The Kids Are Still Not Alright: Rediscovering *Lord Of The Flies*

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Abstract

When Lord of the Flies was published in 1954, its frank depiction of wholesome British schoolboys descending into barbarism and brutality was shocking and disturbing to many.Since then, its shock value has decreased significantly. After all, we live in an age where casual youth violence, more extreme than anything done by Golding's murderous choirboys, is a staple of relatively uncontroversial film and fiction directed at young adults, such as the Hunger Games franchise, films such as Hanna or TV series such as The 100. Furthermore, Golding's book may seem quaint, toothless and rigidly moralistic compared to the much edgier "youth apocalypse" films of Larry Clark or (early career) Harmony Korine. Even more poignantly, the worst excesses of Golding's characters are, so to speak, child's play compared to the spree killings or terrorist executions committed by young males, lavishly covered in contemporary media. However, I argue that even with a drastically decreased shock factor, Lord of the Flies maintains contemporary relevance, owing to a number of themes which continue to inform representations of youth in popular culture: the pathologization of deviant youthful masculinity, the issue of "evil" as an immanent and ahistorical threat to peaceful social coexistence, and the fragility of (Western) civilization in the face of ecstatic violence driven by "will to power."

Key Words:*violence; civilization / savagery; youth apocalypse, identity.*

Introduction

A 13-year old boy in fatigues looks intensely into the camera while holding a gun point-blank to the head of an "infidel" in an orange jumpsuit. As religious Arabic chants start in the background, the child shoots his victim, and the camera lingers on the blood, brains and skull fragments, all in Hollywood-esque image and sound quality. On cinema and television screens, similar scenes play out. Teenagers fight to the death for adult entertainment in *The Hunger Games.* A child is coaxed by an adult to join a mindless killing spree in Bobcat Goldthwait's comedy *God Bless America*, which was released on DVD a few months before a real-world youth, Adam Lanza, murdered 26 people in Sandy Hook Elementary School. In the television series *The 100*, teenagers murder and torture one another in a post-apocalyptic scenario where adults are (mostly) literally off the planet. We are in a contemporary cultural and political climate familiar with child soldiers, pre-pubescent suicide bombers, teenage mass shooters and terrorists who become celebrities (and even Internet heart-throbs, as was the case of Dzokhar Tsarnaev, one of the Boston marathon bombers), as well as television and film where extreme youth violence has become so commonplace it takes *A Serbian Film* or *Martyrs* to cause any sort of outrage. Can we still be shocked, moved, or provoked to any serious moral conversations by the arguably quaint and didactic *Lord of the Flies*, a novel published more than 50 years ago?

This is a question that preoccupies me every semester I teach postwar British literature seminars, and I wonder if my students can relate, or engage in substantive ways to the novel. After all, how powerful is it as a parable on the fragility of civilization, in a world where everyday barbarism and apocalyptic violence are broadcast in copious amounts in news media? One does not need to think of fictional scenarios, there are countless real-world scenarios of unsupervised youths going on murderous spress and organizing in violent tribes (whether it's gangs, militias or terrorist groups). Jack and his (literal) choir boys, symbols of

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the savagery in mankind that needs to be tamed by civilization, are (figuratively) choir boys compared to the Jihadi Johns and Dylan Roofs of this world, or even to the protagonists of much ”young adult” fiction and film, let alone the ”youth apocalypse” movies of Larry Clark or Harmony Korine.

Yet time and time again, when it comes to their term essays, the *Lord of the Flies* seminars tend to be the most animated, and most student always end up picking *Lord of the Flies* over, say, Philip Larkin and John Fowles, and their chosen topics almost always are some variation on the theme of the conflict between civilization and savagery. Tame as it may be in terms of depictions of violence and cruelty, the half a century old story of British schoolboys gone wild still resonates, even with a non-English audience desensitized by onscreen violence. Against this personal backdrop, this paper argues that Golding’s dystopian novel maintains contemporary relevance, despite its many shortcomings, precisely because of the arguably flawed and problematic ways in which it deals with youth violence and deviance (inflected by gender and race), with the issue of “evil” as an immanent and ahistorical threat to peaceful social coexistence, and the fragility of (Western) civilization in the face of ecstatic violence. These flawed and problematic ways are still echoed, albeit in turbocharged versions, in contemporary onscreen representations of youth violence, and I will look at both film and media illustrations of that.

”Jesus Christ, what happened?” (A)morality tales of the youth apocalypse

William Golding was an educator and his experience in working with youngsters certainly must have played a part in, as DeWitt Douglas Kilgore puts it, casting a ”cold eye on the Victorian institution of virtuous and innocent childhood, seeking to replace it with an account of ’what boys are *really* like.’” (3) As Kilgore explains, ever since Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, British adventure novels for boys always assumed that English boys stranded in inhospitable places would survive by virtue of their Britishness: ”If the challenges he faced included dangerous others—like beastly predators, native inhabitants, or pirates—each would be conquered in their turn.” (ibid.) In true Victorian imperial fashion, ”The island would be a land of adventure, a school for teaching the ’manly’ virtues of courage, strength, and leadership.” (ibid.) Golding’s novel subverts that scenario and portrays wholesome British schoolboys descending into the savagery typically associated with the non-white colonial Others.

One contemporary lens through which Golding’s youth dystopia can still resonate is drawing parallels to the ”youth apocalypse” film genre, which can be traced as far back as Golding’s time (*Rebel Without a Cause* from 1955, for example), but is best known for more sustained waves starting the 80s and 90s, with shockers such as *River’s Edge* (1986), *Natural Born Killers* (1994), *Kids* (1995) or *Gummo* (1997). A distinctly American genre illuminating a quintessentially British novel? Certainly. Leaving aside Anglo-American cultural affinities, there is a degree of universalim in depictions of youth gone wild. And, like Golding, youth apocalypse directors such as Larry Clark or Harmony Korine also try to depict ”what boys are really like,” unsupervised by adults, in order to make broader points about culture and society. However, while at it, there is arguably a disturbing level of voyeurism and manipulation in this film genre, and there is often a thin line between *keeping it real* and projecting adult fears about deviant and dangerous youth, commonly the targets of moral panics in the real world.

As Richard Benjamin puts it in *The Sense of an Ending: Youth Apocalypse Films*, this genre, for all its pretensions of authenticity and sympathy with its subjects, often ends up ”imitating or expressing social nightmares in which violent youths are the *cause*, not the

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symptom of most social ills" (35). In a sense, this a twist on, or even a subversion of the so-called "*Lord of the Flies* syndrome," defined by Terry Eagleton as

> the quintessentially modernist dogma that beneath the smooth, paper-thin surface of civilization brood chthonic forces which betray its unspeakable truth, and which will burst forth in some dreadful epiphany once you dump a bunch of schoolboys without cricket bats and a prefect on a desert island.(*Sweet Violence* 189)

While the aforementioned syndrome uses the social dynamics of feral youth as some sort of allegorical construction that emphasizes lurking primal dangers to society and civilization, critics like Richard Benjamin argue that youth apocalypse film simply exploits moral panics about feral youth as the source itself of these primal dangers: "Social anxieties concerning violence, disorder, anomie, and decay are cinematically displaced onto the adolescent body. " (Benjamin 36) Or, as Henry Giroux framed it in a visceral attack on directors like Clark in *Hollywood,Race, and the Demonization of Youth: The "Kids" Are Not "Alright"* (1996): "pushed to the margins of political power within society, youth nonetheless become a central focus of adult fascination, desire, and authority" (31), and white youth in particular "are framed and presented through the degrading textural registers of pathological violence, a deadening moral vacuum, and a paralyzing indifference to the present and future." (31-32)

Race (mostly white) and gender (mostly masculinity) are essential markers for the youthful bodies under the scrutiny of the youth apocalypse genre, just as in *Lord of the Flies*. Benjamin points out that

> The films are obsessed with a scatological adolescent body, one that is violated but also disruptive. […] The white youths depicted are pathologically violent and shockingly indifferent to the present or future. Indeed, their very identity formation as white youths is predicated on the pursuit of pathological violence and ecstasy. (34)

This corporeal obsession has parallels with what Linda Williams calls "body genres," referring to pornography, horror and romance. In "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess," she argues that the success of these films "is often measured by the degree to which the audience sensation mimics what is seen on the screen […]" She goes on to add that "What seems to bracket these particular genres from others is an apparent lack of proper esthetic distance, a sense of over-involvement in sensation and emotion" (704-705). This lack of esthetic distance is a particular feature of Larry Clark's movies, of which *Kids* is by far the most notorious (and the only one of his films ever to secure a major distribution deal in the US), and his trademark voyeuristic and intrusive camera angles may make for unsettling viewing. After all, how can the viewer have a proper ethical distance without aesthetic distance?

Kids, shot in semi-documentary style and focusing on the debauched and violent behavior of a group of teenage misfits in New York City, against the backdrop of the HIV epidemic, has been criticized by prominent cultural critics such as bell hooks and Henry Giroux for its alleged conservative and moralizing message, despite the film-maker's attempt to simply document, in frank and direct ways, the gritty realities of street subcultures. The scenes of gratuitous youth violence, drug use, and the plot line involving Telly, a self-appointed "virgin surgeon" who eschews condoms and goes around infecting virgins with HIV could be interpreted as simply playing to moral panics about deviant kids up to no good (and not surprisingly, *Kids* was particularly well received by conservative critics who saw in it a cautionary tale against drugs, sex and disobeying one's parents). Giroux argues that "Clark's narrative about youth plays on dominant fears about the loss of moral authority, while

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reinforcing images of demonization and sexual license through which adults can blame youth for existing social problems, and be titillated at the same time." (33)

The presence of unrestrained, threatening teenage sexuality in *Kids* and in other movies of its genre is simultaneously a point of departure and a nod to the kind of "youth-apocalyptic" scenario imagined by Golding. Golding deliberately inserted only male characters, he justified his choice thus in a recorded interview: "If you, as it were, scale down human beings, scale down society, if you land with a group of little boys, they are more like scaled-down society than a group of little girls will be." (youtube) He also added that bringing girls into the equation would involve the problematic issue of sex – an argument that implies a fear of teenage sexuality as something that is somehow threatening and transgressive.

Teenage sexuality in *Kids* is best exemplified by Telly's notorious mini-soliloquy, which is particularly chilling since the viewer has been made aware by this point that he has HIV and is spreading it around:

> When you're young, not much matters. When you find something that you care about, then that's all you got. When you go to sleep at night you dream of pussy. When you wake up it's the same thing. It's there in your face. You can't escape it. Sometimes when you're young the only place to go is inside. That's just it - fucking is what I love. Take that away from me and I really got nothing.

Yet maybe equally chilling is some of the behind-the-scenes information revealed in a recent Rolling Stone article called "'Kids': The Oral History of the Most Controversial Film of the Nineties," where several cast members, including Rosario Dawson, claimed that much of the over-the-top sexual language and behavior that was supposedly coming natural to the non-professional actors was deliberately constructed and exaggerated. Rosario Dawson herself had her first ever kiss on the set of that film. This back story might give extra weight to Giroux's assertion that

> What such thinking shares with current right-wing attempts to demonize youth is the assumption that young people are primarily identified with their bodies, especially their sexual drives. Stripped of any critical capacities, youth are defined primarily by a sexuality that is viewed as unmanageable and in need of control, surveillance, legal constraint, and other forms of disciplinary power." (34)

The film ends with Casper, a character who unwittingly exposed himself to HIV after raping the girl infected by Telly, waking up from a drug- and alcohol-induced stupor and exclaiming: "Jesus Christ, what happened?" This abrupt shock at one's own transgressions is eerily reminiscent of the bathetic and arguably anti-climactic ending in *Lord of the Flies,* where even the "hunters" led by Ralph break down and cry when confronted with the sudden presence of an adult, hence reconnected to civilization.

I wonder who the real cannibals are: Of evil, monstrosity and barbarism

Ruggero Deodato's infamous exploitation movie *Cannibal Holocaust* ends with one of the characters, having seen recovered footage of an American film crew in the Amazon taking part in animal cruelty, rape, mutilation and murder, only to be butchered and eaten themselves, uttering the memorable words "I wonder who the real cannibals are." These words have remained emblematic for the frequent moral ambiguity of media or cinematic representations of savagery and violence. While Deodato's movie claimed to be attempting some sort of meaningful critique of exploitative media and of the *mondo cane* pseudo-non-fiction genre, one cannot ignore the blatant racist stereotyping and the very real animal cruelty

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in *Cannibal Holocaust*, making it a particularly nasty and hypocritical exercise in film-making.

Obviously Golding goes nowhere as far as Deodato in the exploitative approach to youth violence, but the over moral stance is nevertheless problematic. Terry Eagleton calls *Lord of the Flies* a "heavily loaded fable of the 'darkness of man's hearts'" (25), and the function of moral fables may be twofold: in addition to the normative moral message deliberately constructed by the author, the text may also serve the ethical purpose of interrogating the ideological framework of the respective message. And the latter may be a more useful theoretical tool in understanding the moral fable and illuminating the continued grip that *Lord of the Flies* still has on readers who are already familiar with much more visceral narratives of savagery. Eagleton explains:

> I call the fable 'heavily loaded' because it is easy to prove that civilization is only skin deep if the people you show trying to build it are only partially civilized animals in the first place (i.e. children). It is as easy as proving in the manner of George Orwell's novel Animal Farm that human beings cannot run their own affairs by portraying them as farmyard animals. In both cases, the form of the fable determines the moral outcome. (*On Evil* 25-26)

Certainly, the portrayal of children as feral may strike a chord with contemporary readers who have been exposed to the visual narratives of the youth apocalypse, and may illustrate a disturbing degree of continuity in the representation of youth. To quote Benjamin once again:

> The films of youth apocalypse share violent and extremely dark orientations. Most often, the teen protagonist's body erupts after an assault or gunfire or extreme drug use. The eruption is not simply a precondition of pain and ecstasy, but a crisis of subjectivity. […] These films contribute to the current negative valuation of the biological, deviant body, which is represented as a threat to the country's future.(47)

In addition to the animality of youth as a facilitating factor to the manifestation of the dormant evil within human nature, a further problematic issue is that of monstrosity. Are the choir boys monsters, or in the middle of some sort of teratological metamorphosis? Is the figurative "beast" that drives them to savagery a form of transcendent monstrosity? In "Ten Theses on Monsters and Monstrosity," Allen S. Weiss contends that "Monsters exist in margins. They are thus avatars of chance, impurity, heterodoxy; abomination, mutation, metamorphosis; prodigy, mystery, marvel. Monsters are indicators of epistemic shifts." (124) Yet the problem with monsters, as embodiments of evil, is that they may function, on a rhetorical level, as ways to depoliticize, dehistoricize, even shut down thought, or to (literally) demonize threatening forms of alterity. In practical terms, we see the shortcomings of monstrosity in the never-ending "War on Terror" (sometimes also called War on Terrorism). Simply calling religious extremists "evil" or "twisted" or "perverted" has done nothing to further the understanding of the threats, or deal in any significant way with "radicalization."

Ultimately, the salient question that *Lord of the Flies* may pose, even beyond authorial intention, is whether cruelty and solidarity are conflicting impulses *within* civilization, rather than overlapping with a neat civilization/savagery binary opposition, and in that case evil and monstrosity may be a way to project these repressed impulses. Also, Eagleton may have a point when arguing that

> In drawing life from the downfall of others, we can flirt with death secure in the knowledge that we cannot actually be harmed. We can vicariously gratify our self-destructive drives, at the same time as we can indulge in a certain sadistic pleasure at the prospect of others' pain.(*On Evil* 26)

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Are we morally complicit in our comfortable complacence (alliteration intended) when viewing or reading violent and gruesome material? Is our reading truly a critical and self-reflexive process, or are we indulging in sadistic voyeurism, or a little bit of both? This ambivalence may be part of these same conflicting impulses that pit Jacks against Ralphs.

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