major one, and the scene's episodes of tedious lassitude alternate with garrulous sing-alongs and arm-wrestling matches. As if mirroring a subject restlessly scanning the visual field for interest, the handheld camera that records their exploits sees the camera shift erratically from face to face, opportunistically dolly in on movement and whip-pan to capture a speaker in action, until one man – egged on by encouraging cries from his pals to 'Kill it!' and 'Get that motherfucker!' – resorts to wrestling a chair, an absurd simulacrum of conflict that underscores the pathos of boredom's indiscriminate investment in feeling something rather than nothing. Recalling Fenichel's suggestion that 'instead of manifesting itself in the form of instinctual impulses, [boredom] require[s] incitements from the outside world', and Bernstein's observation, that, lacking any internal emotional spur, the bored subject will 'create external situations calculated to evoke feelings of so much intensity that those feelings will break through their internal insulating barriers to awareness', the bored subject seems forced to seek out external objects to supply the emotional arousal with which other, better-resourced subjects appear to come fully equipped.<sup>20</sup> Yet this idiosyncratic inversion of the conventional relation between emotion and action brings us to the second snag in boredom's conscription to the avant-garde: that if boredom is not subjective *enough* to animate the avant-garde project, it also seems somehow *too* subjective, reducing action in the world to distractions for the self. Whereas the angry or shocked subject has feelings that are expressed in action, the bored subject acts in order to feel, seeking 'incitement[s]' or 'creat[ing] external situation[s]'; whereas the angry or shocked subject's feelings are orientated around an object in the world, the bored subject merely uses objects to create vibrations within the recesses of her private sensorium.<sup>21</sup>

Simultaneously inadequately and excessively subjective, then, boredom's capacity for mobilisation within avant-garde praxis already seems strikingly tenuous. Yet as if boredom's distinctive composite of subjective atrophy and subjective indulgence were not damning enough, this

morphology of the bored subject seems to map all too readily onto models of the *consumer* subject – icon and cipher of the commodity culture that the avant-garde has traditionally pitted itself against.<sup>22</sup> Like the bored subject, the consumer subject is routinely distinguished by a singular combination of self-absorption and vacancy. For Mike Featherstone, for example, the consumer subject is marked by a ‘new Narcissism, where individuals seek to maximise and experience the range of sensations available’, while for Stephen Miles, conversely, postmodern consumer practices are indexed to ‘a spiritually empty and immoral society where money is all and where the soul is degraded’.<sup>23</sup> In this respect, it should come as no surprise that scholars like Jean Baudrillard, Fredric Jameson and Gianni Vattimo have enlisted boredom as the emblematic emotion of a critically devalued postmodern consumer culture – the characteristic condition of hyper-consuming and hypo-affective subjects whom the commodity has lost its power to move.<sup>24</sup> An undeniably negative emotion, then, boredom is not, however, an oppositional one. Far from resistant to the mainstream consumer culture that is the avant-garde’s traditional target, boredom’s querulous protests are merely a plaintive, irritable cry of inadequate immersion in it. Whereas an emotion like anger is capable of delivering up an affective critique of capitalist consumer culture, boredom simply registers a frustrated desire to be more satisfactorily or more completely a part of it.

Yet there are still further oddities to be observed in *Gummo*’s use of the emotion that Reinhard Kuhn – opposing boredom to ennui – dismissed as a ‘superficial and vague disquiet’.<sup>25</sup> For more than just inappropriate to its clear avant-garde oppositional agenda, boredom is all *too* appropriate to a widespread and demeaning stereotype of the uneducated rural white populations the film depicts, in which that population is routinely cast, as Gail Sweeney puts it, as a group of ‘total consumer[s] and non-producer[s]’.<sup>26</sup> Best condensed in the vicious pejorative label ‘white trash’, which metonymically identifies as their very essence the ‘trash’ that these groups supposedly produce through their voracious, uninhibited habits of consumption, this stereotype is a function of a wider tropological procedure by which, as Daniel Miller has it, ‘materialism, understood as a concern for increasing one’s possession of goods often at the expense of a concern for other people, tend[s] to be strongly associated with poverty rather than wealth’.<sup>27</sup> Unsurprisingly, perhaps, this imaginary alliance of poverty and consumerism has been a key rhetorical projectile in the effort to explain and justify the social dispossession of poor white populations through reference to their supposed moral and spiritual inadequacy. In these terms, *Gummo*’s identification of Xenia’s residents as bored – a term burdened with its own hyper-consumerist overtones – serves

## Textual Practice

merely to reinforce the stigmatising moral and social discourse that already circulates around these marginalised populations.

What, then, is at stake in *Gummo*'s engagement with boredom? Why would a film with clear avant-garde aspirations establish as its dominant affective climate an emotion not only hand in glove with the late-capitalist consumer culture that the classical avant-garde strives to resist, but defamatory to the very groups the classical avant-garde strives to defend? Quick to register its craving for avant-garde status, and equally quick to observe its apparent falling short, most critics diagnosed a simple case of directorial deficiency, a study in shock aesthetics falling flat. For Walter V. Addiego, 'Korine's trying to offer a radical vision of rotten America, but the whole thing seems warmed over'.<sup>28</sup> Russell Smith dismissed those who, apparently mistakenly, believe 'they're seeing something original or groundbreaking in *Gummo*'.<sup>29</sup> For Paul Tatara of CNN, meanwhile, whereas the true avant-garde was 'railing against social and economic oppression' through 'instantaneous, disposable outbursts', *Gummo* is merely 'making fun of people' to no apparent political purpose; whereas the true avant-garde was doing something new, *Gummo* is 'not telling us anything we don't already know'.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, just as the film itself was roundly condemned as an aesthetic failure, so its characters were denounced as failed dissidents. Janet Maslin's description of one character's conspicuously weak effort at public dissent – 'spitting and urinating on the highway below [a bridge] in silent protest' – is exemplary here in its unbridled contempt for what she construes as the characters' futile attempts at provocation and incitement, attempts that are measured unfavourably against a persistent cultural fantasy of a spontaneously animated, angered proletarian subject.<sup>31</sup>

Given boredom's manifest antagonism to traditional avant-garde aspirations, however, what is most curious about *Gummo* is its sheer *insistence* on the emotion – an insistence that invites us to read the film's numbing effect not as mere directorial failure, but as deliberate, calculated policy. While an uneventful evening at a friend's might seem a relatively appropriate object for boredom, *Gummo* routinely articulates boredom not just to everyday tedium, but to the more disastrous and destructive implications of poverty, occasions on which a much stronger, more radical emotion might seem called for. Exemplary here is the opening sequence of the film, in which a series of grainy, poorly shot stock images of disaster (a dog is caught on a television antenna; a boy lies injured on the road) are synched to a voice-over narration's litany of horror:

A few years ago. A tornado hit this town. It killed the people. Dogs died, cats died, houses were split open and you could see necklaces

hanging from the branches of trees. People's legs and neckbones were stickin' out. Oliver found a leg on his roof. A lot of people's fathers died or were killed . . .

Despite the sensational informational content of both sound and image track, however, the voice itself is torpid to the point of being catatonic, constantly on the point of expiring into a feeble whisper. The palpable boredom the voice both communicates and elicits is all the more marked in that, judging by the speaker's strenuous efforts to transfigure a scene of violent death into visual spectacle ('people's legs and neckbones were stickin' out'), the narrative's purpose is precisely to evoke intense emotion of some kind – an intuition corroborated by the speaker's last-ditch attempt to endow the panorama of violent death with the additional titillation of the semi-pornographic, in the story's brief post-script ('I saw a girl fly through the sky and I looked up her skirt').

*Gummo* ratchets up its commitment to boredom even further in repeatedly leading us to expect the revelation that a stronger, more profound emotion underpins the prevailing boredom – only to just as frequently dismiss these expectations. In one brief, transitional scene whose simultaneous sweetness and inconsequence exemplifies what Wall has identified as the film's 'incongruously gentle placidity', Tumbler plies Solomon with a string of poignant questions about his mother, who will appear repeatedly in film's second half.<sup>32</sup> 'Does your mother ever make you food?' Tumbler asks, picking up his bike. 'Has she ever made you crêpe suzette?' In their wistful conflation of emotional and physical nourishment, the questions cannot help but drive home the absence of Tumbler's own mother from the film's narrative and diegesis. Appealing to the popular assumption that, as Patricia Meyer Spacks puts it, the politically and artistically anaemic emotion of boredom usually 'masks another condition', the now-conspicuous absence of Tumbler's mother holds out the tantalising promise of an elaboration of fuller, more profound motives for the boy's delinquency than the peculiarly hollow, etiolated figure of boredom has thus far been able to provide.<sup>33</sup> Yet immediately after introducing the charged motif of the mother, the film abruptly shifts from the realist register associated with fuller emotions to the direct-address format characteristic of vaudeville or stand-up comedy, cutting to a long shot of the two boys on their bikes accompanied by Tumbler's voice-over singing a frivolous popular song: 'This man I know . . . had gravy on his vest, gravy on his tie, gravy on his shirt, gravy all over him . . . that dirty old man'. At the very point that we are expecting Tumbler to reveal the roots of his boredom in, say, maternal loss, the film effectively recodes the character's gesture toward deeper issues as yet another attempt to

## Textual Practice

distract himself from tedium. If *Gummo* is boring, it seems, it is meant to be boring.

The methodical, even systematic character of the film's engagement with boredom suggests that the tedium that reads on first sight as aesthetic failure or misstep might be more accurately read as deliberate, calculated strategy. But why would a film so committed to staking out its avant-garde credentials install the weak, trivializing emotion of boredom as its dominant mood and effect? One ready answer might seize on the fact that scholars in the humanities have expressed a profound scepticism about the avant-garde's continuing political efficacy that is encapsulated in Stephen Best and Douglas Kellner's slightly plaintive observation that the avant-garde has 'lost its sharp critical and oppositional edge'.<sup>34</sup> Critical explanations for the avant-garde's emotional and thus political neutralisation differ, of course. For Bürger, art itself is the culprit, as the post-war neo-avant-garde's recycling of forms and strategies from the first two decades of the twentieth century evacuated those strategies of political and emotional traction.<sup>35</sup> For Jameson, by contrast, the blame lies squarely with postmodern consumer culture's assimilation of avant-garde practices into the cycle of commodity production, such that 'our clothing, furniture, buildings and other artefacts are now intimately tied in with styling changes which derive from artistic experimentation; our advertising ... fed by modernism in all the arts and inconceivable without'.<sup>36</sup> While differing in their causal account of this trend, however, critics as diverse as Jameson and Bürger are akin in their observation that, whether through the law of diminishing returns, or through its appropriation by consumer culture, avant-garde shock has effectively 'exhausted its potential'.<sup>37</sup> In this light, *Gummo*'s engagement with boredom would register as a reflective rumination on a broader historic crisis in the function and efficacy of the avant-garde.

But while the above account of the film's trademark tedium is not without explanatory power, this article's gambit is that, far from a symptom of or engagement with the avant-garde's demise, *Gummo*'s deliberate tedium is part of an effort to remodel and repurpose the avant-garde for changed social and economic conditions. Both defenders of the avant-garde's continuing relevance, like Jean-Francois Lyotard, and eulogists of the avant-garde's failure, like Jameson, champion or eulogize the *same* avant-garde. This is an avant-garde that struggles for formal innovation, that orientates itself around strong emotion, and that culminates in revolutionary political action. As Hal Foster argues, however, in his impassioned 1994 defence of the avant-garde, 'What's Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde?', we can only begin to trace the contours of the postmodern avant-garde if we allow the possibility that its form and agenda may diverge somewhat from its modernist forebear. Subscribing, then, to

Sianne Ngai's contention that 'the nature of the sociopolitical itself has changed in a manner that both calls forth and calls upon a new set of feelings', this article will argue that *Gummo* exemplifies an avant-garde practice whose emotional ethos – and thus its relation to formal and political change – is specifically tailored to the economic and social co-ordinates of affluent Western societies in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.<sup>38</sup> Importantly, this argument that *Gummo's* distinctive affective atmosphere marks the transformation rather than the expiry of the avant-garde will be advanced through an overhaul of orthodox conceptions of boredom itself. While often dismissed as an emotional accessory of consumer culture, boredom is, I will show, more properly understood as consumer culture's ultimate trash – an abjected status that affords it an unexpected utility to an avant-garde project intent on resisting consumer culture's siren-like call.

What underpins this shift in boredom's cultural standing? It has become commonplace in cultural and social theory to identify the transition from mid to late capitalism with the transition from a society predominantly structured around production to a society predominantly structured around consumption – a society variously styled as 'multinational, consumer or late capitalism'.<sup>39</sup> This transition's implications for boredom, however, only come clearly into relief when we observe that, for many theorists, it entails a wholesale metamorphosis of the social and economic organisation of emotion, in which not one emotion but emotion as a category is converted into an object of productive labour and commodity consumption. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's concept of 'immaterial labour', for example, stitches 'ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement or passion' into the fabric of late capitalism's 'ensemble of intellectual, communicative, relational and affective' commodities, while Zygmunt Bauman limns the shift from a producer to a consumer society as a passage from the ethics of work to the aesthetics of consumerism that 'puts a premium on the sublime experience'.<sup>40</sup> In this model of mutual imbrication between a 'commodified' emotion and an 'emotional' commodity, the commodity becomes a vehicle for emotional frisson it generates, while emotion, in turn, becomes a parasite on the commodity. Whereas Baudrillard, Jameson, Mestrovic and Spacks have earmarked boredom as excessively and uniquely dependent on the commodity, Bauman's insistence that 'the excitement of the new and unprecedented sensation is the name of the consumer game' draws all emotions – even supposedly oppositional or radical ones – into the orbit of the commodities that radiate through late capitalist consumer culture.<sup>41</sup> By implication, emotions like shock and anger become forms of emotional merchandise that are bought and sold within the very cultural formations they are routinely represented as resisting.

## Textual Practice

While the changed status of emotion in late capital is now well-trodden critical territory, the knock-on effect of this change for boredom – that peculiar feeling of feeling nothing at all – remains relatively neglected terrain. A notable exception here, is Bauman, who in placing strong, oppositional emotion under the aegis of the commodity, singles out boredom as the emblem of a pained, desiring distance from the commodity – the trademark emotion not of the happy participants in an affectively charged consumer culture, but of those ‘shut off or excluded from the social feast’.<sup>42</sup> As Bauman puts it with characteristic bluntness, ‘common remedies against boredom are not accessible to those in poverty’.<sup>43</sup> For Bauman, the emotion’s socio-economic reassignment reflects the changed relation to work inherent in the shift from a ‘society of producers’ to a ‘society of consumers’ – a shift in which an industrial society that deploys the entire labour force is displaced by a post-industrial society that ‘produces everything needed without the participation of a large and growing section of its members’.<sup>44</sup> As work and its attendant purchasing power becomes a privilege, a tedious leisure time unrelieved by the distractions and stimulations of consumption becomes the curse of the underprivileged – those ‘flawed consumers’ discarded by what Lauren Berlant has called ‘the impersonal pulses of capitalist exchange’.<sup>45</sup> At the heart of Bauman’s vision of boredom, then, is a striking reversal of the model of the emotion that percolates through post-modern social theory. For Bauman, far from uniquely implicated in consumer culture, the recursive emotion of boredom is visited upon those ‘shut off or excluded from the social feast’. Far from an emotion with a special constituency within consumer culture, boredom is capitalist culture’s other, the only emotion not on the market, the emotional economy’s discard or waste-product: a kind of emotional trash.<sup>46</sup> Far, then, from intrinsically incompatible with the avant-garde, boredom may be unusually serviceable to it.

A quick survey of *Gummo* bears out this sense that, in the new affective and emotional economy, boredom is less an emotion morally reprehensible for its complicity in mainstream commodity culture than an emotion socially forsaken for its position on the squalid margins of economic life. *Gummo* embeds its tonal and characterological tedium in a series of conspicuously trash-strewn bedrooms, hallways, and kitchens – from the junk-lined hallways and corridors of Solomon’s mother’s house, to the kitschy mess of the girls’ upstairs bedroom, to the literal rubbish-dumps in which a coterie of neighbourhood boys play. Critics everywhere commented on the film’s clutter: Maslin, for example, noted of the production design that ‘directorial instruction d[id] not apparently extend beyond asking the cast to conserve about a year’s worth of laundry and litter’; the *Chicago Reader* critic observed, of the scene between Solomon

and his mother, that it transpired in ‘a basement piled high with junk’; while Nathan Adams of *FilmSchoolRejects* mentions ‘the crap-packed, filthy houses that much of the movie takes place in’.<sup>47</sup> But while its status as junk is indisputable, the rubbish ‘pack[ed]’ and ‘pile[d]’ into *Gummo*’s frames is no more abundant than the furniture that lines the walls of, say, the middle-class suburban home of *Modern Family*’s Dunphy family. The persistent critical preoccupation with the sheer abundance of *Gummo*’s trash, then, effectively confirms its status *as* trash in its resonance with the classic Marxist opposition between the ‘commodity’ and the ‘thing’ – an opposition which, in conferring exchange value on the commodity and stripping it from what Peter Stallybrass calls a ‘mere thing’, effectively affords the former a kind of ethereal abstraction, while confirming the latter in its stubborn materiality.<sup>48</sup> As Stallybrass’s concise gloss of Marx’s analysis suggests, ‘the commodity becomes a commodity not as a thing but as an exchange value. It achieves its purest form, in fact, when most emptied of particularity and thingness’.<sup>49</sup> In their incorrigible ‘particularity and thingness’, *Gummo*’s mountains of old clothes, bits of broken furniture and stacks of newspapers clearly fall into the category of things, and thus visually ‘fill up’ the frame in a way that the commodity – abstracted into a moment of pure, transparent exchange value – does not. If *Gummo*’s characters are bored, then, their boredom should be traced not to their immersion in commodity culture but to their immersion in the graveyards of its refuse.

For the majority of the film’s critics, of course, the boredom that saturates the film’s narrative and *mise-en-scene* invites criticism not for its biologically dubious position on the fetid periphery of consumer culture, but for its morally dubious over-implication in consumer culture. Yet even as they reassert this hackneyed critical equation of boredom and consumerism, their attacks on the film’s tedium register the more recent cultural coupling of boredom and trash. Maslin’s disgusted denunciation of the film is exemplary here in its mobilisation of an account of the film’s rubbish-filled *mise-en-scene* – the ‘trash-strewn’ bridge on which bunny-boy walks, the ‘tawdry’ clothes worn by the three sisters – to stand in for assessment of its aesthetic failure as an avant-garde text. In making it near-impossible to distinguish between her revulsion at the film’s failure as an oppositional text, and her revulsion at its abundance of trash, she dramatises a crucial slippage between two divergent reasons for repudiating its tedium: because it is not sufficiently opposed to consumer culture or because it does not sufficiently embody its norms. Ken Fox’s review in the *TV Guide* is marked by a similar ambivalence. Arguing that ‘Korine’s loose, improvisatory script is all over the place, picking up the garbage-strewn lives of Xenia’s other inhabitants in fragments’, he effectively collapses the difference between inadequately radical film form

## Textual Practice

and junk-laden mise-en-scene, using terms with strong associations with the vernacular rubric of trash ('loose', for example, tends to echo 'garbage strewn') to condemn the film's formal failure.<sup>50</sup> The same slippage afflicts Edward Guffman's review in the *San Francisco Chronicle*. For Guffman, the film's tedium can be traced to its immature grasp on the mechanisms of shock, as Korine 'takes the festering rot that hid beneath the surface of David Lynch's *Blue Velvet*, brings it completely into the open and then congratulates himself for having the artistic courage to show us the raw, grotesque truth'.<sup>51</sup> Yet in Guffman's evocation of the film's 'festering rot' and 'raw, grotesque truth', it is hard not to hear echoes of his earlier description of the film's Ohio setting, 'a filthy place that got hit by a tornado 20 years ago but has yet to sweep up its literal and emotional debris'. These figurative oscillations between attacks on the film's overly consumerist form and attacks on its inadequately consumerist content register in real time the shift that historically marks boredom itself – from an emotion tainted by the moral stigma of consumerism to an emotion tainted by its association with literal waste.

This critical tendency to attribute boredom, if only implicitly, to trash, culminates in a no less noticeable tendency to cast boredom itself as trash. In the regular critical variations on the claim that the film was 'pointless garbage', 'the vilest waste of two hours of my life', or 'wasting 88 minutes of my time', boredom and trash are very precisely conflated.<sup>52</sup> Indeed, perhaps the strongest evidence of this historically novel identification of boredom and trash lies in the fact that, hot on the heels of the boredom that dominates the film's reviews is what Wall calls, with minimal exaggeration, 'a nearly universal spasm of revulsion'.<sup>53</sup> If boredom is itself a kind of meta-emotion, an emotion about emotion's absence or failure, it seemed to trigger in critics, in a second level of emotional supplementarity, a disgust *at the fact of boredom* itself. Out of all proportion to an emotional target whose ostensible crime is merely its implication in consumer culture – a 'crime' to which moral censure or disapproval might be a more appropriate negative response – the shudder of disgust that runs through much of the commentary on the film's tedium indexes boredom's transformation into an emotion repudiated by the very consumer paradigms it once emblemized.

But the cultural syllogism that conflates boredom and trash is not exhausted by the logic of identification: as our emotional trash, boredom is also, *Gummo* reminds us, an emotion that *makes* trash of those it afflicts. Having degenerated irreversibly from commodity to thing, from abstract value to material object, the debris scattered throughout *Gummo*'s interior spaces becomes the marker of its owners' failure to make the inverse transition: from worthless objects for a panoptic-cinematic gaze to autonomous, emotive consuming subjects. This failure is registered in the

film's repeated refusal to observe the cinematic conventions conventionally enlisted to distinguish between people and things, foreground and background, subject and object. One scene opens with a shot of a small boy lifting a framed picture from his living room wall. Disclosing and upsetting – in a gruesome *cinema-verite* touch – a swarm of cockroaches hiding beneath it, he instigates an unsettled relation between animate and inanimate that is only intensified as the mobile camera pulls away from him and begins to scan the room. Taking in broken toys, stacked newspapers, chipped crockery and heaped clothes before lighting at last on the figures of Solomon and Tumbler, who are seated on the couch huffing glue from a plastic bag, the camera's patient, paratactic inventory effectively conflates our protagonists with the detritus that surrounds them in a kind of cinematographic enjambment of barely human person and literally inhuman thing. This cinematographic effect is subtly augmented by the audio track, which delivers up a diegetically anchored string concerto that seems to exist solely to point up the yawning social and cultural distance between the scene's dehumanised characters and the sublimely emotional products of elite high culture. If strong feeling, the emotional effect of achieved possession, certifies our status as commodifiable subjects, boredom, the emotional index of dispossession, appears to reduce us to a worthless, lifeless thing. In light of this sense that boredom demotes those who feel it to the status of human waste, we are able to develop an alternative genealogy of the appellation 'white trash', in which the term denominates not a category of person – a person who creates trash – but a person who, lacking in the feeling conferred by the commodity, falls into the forlorn category of trash.

Assuming, then, that boredom is less consumer culture's emotional apotheosis than its emotional waste-product, why has boredom so long served as consumerism's moral and spiritual patsy? In a sequence that has Solomon's characteristically croaky voice-over guide us through the lives of two middle class brothers, *Gummo* establishes a powerful and complex relation between boredom and consumerism that goes some way toward accounting for the strange chiasmic exchange that sees boredom, sign of consumer failure, assume consumer culture's moral taint – even as shock, consumer emotion *par excellence*, remains pristinely untouched by the stigma of the commodity. So disconnected from the narrative and social co-ordinates of the rest of the film as to leave us in doubt as to whether it should be read as objective representation or as Solomon's subjective projection, the sequence is structured as a kind of idyllic home-video montage reel. Cast against the backdrop of a well-heeled suburban home that boasts a boat, a lavish-looking car and a luxuriously fitted-out kitchen, the two sturdy adolescent boys play with a dog, work out on their expensive exercise equipment, and engage in a faux-fist fight. Yet

## Textual Practice

while their inane grins register their obliviousness to the commodities that buttress their experience, Solomon's voice-over narration contrastingly foregrounds his acute awareness of and rapacious desire for the commodities that fail to buttress his own. His commentary alternates between envious catalogue of the boys' possessions and the slack boredom of his own dispossession: 'There were these two kids I know, two brothers . . . They came to school in really nice shorts and polished tennis sneakers and their shirts were always collared with buttons and their hair was always slicked back . . .' Barred from participation in 'the social feast', a bored and frustrated Solomon thinks only of the gleaming commodities that festoon it. Just as, according to Gay Hawkins, trash's hyper-visibility as a 'thing' sees it recruited as the disgraced symbol of the dissolute consumer culture from which it is in fact the abjected waste product, so boredom's all too visible zeal for the commodity ensures it will forever be identified with the very consumer culture whose infinite distance it indexes.

Yet if Solomon's bored, frustrated exclusion from consumer culture paradoxically brands him with the stigma of consumerism, the opposite is also true: the brothers' material affluence affords them a semblance of lofty detachment from material considerations. This chiasmus finds its clearest crystallisation in the series of weightlifting exercises that form part of the sequence's visual chronicle of the brothers' daily routine. Expressing just the kind of emotional and moral qualities that consumer culture ostensibly militates against, these purposive, goal-oriented activities serve at once to distinguish the two brothers from our callow, drifting protagonists, Solomon and Tumbler, and to mark off this episode from the purposeless, unfocussed activity that seems to saturate the other sections of the film. In its painstaking ocular record of the boys' possessions – a measured pan absorbs the textures of their clothes, the sheen of their car and the opulent appurtenances of their home gym – the film works hard to establish a correlation between the industry and perseverance the boys exhibit and the expensive exercise equipment through which these emotional and moral qualities are exercised. So readily do these qualities dissociate themselves from the commodities on which they depend, however, that, irrespective of the film's careful visual auditing, the boys' diligent, focused expressions register not as emotional states contingent on a set of material objects but as emotional traits that index an essential, inherent disposition.<sup>54</sup> In a chiasmic face-off that sees shock and boredom swap their moral and ethical physiognomies, then, if those who cannot buy their way into consumer culture financially are equally unable to buy their way out morally, those with access to the commodity can equally purchase a moral and emotional distance from the worldly goods that anchor their experience.

In its materialist analysis of boredom and shock, this essay has sought to confound the fantasmatic cultural chiasmus by which these antithetical emotions routinely exchange their qualities. The value of such an analysis is twofold. Perhaps most prominently, it throws new light on the figure of the spontaneously animated, angered marginalised subject – ‘excited by work, by pleasure and by riot’ – against which the bored, apathetic Solomon and Tumbler are routinely measured and found wanting.<sup>55</sup> In view of *Gummo*’s insistent alliance of our literal and emotional ‘trash’, this figure emerges as a kind of fantasy. Disavowing the emotional effects of material dispossession, this fantasy mandates a contemporary critical scene in which the poor have been cast as emotionally and spiritually inimical to the avant-garde praxis that operates in their name.<sup>56</sup> If modernity marks a moment prior to what Hardt and Negri dub ‘the colonization of the affects’, it may have been legitimate at this historical juncture to expect a correspondence between economic dispossession and forceful, animated negative emotion.<sup>57</sup> In the wake of post-industrial Western society’s congenital cross-implication of emotional animation and economic power, however, a marginalised population’s emotional atrophy may be part and parcel of their economic dispossession. In this light, the expectation that the poor should greet their social and economic dis-enfranchisement with an emotional depth and intensity accessible only to the socially and economically enfranchised comes to seem wholly illogical. By that same token, the expectation that a scene of dispossession and poverty that stultifies those who suffer it should nevertheless stimulate those who watch it can be shown to perpetuate, at the level of form, the unequal distribution of resources that underpins the poverty it critiques at the level of content.

Of course, if shock’s status as an emotional commodity voids its claim to the ranks of the avant-garde, it should not be assumed, conversely, that boredom’s status as trash automatically guarantees its avant-garde credentials. It is this essay’s contention, however, that our emotional trash *does* possess a certain unique utility as an instrument of postmodern oppositional praxis. If – as anthropologist Mary Douglas has famously argued – dirt is less ‘a residual category, rejected from our normal scheme of classifications’, than a term that can make that ‘normal scheme of classifications’ starkly manifest, the same, I suggest, is true of boredom, which, as our emotional ‘trash’, casts on the emotional economy in which we live a uniquely diagnostic light.<sup>58</sup> Indeed, Korine is careful to exploit boredom’s diagnostic power by ensuring that even as the film diverges emotionally from conventional avant-garde methods, it remains scrupulously faithful to conventional avant-garde ends. In the classic literature on the avant-garde, the reification of shock rides on its capacity to institute a feedback loop between spectatorial and character emotion that facilitates political identifications across class boundaries, ‘draw[ing] the audience’s attention

to . . . poverty in order that it should be capable of revolutionary action'.<sup>59</sup> This is a moment of recognition that, despite its emotional idiosyncrasy, *Gummo* forcefully delivers, matching the affective deprivation embodied in spectatorial boredom to the mundane material deprivation of poverty: as video and performance artist Mike Kelley, himself a practitioner of a latter-day avant-gardism, put it, 'I was in a half-nod watching people in a half-nod.'<sup>60</sup> Yet if *Gummo*'s tedious spectatorial game-loop effectively honours the traditional aims of avant-garde praxis, critics of *Gummo* almost unanimously condemned the emotion's deployment in place of more traditional avant-garde emotional rubrics. Drawing on the figure of shock (or rather, its absence) as a pretext for warding off the moment of identification that shock has been so celebrated for its capacity to secure, they make it painfully clear that their investment lies not in the avant-garde's avowed political objectives but in its bracing emotional stragatagems. In re-circulating our emotional trash in a cinematic context usually equipped with far more appealing emotional fixtures, then, *Gummo* is able to highlight very starkly not only the fact that emotion is a commodity, but the fact that spectators remain invested in these emotional commodities over and above the political effects they supposedly guarantee.

This paradoxical deployment of the figure of shock to elude the ethical and political claims that underpin shock's lionisation is scathingly satirised in a sequence that – shot through with mathematically precise ironies that give the lie to the film's apparent haphazardness – sees a leathery-skinned old man approach our three female protagonists, claiming to have sighted their missing house cat. Predictably enough, his offer to drive them to the place 'just out of town' at which he had spotted the cat is revealed as a scam: having reached a suitably isolated suburban carpark with the three girls bundled in his backseat, he allows one of his hands to find its way between thighs of the middle sister, Helen, while ostensibly searching the car for a map. Rebuked by the girls' triplicate outrage as they pile out of the car, he drives rapidly away, but not before offering a dismissive parting shot in an attempt both to excuse his attempted molestation and to dismiss their fury: '*nothing new to trash like you*'. Neatly yoking emotional trash ('nothing new') to the social trash ('trash like you') of the poor white population to which the girls belong, this self-serving maxim resonates with the aesthetics of shock in its assumption that whereas the 'new' might warrant resistance and protest, the structural, familiar and ongoing status of an event nullifies its claim on our revolutionary impulses. Yet in couching this appeal to shock in the context of, and as an excuse for, an attempted child molestation, *Gummo* slyly and pointedly underscores its absurdity. Once again, the apathy and ennui implied by the old man's disdainful 'nothing new' effectively foregrounds the emotional economy of which it is the abjected waste-product.

As the preceding analyses have made clear, *Gummo*'s substitution of boredom for shock is a mark neither of a local aesthetic failure, nor of the historical expiry of the avant-garde. Yet nor should the film's appointment of boredom as its emotional *leitmotif* be mistaken for a simple displacement of one affect by another in a structurally continuous avant-garde programme. Rather, boredom's rise to prominence in the postmodern avant-garde marks the avant-garde's passage from a mode that enlists emotion as a catalyst to political action to a mode that enlists emotion as a 'precious symptom' of a political situation in which the relation between emotion and action is suspended or obstructed.<sup>61</sup> In this respect, boredom's reputation as a worthless affective waste-product is no misconception – and I have not, for this reason, sought to recuperate or rehabilitate an affect that is not only morally problematic and politically effete but experientially unpleasant. Instead, I have argued that it is precisely *as* our emotional 'trash' that boredom acquires its unique diagnostic traction for the avant-garde. Whereas shock's apparent political efficacy merely dissimulates what Heather Love calls 'the conflicts in scale and political goals between psychic life and political power', boredom's conspicuous political impotence works to foreground that conflict – while suggesting, moreover, that to conflate 'psychic life and political power', feeling and action, is potentially to authorise injustice through reference to the affectively tranquilising impact of its ubiquity and familiarity.<sup>62</sup> To say that the boring postmodern avant-garde decouples emotion and action is not, of course, to say that it somehow reifies diagnosis *over* action. Rather, in remarking emotion's inadequacy to the scope of political action and the gravity of social injustice, *Gummo*'s tedium points up the need for a form of political action that does not rely on individual feeling as its ultimate catalyst and metric. For Bürger, the avant-garde's devolution from an emotional mechanism designed to heal the breach between art and politics to an emotional aetiology that can only highlight or underscore that breach evinces the historical failure of the avant-garde. For *Gummo*, however, that devolution is a necessary first step toward a model of political life and social action that is not played out in the echo-chamber of feeling.<sup>63</sup>

Or is it? If avant-garde boredom can help us loosen the semiotic knot that ties emotion to the political, it remains near-impossible to resist retying it, brokering this notoriously weak anti-emotion as a new and paradoxical index of political urgency. From this perspective, if what we see in *Gummo* tends to galvanise in us less the animated 'shock of the new' than the slow-burning distaste of something worthless, trashy and irrelevant, this is exactly the point at which it would acquire political urgency – even as it deprives us of affective compensations for the tedium of witnessing it. Jean-Francois Lyotard famously defined

## Textual Practice

shock as ‘par excellence, the sign of something happening, rather than nothing at all’.<sup>64</sup> In *Gummo*’s emotional logic, however, shock is less the mark of something happening *per se* than the mark of something happening that – whether in the form of avant-garde art or mainstream consumer kitsch – is able to find mainstream recognition as a commodifiable event. Conversely, boredom is less the mark of nothing happening, than of something happening over and over and over again; something to which, precisely because it no longer excites or surprises us, precisely because it lacks both commercial and affective value, we may be ethically bound to pay attention.

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## Notes

- 1 Eugene Levy, ‘Gummo’, *Variety*, 14 September 1997, <http://www.variety.com/review/VE1117329547.html?categoryid=31&cs=1&p=> [Date accessed: 10 July 2011].
- 2 David Stratton, ‘Gummo’, SBS, undated, <http://www.sbs.com.au/films/movie/1659/gummo> [Date accessed: 14 July 2011]; Janet Maslin, ‘Cats, Grandmas and Other Disposables’, *New York Times*, 17 October 1997, <http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9907E6DA123FF934A25753C1A961958260&partner=Rotten%20Tomatoes> [Date accessed: 13 July 2011].
- 3 Walter V. Addiego, ‘Portrait of Social Decay Flirts with Sensationalism’, *San Francisco Examiner*, 24 April 1998, <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/e/a/1998/04/24/WEEKEND10.dtl> [Date accessed: 25 June 2012]; David Denby, quoted in Unattributed, ‘The Loafer’s Guide: Harmony Korine’, *The Observer*, 17 September 2000, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/theobserver/2000/sep/17/life1.lifemagazine> [Date accessed: 10 July 2012]; Dennis Schwarz, ‘I found myself becoming bored and tuning the film out’, *Ozus’ World Movie Review*, 22 August 1999, <http://www.homepages.rovers.net/ozus/gummo.html> [Date accessed: 10 July 2012]; Ed Scheid, ‘Gummo’, *Box Office*, 17 October 1997, <http://www.boxoffice.com/reviews/theatrical/2008-08gummo> [Date accessed: 10 July 2012].
- 4 While documentary realism and the avant-garde are often directly opposed in criticism, there is, in fact, a long cinematic tradition of combining avant-garde technique with a critical social realism whose grittiness actually undermines and critiques the glossy patina of Hollywood ‘realism’, and much of this work is structured around the explicit objective of catalysing its audience to political action through the exposure of impoverished and unjust social conditions. As a film that, as Jay McRoy and Guy Crucianelli observe, clearly ‘evokes the works of both neorealist and avant-garde experimental filmmakers’, *Gummo* seems to fit comfortably within this tradition (Jay McRoy and Guy

Crucianelli, 'I Panic the World: Benevolent Exploitation in Tod Browning's *Freaks* and Harmony Korine's *Gummo*', *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 42.2 (2009), pp. 257–2, p. 268). A genealogy for this strain of 'realist avant-garde' film-making can be formed through a loose assembly of titles: from Miguel Litten's *Alsino and the Condor* (1982), Hector Babenco's *Pixote* (1981), Glauber Rocha's *Terra Em Trans* (1967), Pier Paolo Pasolini's *La Porcile* (1969), and Luis Bunuel's savage tale of Mexican street children, *Los Olvidados* (1950), to, earlier still, the work of Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov. According to Scott MacDonald, the Soviet revolution

produced a cinema that mounted a direct attack on the mass-entertainment film industry, particularly its function as propagandist for capitalism and the political systems that support it – from a position outside capitalist culture. The major films of Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Dovzhenko, and Vertov combined overt political content and experimental form into impassioned critiques of social conditions and polemics for a more humane political system. (Scott MacDonald, *Avant-Garde Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 3–4)

- 5 Jonathan P. Eburne and Rita Felski, 'Introduction', *New Literary History*, 41.4 (2010), pp. v–xv, p. v; Bernardo Bertolucci, quoted in Craig McLean, 'And the Ass Saw the Angel', *The Face* (July, 2000), pp. 204–6, p. 206; Gus van Sant, 'Forward', Harmony-Korine.com, <http://www.harmony-korine.com/paper/int/hk/forward.html> [Date accessed: 25 April 2012]; Werner Herzog quoted in Graham Fuller, 'Harmony Korine: Directing on the Edge of Madness', *New York Times* (September 12, 1999).
- 6 Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 80; Clement Greenberg, 'Collage', in Greenberg, *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1961), pp. 70–83; Renato Poggioli, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1968); Marjorie Perloff, *The Futurist Moment: Avant-Garde, Avant Guerre, and the Language of Rupture* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990); Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996). Indeed, even those critics who argue for the continued purchase of avant-garde practice in postmodern art often do so by arguing for postmodern art's ongoing ability to shock. For example, Hal Foster's effort to claim the work of Andy Warhol's for a latter-day avant-garde project pivots on the argument that Warhol's simulacral repetitions are less 'blank' than 'shocked', less anaesthetised than traumatised (Foster, *Return of the Real*, pp. 130, 131).
- 7 Jochen Shulte-Sasse, 'Foreword', in Peter Bürger (ed.), *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. xxxix; Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* p. 80. The notion that avant-garde shock works to dissolve the illusion of aesthetic autonomy that usually blunts art's capacity

## Textual Practice

- for social transformation is key to most theorisations of the avant-garde (see Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 51; Foster, *Return of the Real*, 4; Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), p. 205).
- 8 Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 262.
  - 9 Bernstein, 'The Ready-Made Life', p. 512; The Situationiste Internationale, quoted in Laurie Langbauer, 'The City, the Everyday and Boredom: The Case of Sherlock Holmes', *Differences*, 5.3 (1993), pp. 80–102, p. 86; Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 181.
  - 10 John Richardson, *An Eye for Music: Popular Music and the Audiovisual Surreal* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 57.
  - 11 Spacks, *Boredom*, p. 138.
  - 12 Foster, *Return of the Real*, p. 4. For Bürger, for example, the essence of the avant-garde lies in its 'question[ing of] the autonomous, self-referential status of art in bourgeois society' in an effort to 'reintegrate art into the praxis of life'; this 'questioning' entails 'disengag[ing] . . . from th[e] concept of beauty' through the use of techniques like 'collage', which asks to be read not as part of an autonomous, organic 'work' unrelated to the viewer's reality, but as a part of the viewer's own sensuous, material experience (Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, pp. back cover, 51, 76, 103). For Hal Foster, likewise, avant-garde art strives to 'exceed [the] apparent autonomy [of modernist art]', whether through the 'embrace of everyday objects and [a] pose of aesthetic indifference' that resists beauty, as in dada, or through the 'use of industrial materials and [the] transformation of the function of the artist', as in Russian constructivism (Foster, *Return of the Real*, pp. 4–5). For Rosalind Krauss, meanwhile, the avant-garde effects a 'disruption in the autonomy of the sign' that foregrounds the sign's lack of transparency, its dependence on social praxis; in instituting this disruption, the avant-garde typically deployed collage, as a strategy 'in direct opposition to modernism's search for perceptual plenitude and unimpeachable self-presence' (Krauss, *Originality of the Avant-Garde*, pp. 205, 38).
  - 13 Michael O'Pray, *Avant-Garde Film: Forms, Themes and Passions* (London: Wallflower, 2003), p. 2.
  - 14 Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, p. 72.
  - 15 Richard J. Williams, 'Towards an Aesthetics of Poverty', in David Hopkins and Anna Katharina Schaffner (eds), *Neo-Avant-Garde* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), pp. 197–222, p. 200.
  - 16 Thomas Carl Wall, 'Dolce Stil Novo: Harmony Korine's Vernacular', *CR: The New Centennial Review*, 4.1 (2004), pp. 307–21, p. 315.
  - 17 Eugene Levy, 'Gummo', *Variety*, 14 September 1997, <http://www.variety.com/review/VE1117329547.html?categoryid=31&cs=1&p=> [Date accessed: 10 July 2011].
  - 18 Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 40.

- 19 Otto Fenichel, 'On the Psychology of Boredom', in Hanna Fenichel and David Rapaport (eds), *The Collected Papers of Otto Fenichel, Vol 1* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1954), pp. 290–301, p. 293; Haskell E. Bernstein, 'Boredom and the Ready-Made Life', *Social Research*, 42.3 (1975), pp. 512–37, p. 516. As Bernstein clarifies, 'the inability to experience one's own feelings directly and intensely is the root cause of ... boredom' (Bernstein, 'Boredom and the Ready-Made Life', p. 518).
- 20 Fenichel, 'On the Psychology of Boredom', p. 293; Bernstein, 'The Ready-Made Life', p. 518.
- 21 Admittedly, far from insisting on boredom's inappropriateness to the scene of political struggle, many critics have singled out boredom as an inherently radical emotion. For Siegfried Kracauer, for example, boredom is less the effect of a 'culture of distraction' than a sign of its critical rejection, and thus a posture that we should cultivate by 'tarrying for a while, without a goal, neither here nor there'; for Walter Benjamin, likewise, boredom is 'the dream bird that hatches the egg of experience', providing fertile emotional soil for creativity and imagination; while for Martin Heidegger, boredom is a fundamental form of attunement, a mood that is capable of 'look[ing] into our Da-sein ... penetrat[ing] us and attun[ing] us through and through' (Siegfried Kracauer, *Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 332; Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 3: 1935–38*, Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (ed.) (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 149; Martin Heidegger, 'Description of the Situation: Fundamental Attunement', in Gunter Figal (ed.), *The Heidegger Reader* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), pp. 79–103, p. 100). Yet in many cases, the attempted critical recovery of boredom depends on carving up the emotion into 'good' and 'bad' instantiations, where the qualities traditionally associated with the emotion are consigned to a devalued 'bad' boredom, while a series of qualities more readily associated with ennui or melancholy are conferred upon a reified 'good' boredom. Heidegger, for example, is careful to distinguish between 'profound boredom' and 'superficial boredom', between the boredom that is capable of 'attun[ing] us through and through in the ground of dasein', and a 'fleeting, cursory inessential boredom' that simply indexes the desire for some kind of stimulating external object; Bernstein, meanwhile, differentiates between boredom as transient 'responsive feeling', and boredom as chronic 'malaise' (Heidegger, 'Description of the Situation', p. 103.; Bernstein, 'The Ready-Made Life', p. 513). The extent to which these distinctions between particular kinds of boredom ultimately perpetuate the critical devaluation of boredom in general becomes painfully clear in Patricia Spacks's effort to adjudicate the debate by suggesting that when we talk about an emotion that can have a broader, social bearing, we are talking not about 'boredom' but about 'ennui', since whereas 'ennui implies a judgment of the universe; boredom [is] a response to the immediate' (Spacks, *Boredom*, p. 12). Restless, irritable everyday boredom, then – as opposed to boredom distended into 'chronic malaise', deepened into 'profound

## Textual Practice

- boredom' or elevated as melancholic 'ennui' – retains its status as critical anathema.
- 22 From Clement Greenberg's classic essay 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch', which situated 'avant-garde culture' in direct opposition to 'popular, commercial art and literature with their chromeotypes, magazine covers, illustrations, ads, slick and pulp fiction', to Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, which counterposes the literary avant-garde to a popular fiction that functions as 'mere entertainment, designed to prompt purchasers to buy what they do not need', theorists of the avant-garde have routinely appointed consumer culture as the avant-garde's foil and primary antagonist (Clement Greenberg, 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch', pp. 8, 9; Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-garde*, p. 54). According to Walter Adamson, for example, the avant-garde project is 'above all, the effort to press art into the center of modern cultural life while resisting those tendencies that would reduce it to a commodity defined ultimately by its exchange value' (Walter Adamson, *Embattled Avant-Gardes: Modernism's Resistance to Commodity Culture in Europe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), p. 3).
  - 23 Mike Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism* (London: Sage, 2007), p. 88–9; Stephen Miles, *Consumerism: As a Way of Life* (London: Sage, 1998), p. 150.
  - 24 From Baudrillard's work on 'banality' as one of advanced capitalism's 'fatal strategies'; to Jameson's analysis of boredom as 'a precious symptom of our own existential, ideological, and cultural limits'; to Gianni Vattimo's argument that ennui is the presiding after-effect of modernity, with its logic of 'novelty become obsolete and replaced by new novelty in a process that discourages creativity in the very act of demanding it' – boredom, often framed in terms of a rubric of cultural exhaustion and repetition, pervades the theoretical construction of postmodernism (Jean Baudrillard, *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*, Mark Poster (ed.) (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), p. 198; Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, p. 72; Gianni Vattimo, 'Verwindung: Nihilism and the Postmodern in Philosophy', *Substance*, p. 53 (1987), pp. 7–17, p. 8).
  - 25 Reinhard Kuhn, quoted in Patrice Petro, *Aftershocks of the New: Feminism and Film History* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press), p. 86.
  - 26 Gael Sweeney, 'The King of White Trash Culture: Elvis Presley and the Aesthetics of Excess', in Annalee Newitz and Matt Wray (eds), *White Trash: Race and Class in America* (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 250.
  - 27 Daniel Miller, 'Introduction', in Daniel Miller (ed.), *Consumerism: Critical Concepts in the Social Sciences* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 1–14, p. 2.
  - 28 Walter V Addiego, 'Portrait of Social Decay Flirts with Sensationalism', *San Francisco Examiner*, 24 April 1998, <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/e/a/1998/04/24/WEEKEND10.dtl> [Date accessed: 10 July 2011].
  - 29 Russell Smith, 'Gummo', *The Austin Chronicle*, 28 November 1997, <http://www.austinchronicle.com/gyrobase/Calendar/Film?Film=oid%3a140777> [Date accessed: 10 July 2011].

- 30 Paul Tatara, 'Review: Proof that kids shouldnot play with cameras', *CNN Interactive*, 7 November 1997, <http://www.cnn.com/SHOWBIZ/9711/07/review/gummo> [Date accessed: 10 July 2011].
- 31 Janet Maslin, 'Cats, Grandmas and Other Disposables', *New York Times*, 17 October 1997, <http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9907E6DA123FF934A25753C1A961958260&partner=Rotten%20Tomatoes> [Date accessed: 13 July 2011].
- 32 Wall, 'Dolce Stil Novo', p. 308.
- 33 Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Boredom: The Literary History of a State of Mind* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. x. For another example of this assumption, see D. A. Miller's claim that 'Far from the intrinsic reflex-response to banality, boredom hysterically converts into yawning affectlessness what would otherwise be outright panic' (D. A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. 145).
- 34 Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, *The Postmodern Turn* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1997), p. 129.
- 35 Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, p. 81.
- 36 Fredric Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983–1998* (London: Verso, 1998), p. 19.
- 37 For Andreas Huyssen, 'There seems to be little doubt that the classical avant-garde has exhausted its potential'; while even Marjorie Perloff, one of the modernist avant-garde's most prominent champions, who insists that the avant-garde's 'death has been vastly exaggerated', has to concede that 'the utopian side of avant-gardism, its longing to change the world, to overcome the bourgeois 'dislocation [of art] from the praxis of life' has not met with success' (Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), p. 162; Marjorie Perloff, *Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1991), pp. 200–1). It is worth noting that there are a number of notable exceptions to this general tendency, perhaps most conspicuously the work of Jean-Francois Lyotard, who figures postmodern art as a continuation of the modernist avant-garde project, and the work of Hal Foster, who endeavours to resist the essentialism of Bürger's historicist construction of the avant-garde (Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994); Hal Foster, 'What's Neo About the Neo-Avant-Garde?', *October*, 7 (Fall, 1994), pp. 5–32, p. 23).
- 38 Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 5.
- 39 Johann Willem Bertens, *The Idea of the Postmodern: A History* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 55.
- 40 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 293; Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Reflections on Empire* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), p. 62; Zygmunt Bauman, *Work, Consumerism and the New Poor* (Berkshire: McGraw-Hill International, 2004), p. 32. Bauman and Hardt and Negri form part of a legion of critics who have explored aspects of emotion's commodification in late capitalist

## Textual Practice

- economies, including Eva Illouz, *Cold Intimacies* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007); Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (Berkeley, CA: California University Press, 1983); and Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2005).
- 41 Bauman, *Work, Consumerism and the New Poor*, p. 25.
  - 42 Ibid., p. 39.
  - 43 Ibid., p. 40.
  - 44 Ibid., p. 1.
  - 45 Ibid., p. 38; Lauren Berlant, 'Nearly Utopian, Nearly Normal: Post-Fordist Affect in *La Promesse* and *Rosetta*', *Public Culture*, 19.2 (2007), pp. 273–301, p. 274.
  - 46 Bauman, *Work, Consumerism and the New Poor*, p. 39.
  - 47 Maslin, 'Cats, Grandmas and Other Disposables'; Lisa Alspecter, 'Too Big to Ignore', *Chicago Reader*, 9 April 1998, <http://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/too-big-to-ignore/Content?oid=896013> [Date accessed: 13 July 2011]; Nathan Adams, 'Harmony Korine Got Gross with *Kids*, but *Gummo* Saw Him Achieve Maximum Sleaze', *Film School Rejects*, 26 March 2013, <http://www.filmschoolrejects.com/features/harmony-korine-kids-gummo.php> [Date accessed: 14 July 2011].
  - 48 Peter Stallybrass, 'Marx's Coat', in Patricia Spyer (ed.), *Border Fetishisms: Material Objects in Unstable Spaces* (New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 183–207, p. 183.
  - 49 Stallybrass, 'Marx's Coat', p. 183.
  - 50 Ken Fox, 'Gummo', *Tvguide.com*, <http://movies.tvguide.com/gummo/review/132299> [Date accessed: 17 December 2012].
  - 51 Edward Guffman, 'Gummo Stages a Freak Show of Kids and Rubs it In', *San Francisco Chronicle*, 21 May 1998, <http://www.sfgate.com/movies/article/Gummo-Stages-a-Freak-Show-of-Kids-and-Rubs-It-In-3005633.php> [Date accessed: 17 December 2012].
  - 52 Russell Smith, 'Gummo', *The Austin Chronicle*, 28 November 1997, <http://www.austinchronicle.com/gyrobase/Calendar/Film?Film=oid%3a140777> [Date accessed: 10 June 2012]; Ken Hanke, quoted on *RottenTomatoes.com* <http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/gummo/>.
  - 53 Wall, 'Dolce Stil Novo', pp. 309, 310; Maslin, 'Cats, Grandmas and Other Disposables'.
  - 54 It is worth noting that when Solomon attempts a similar work-out regime a little later in the film (he tries lifting home-made 'weights', a set of forks tied together with masking tape, in front of the wall mirror in his basement, to the soundtrack of Madonna's 'Like a Prayer'), he becomes an object of ridicule rather than admiration, his actions signs not of elevation above consumer culture but of a hopeless yearning to live up to an unachievable, commodity-driven ideal of masculinity. As his mother chides, 'You're gonna stunt your growth with those things! You shouldn't lift while you're growing.' Indeed, the presence of a full-length mirror in the scene, a mirror whose 'point of

- view' the camera frequently occupies, relegates his actions to the realm of the imaginary, an exercise in vanity rather than vocation.
- 55 F.T. Marinetti, quoted in Marjorie Perloff, 'The First Futurist Manifesto', Marjorie Perloff.com, <http://marjorieperloff.com/stein-duchamp-picasso/marinetti-revisited/> [Date accessed: 1 July 2013]. Originally published in *Rett Kopi: Manifesto Issue: Dokumenterer Fremtiden* (2007), pp. 152–6.
- 56 At stake here is what Daniel M. Gross has called 'a contoured world of emotional investments, where some people have significant significantly more liabilities than others' (Daniel M. Gross, *The Secret History of Emotion: From Aristotle's Rhetoric to Modern Brain Science* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2006), p. 3). Gross offers a compelling critique of what he calls the twentieth century's critical theory's 'democratisation of emotions': according to Gross, both cognitive appraisal models of emotion, which represent emotion as an effect of individual judgment, and psycho-neurological models of emotion, which locate emotion in the mind or brain, project a purely private model of emotion as something 'housed in our nature' (Gross, *The Secret History*, p. 5). In doing so, they elide the extent to which emotions' constitutive power lies in their uneven social and economic distribution.
- 57 Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, p. 412.
- 58 Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 37.
- 59 Williams, 'Towards an Aesthetics of Poverty', p. 200.
- 60 Mike Kelley, 'From the Archives: Mike Kelley Interviews Harmony Korine', *Filmmaker Magazine*, 13 February 2012, <http://www.filmmakermagazine.com/news/2012/02/from-the-archives-mike-kelley-interviews-harmony-korine/> [Date accessed: 25 March 2012].
- 61 Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 72.
- 62 Patrice Petro has acutely identified the critical potential latent in boredom in her suggestion that while an 'aesthetics of boredom retains the modernist impulse of provocation and calculated assault... it nevertheless abandons the modernist fiction of the self-contained aesthetic object, precisely by exploring the temporal and psychic structures of perception itself' (Patrice Petro, *Aftershocks of the New: Feminism and Film History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002), p. 68).
- 63 Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, p. 94.
- 64 Jean-Francois Lyotard, 'The Sublime and the Avant-Garde', trans. Linda Liebmann, *Art Forum* 22 (1984), pp. 36–43, p. 40.

