

A Larry Clark Portrait

By [ADRIAN MARTIN](#)

Life in Motion

One of the great clichés of contemporary cinema is the use of a sudden freeze frame on a character, with his or her name printed on the screen, as if to offer a thumbnail portrait of that person. The device is reminiscent of the vignettted close ups in the credits of 1930s movies, boiling a character down to a few, superficial associations: a name, a smile, a haircut. When Martin Scorsese (*Mean Streets*, 1973), Danny Boyle (*Trainspotting*, 1995) or Guy Ritchie (*Snatch*, 2000) use such portraiture in its modern, jazzy variant, it is invariably at the start of a story, to orient us.

Larry Clark deliberately waits until the very end of *Bully* (2001) to freeze, one by one, on his gallery of wanton teenagers. When he at last does so, the effect is a powerful and chilling subversion of the cliché.

It is paradoxical that Clark should eschew such effects of split-second portraiture. After all, his fame came precisely from the photographic portraits he snapped since the early '60s and collected in a series of books, including *Teenage Lust*, *Tulsa* and *The Perfect Childhood*. And he is often pegged, by lazy critics, as a mere photographer-turned-filmmaker, lumped into that class of prestigious American artists who, since the '90s, have indeed produced some rather ungainly and inert movies (for example, Cindy Sherman's *Office Killer* [1997] or David Salle's *Search and Destroy* [1995]).

But the very essence of Clark's films – six features already since his debut with *Kids* in 1995, with projects including *Shame* (a remake of Neil Jordan's *Mona Lisa*, 1986) and *Interrupted* (an authorised biopic of Nicholas Ray) in the pipeline – is movement. His films offer a continuously mobile, almost cubist form of portraiture, the kind that is only possible in cinema. His sensitively hand-held camera never ceases sculpting the flesh, tracing the gestures, gazing into the eyes of the strange, too-beautiful creatures that inhabit his amoral universe. It is impossible for these beings to be frozen, summed up, nailed down. Clark is not a fetishist of the image; what is rudely torn from our view, by the camera or the editing, is just as crucial as what we do manage to glimpse. And the music – few contemporary filmmakers select their collages of pre-existing tracks more cannily or dynamically than Clark – always restlessly drives the action into another mood, another state.

An Amoral Cinema

It is too easy to think of Clark as a realist, or even a hyperrealist, absorbed in a contemporary practice of reportage. These are labels he himself invites. To prepare *Kids* he “spent two years hanging” with his blushing young non-professional performers. The research for his new film *Wassup Rockers* (2005) was partly derived from his own teenage son, who “keeps me up to date” on the latest musical mutations. He presented *Another Day in Paradise* (1998) as a “real” version of “Hollywood jive”, the “bullshit movies” that have been made about lifestyles based around drugs and crime. All of Clark's films are close, at some level, to the still vivid memories of his own formative experiences:



Adrian Martin.

Well, you know I was an outlaw. When I was fifteen I

was a junkie and I spent many years being an outlaw. I was a burglar, and an armed robber, and a violent person, and I went to a penitentiary. I took every drug on the map for many years, so I was very familiar with that lifestyle.

Personally, I have no trouble believing that all of Clark's films are broadly truthful in their social observation (although it is at this preliminary level that many discussions of his work stall). His particular kind of verisimilitude, however, does not pretend to be transparent, neutral or objective, in the manner of much realist art. Clark's approach and style owe a great deal to a tradition of subcultural, underground cinema that includes the work of Andy Warhol, Paul Morrissey and, more recently, Gus Van Sant (his executive producer on *Kids*). Clark even has a 'shadow' in Catherine Hardwicke, whose *Thirteen* (2003) and *Lords of Dogtown* (2005) closely mirror his films.

I would describe this cinema tradition, unpejoratively, as amoral. It gazes, coolly and unflinchingly, upon the most extreme manifestations (and sometimes the most pathetic dregs) of human behaviour. But this gaze is not dispassionate. As viewers we are calmly invited to not merely understand but imaginatively share the tawdry fantasies of those we behold. The mood of such amoral movies is discomfiting and kinky, somewhere between decadent, bad-taste comedy and dark, despairing nihilism.

Under the Influence

But Clark brings something else to this mood. He is a filmmaker devoted to sensuality and sensation. His films privilege the headlong confusion of the present moment, rendered in all its messy, vibrant immediacy. In this, he joins another cinema tradition, pioneered by John Cassavetes (*Faces*, 1968) – Clark named his production company Chinese Bookie Pictures in homage to Cassavetes' *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* (1976) – and his heir apparent, Abel Ferrara (*Bad Lieutenant*, 1992). Like them, Clark is drawn to characters in various states of intoxication, 'under the influence' of drugs, drink, madness or obsession. But Clark goes further than either of those directors in his depiction of erotic experience. Ecstatic abandon is an everyday occurrence for his childlike characters. This is abundantly evident, for example, in the lovemaking scenes between Vincent Kartheiser and Natasha Gregson Wagner in *Another Day in Paradise*.

It is often hard, in Clark's films, to distinguish the loss of self that occurs in passion or intoxication from the sort of blankness that sociologists label alienation or anomie. But the inability to draw a hard line between these two states of being is precisely Clark's great, inexhaustible subject, and the basis for the challenge with which his amoral cinema confronts us. His films, so devoted to the thrill of the moment, are also meditations on consequences and responsibility. If his films contain more sex than most, they also dwell on the consequences of sex (like pregnancy and AIDS) more than most. Likewise, the spectre of death (or, less definitively, the threat of long-term incarceration) hovers over all his characters in their precarious lifestyles - albeit without the morbid romanticism that mars so many films on similar subjects.

For Clark the big issue is: how can we make strict moral judgements about people who can hardly be said to be 'all there', consumed as they are by impulse and sensation? Ultimately, the metaphoric, even mythic dimension of Clark's work becomes clear: his tales of on-the-edge characters constitute merely the most immediate and truthful way he knows to address that lack of definition, that zone of amorality, in all individuals and social formations. This is why, for instance, flashbacks seem almost taboo in his films, except as strange, indefinable, David Lynch-like apparitions: such visions that, in more conventional films, serve to define the path of a personality, here belong to no single consciousness. They emerge from the flux of shared, sensory experience and disappear back into it.

What's Happening?

A certain vein of twentieth century thought, culminating in the philosophy of Jean-François Lyotard and Gilles Deleuze, makes poetry

of the simple question: what's happening? How do we know when a true event, big or small, is taking hold of the world and subtly but surely transforming it? And how do we tell the story of that change if we no longer believe in the agency of the 'sovereign subject', the individual consciousness that grasps and filters all data and translates it into decisive actions? How does an event move a modern, fragmented, 'decentered' world?

Cinema has, for the most part, accustomed us to a relentlessly narrativised succession of happenings, all of equal importance and intensity, affecting characters in complete possession of their subjective faculties and empowered by the capacity to take immediate action. So it too rarely engages these prime philosophic questions of our time. Clark's films are different. They are not non-narrative or anti-narrative, but what 'happens' inside them is not reducible to the moves – generally very few – of the storyline. Clark is what Manny Farber once called a termite artist, who works in the fine grain rather than the broad strokes.

His films are absorbed more in description – of a time, a place, a mood, a character's particular way of being or feeling – than in action. They plunge into the intricate swirls of transpersonal events. We can rarely tell, as his films unfold, from where the familiar 'plot intrigue' is going to come. This is why, post *Kids*, he has enjoyed monkeying around with the trappings of genre (especially in *Another Day in Paradise*): on the one hand, what little fiction he needs (an encounter, a betrayal, a murder) is already built into the formula, so he need not labour it; on the other hand, he can lead us astray from the preordained narrative line at any or every point, burrowing inside and stretching out those plotless passages in which his characters simply hang out or kill time or wander in pursuit of some diversionary fun.

Games People Play

All of Clark's films are occupied with studying groups or communities, no matter how they construct themselves: friends, social 'scenes', biological families, ad hoc families like the criminal foursome in *Another Day in Paradise*. 'The couple' – so central to the cinema of F.W. Murnau, Jean Vigo or Krzysztof Kieslowski – is significant to Clark only insofar as it forms a piece of a larger, more volatile grouping. An intriguing aspect of Clark's development as a filmmaker and storyteller in *Bully* and *Ken Park* (2002) is the increasing inclusion of adults alongside his usual teenagers – adults who are variously bemused, uncomprehending, excited or intolerant in the face of what their sons and daughters get up to. *Ken Park's* single-minded theme is the various forms of sexual relationship between teenagers and adults. Virtually every situation in the film is one of abuse, although Clark does not shy away from the ambiguities involved in consensual sex that strays from normal, socially sanctioned paths.

Although his characters tend to deliberately blur together (promiscuity is not only a social fact but an artistic strategy in his work), there is one, traditional divisor that sharply defines a stark difference in behaviour. Like Cassavetes, Robert Altman (*Short Cuts*, 1993) or Mike Leigh (*Naked*, 1993), Clark arranges the pieces of his meandering plots to expose an abyss between men and women. Although the sexes join in rituals of intoxication and ecstasy, in every other respect they split off into mutually alien tribes. *Kids* depicts a world in which boys are heartless, rapacious beasts, and girls (despite their feistiness) masochistic, suffering victims. *Another Day in Paradise* equalises the power game somewhat, but shows how the teenagers are each trained in the ways of their milieu by their same-sex mentor – and it ends with a definitive Clark moment, when James Woods stops the car to matter-of-factly punch Melanie Griffith for letting his 'son' (whom he is planning to kill) escape. In *Bully*, the guys do the dirty work of murder (albeit clumsily) while the gals freak out or implode.

Bully is about a form of domestic violence that infects intimate relationships – along with *Ken Park*, it marks a more pointedly political interest on Clark's part in omnipresent structures of social oppression infiltrating the sphere of sexuality. The story of *Bully* is based on true events involving the sadistic Bobby (Nick Stahl) and the best friend he long dominated, Marty (Brad Renfro). When Marty gets involved with

Lisa (Rachel Miner), he starts to contemplate what his life might be like without Bobby's tyrannical influence. So, one dark night near a crocodile swamp, Marty galvanises a motley crew of friends and hangers-on into killing Bobby. Once the reality of this becomes evident in the cold morning light, this fragile group instantly falls to pieces. The unravelling of each participant flows forth in a cascade of confessions, recriminations and betrayals – a little like the way criminal lovers used to animalistically turn on each other in classics of the film noir genre like *Double Indemnity* (1944).

As a black comedy about family life in suburbia, *Bully* runs rings around a comfortable, conventionally 'meaningful' film like Sam Mendes' *American Beauty* (1999). In a recurring gag, Clark places the kinkiest tableaux shared by these wild teens scarcely out of the earshot of befuddled parents elsewhere in the house. There is a touch of Samuel Fuller (*Shock Corridor*, 1963) in *Bully*, a salutary shock-tactic mentality that gives rise, for instance, to the film's very first moments: Marty, in close up, doing a fine line in phone sex, while between verbal obscenities his mother calls him out to eat. Without doubt, the punk, 'wild adolescent' sense of humour in Clark has found its best outlet so far in the outrageous auto-asphyxiation/masturbation scene in *Ken Park* (set hilariously to the rhythm of quasi-orgasmic cries emitting from a TV tennis broadcast); and the scrappy but amusing remake of Roger Corman's *Teenage Caveman* (2003) – perfect material for him! – made quickly for television in the style of a shoot-it-while-you-can B movie.

The phone sex detail was only one of many that Clark proudly boasted he inserted into the script after consulting the rich documentation of the real-life case. Where his writers had simplified the story, Clark felt compelled to retain everything in it that was complex and unclear. As a result, *Bully* is a rich but unforced essay on the ambiguities of teenage homoeroticism. The question of whether Bobby and Marty are secretly "queer for each other" (as one of their companions charges) is left a mystery. All the behaviour that might suggest this is shown to us plainly enough (such as the scene where Bobby goads Marty into dancing in a gay bar, and seems to enjoy it).

But Clark is not interested in delivering us a magic key to the film, outlining some fundamental pathology that would explain all its events. Sexual desire – of any and every persuasion – is, in his films, not an individualising character trait but a force that sweeps up and entangles bodies, or as André Bazin said of Jean Renoir's disquieting American psychodrama *The Woman on the Beach* (1947), something which "goes from one character to another like a mysterious ball of fire." This is an exploration to which Clark will undoubtedly return in his *Shame* project.

X-Ray Speculations

Like the celebrated Australian art-photographer Bill Henson, Clark is regularly accused of grubby, salacious voyeurism. His films are damned by some reviewers as 'sleaze fests' or 'perve marathons', -and a particular shot in *Bully* gave rise to an enduring joke about 'crotch-cam'. Such appellations are lazy, but not entirely wrong. One doesn't require a degree in film theory to feel that, in Clark's work, the medium of narrative cinema is being stripped down to its fundamentals: a body in front of a camera, and an audience in front of a screen. What theorists call the 'lawless seeing' underwriting the entire institution of movies is admitted and eagerly encouraged by Clark. But to stop at either damnation or celebration of this primal 'scopophilia' misses what Clark's movies are profoundly about. If he gives almost surreal prominence to the raw physicality (and frequent nudity) of his characters it is, paradoxically, in order to evoke the inscrutability of their inner selves.

Every great director invents his or her own way of creating characters in cinema – a distinctive way of separating and interrelating the conventionally seamless amalgam of body, voice, actor, role, and 'inner' self. Altman, for example, renders the psychological processes of his characters opaque – they float in a kind of amnesiac dissociation (think of the men who go on fishing near a dead body in *Short Cuts*) that is occasionally punctured by impulsive, territorial strikes (like the sudden murder a woman performs on her soul-sister in *Kansas City*

[1996]). Ferrara executes a kind of X-ray cinema in which his characters, seen at first in their most everyday settings and postures, are progressively stripped of all trappings of selfhood and identity, until they are little more than bundles of raw nerves. Clark, too, emphasises the insubstantiality of personhood by paying strict and loving attention to the body.

Clark's take on physical beauty raises him to the level of a Jean Genet or Pier Paolo Pasolini. The teens in *Bully* are not just glamorous, they are, through Clark's lens, sublime gods and goddesses. Their 'trashy' gestures (of walking, eating, fucking) slowly come to resemble the postures and arrangements of classical painting – and their (very evident) accumulation of bruises turns them into veritable 'tarnished angels'. Their beauty harshly contradicts the acts they perform, and renders more deeply mysterious their motives. Lisa is a femme fatale not from some cheap film noir, but a Greek or Shakespearean tragedy. In an extraordinary moment, the camera lingers on her naked body until she utters the ambiguous line "it's Bobby" – which, in context, could mean either that Bobby is the big problem in everyone's life, or that he is the father of her child (and that, whichever scenario, he should be eliminated). Marty, too, touches a larger-than-life realm: for all his brutish thickness, he is a soulful, sacrificial lamb, eventually bullied by fate – and by the law enforcement system – rather than by just one good-looking creep. This is why the ultimate freeze-frame of the movie – Marty hugging his little brother in an intense, Pieta-like pose while a text spells out the court's death sentence upon him – is so strong.

New Pornographic Wave

If there is one journalistic line that dogs Clark, it is this head-scratching, ultimately vacuous question, the kind of binary reflex that allows no real answer: 'does he criticise what he shows, or merely exploit it?' The media spectre of 'moral panic' grips these movies, with commentators either trying to whip up a panic from them, or imputing to Clark their own fervent belief that our morally declining society, weakened by the deleterious effects of all-pervasive pop culture, needs a good wake-up call. In this light, some have judged *Bully* to be more or less a rehash of Tim Hunter's milestone *River's Edge* (1986) – another, somewhat less incendiary snapshot of severe teen alienation.

But Clark is not trying to make a midday telemovie about social problems needing urgent, reformist action. His films exude neither angst nor outrage. In fact, he sometimes mimics the form of issue-based drama, purely in order to mock and eventually detonate it from within. Nowhere is this more evident or hilarious than in his own cameo appearance in *Bully*, glowering from the courtroom stalls at the wayward miscreants – one of them, by this time, heavily pregnant, and all of them bickering with each other like peeved children.

Although *Ken Park* is, a genuine sense, the most moral of Clark's films so far, it has drawn hysterical accusations of being his most immoral. Indeed, in Australia it aroused so much controversy that it is still banned there. *Ken Park* was made in collaboration with the outstanding cinematographer Ed Lachman. This dual credit is not insignificant in terms of the film's achievement: the extraordinary sense of intimacy it creates between the camera and its subjects is due to the fact that Clark and Lachman were able to use such a small crew.

The film (partly written by Harmony Korine) is part of what one European critic has jokingly dubbed the New Pornographic Wave, an international trend that includes Apichatpong Weerasethakul's masterpiece *Blissfully Yours* (2002), Catherine Breillat's *Sex is Comedy* (2002) and *Anatomy of Hell* (2004), Lukas Moodyson's *A Hole in the Heart* (2004) and Tsai Ming-liang's astonishing *The Wayward Cloud* (2005). All these films place explicit sex scenes into extremely complex, self-reflexive contexts. However, although *Ken Park* is graphic and provocative, it certainly does not boast the 'real' (unsimulated) sex scenes of *Romance* (1999), *Baise-moi* (2000) or Michael Winterbottom's *Nine Songs* (2004).

Ironically, the scene in *Ken Park* that gave the Australian Classification Board the most trouble is the penultimate threesome between three

teens. Prefaced by a story related by one of the youths about a primitive erotic utopia, it is one of the most beautiful and intoxicating sex scenes in cinema history - a pure celebration of pleasure, and indeed the only unproblematically happy moment in Clark's entire oeuvre. Perhaps the censors overlooked what makes this scene so powerfully significant: it is the only key event in the film where adults are not present.

The Evidence

There is a dimension of Clark's overall achievement that – as is the case for all good cinema – escapes the reach of the written word. His films create complex moods and ambiances that cannot be spelt out in any language other than purely cinematic language. That awesome, prodigious capacity for invention shouldn't render us speechless, but it should serve to rivet our attention, for a change, not on the literary or theatrical aspects of movies (characters and themes in their traditional formulation) but on the special, unique properties of filmic form. The fact is that no other director today can put movement, music and the enigmatic aura of personal presence together in quite the remarkable way that Clark does. Trying to prove this assertion puts a fan in the same position as Jacques Rivette back in 1953 when, in the pages of *Cahiers du cinéma*, he sought to demonstrate the genius of Howard Hawks: "The evidence on the screen is the proof ... Some people refuse to admit this, however; they refuse to be satisfied by proof."

Likewise, it strikes me that people would have to deaf and blind not to see in his magnificent, final passages – the moves that, at a petrol station bathed by dusk light, lead to Kartheiser's dash for freedom through a field as Bob Dylan's "Every Grain of Sand" plays in *Another Day in Paradise*, or the sudden flurry of plot actions in *Bully* that, under a disconcerting Fatboy Slim ambient-techno track constantly building up and cutting out, culminate in those heart-stopping freeze-portraits – the irrefutable proof that Larry Clark is one of the most exciting and important directors in contemporary world cinema.



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11