Girls Go Wild in the Social Factory: *Spring Breakers*, sound, neoliberalism

The experience of watching Harmony Korine’s *Spring Breakers* seems to embody the truth of this sentence, from a recent piece by T.J. Clark: “There will be no future, I am saying finally, without war, poverty, Malthusian panic, tyranny, cruelty, classes, dead time, and all the ills the flesh is heir to, because *there will be no future*”. For Clark, this is because no political movement now can have a real relationship with the future; the nature of the present, in which capitalism, dead as an ideology since the financial crisis, remains intractable, does not permit it. There is, writes Clark, “only a present”, infinitely distended in which the left marshalls its project. I want for the moment to push to one side the strange & slightly toxic high-cultural pessimism of Clark’s piece - not least because I wish to avoid painting, by association, a negative picture of the film - to concentrate on that last clause: “*there will be no future*”. The film itself ends, following the climactic shootout in which Alien (James Franco), the gang leader and protector of protagonists Brit (Ashley Benson) and Candy (Vanessa Hudgens), is killed, with the two driving off into the night, in a shot that seems partly an echo of earlier one following the robbery of a chicken shop that forms their initiation into violent crime. The soundtrack, as the credits begin to roll, suggests a sense of peace, though not resolution; it seems, rather, like the odd moments of suspension in the soundtrack - the calm before a brostep drop or becalmed late 90s pop ballad (Britney Spears’ ‘Everytime’ being the main example in the film). And the soundtrack is the thing to pay attention to here: one of the reasons why I’m discussing this film in an event about contemporary music is that it seems to bring into film, to visualise, certain tendencies that have been developing in pop for several years. Besides the original soundtrack by Skrillex and film composer Cliff Martinez, there are tracks from Skrillex’s earlier releases, trap, trance-pop, and the kind of narcotised rap patented on Drake’s second album, genres that converge in a dedication to hedonism which isn’t even really dedication but an automatism of pleasure, an apparently automatic entry into the abundance of what causes or carries pleasure, its scenes (think of all the songs that take place in clubs or that mention “ridin’ in my ‘rari/Lex”). More importantly for us, they converge in certain rhythmic effects, certain ways of organising the time of the song.

The blogger Voyou Desoeuvre writes that the film “produces visually the affective structure of a dubstep track … sharply switching between an ethereal straining at the limits of reality and a brutal pulverising of it produces a kind of transcendence, or an aesthetic effect that hints towards transcendence, at least.” There’s a temporal implication to this: not just the fact of repetition (which Jacques Attali goes on about), but an abrupt switch between extremes of sensation, between hectic activity and placid drift, mediated only by the most cursory of builds; the song’s action is a switching between two poles rather than the production of something else – harmonic and melodic resolution etc. The film’s rhythms are structured by a kind of irrational repetition, by temporal loops that break up the forward motion of story-impelling action within individual scenes. Particularly after the departure of Faith (Selena Gomez) and Cotty (Rachel Korine), the film repeatedly returns to the same scenes - of the girls riding Vespas, drinking, floating in the pool - and, importantly, the same sounds: whispered, strangled or excited lines of dialogue, rattling trap 808s, viscous bass, the girls themselves singing ‘Everytime’. The film returns repeatedly to scenes of beach partying, drenched in booze and sunlight, scored by the same Skrillex track, that seem to stand outside of the narrative. In the party sequences where Cotty taunts a young man, and in which the girls are arrested for using coke, images are interpolated from the future and before the beginning of the sequence, and many of the shots have no obvious temporal signifiers, so that one moment of revelry can hardly be told apart from the next in terms of the film’s fabula. There is a curious sense, moreover, that the traditional narrative arc of the good-girls-gone-bad film isn’t really played out here: normally starting out with innocent subjects who are exposed to or give in to temptation, going through conflict, ending with damnation or escape and salvation - in other words, a developing series of dramas that produce a future from a present. Here Brit and Candy seem to stay roughly the same as characters, and there is no qualitative difference in how their actions are treated even up to the final shooting. The progress of the film, following the eruptive line of the soundtrack, isn’t really so much a question of qualitative progress at all, but of changes of level.

Many critics have remarked on the film’s closeness to the genre of the music video, a comparison usually

1 T.J. Clark, ‘For A Left With No Future’, *New Left Review* 73, March-April 2012, p. 53-75
2 http://blog.voyou.org/2013/04/11/spring-breakers-anti-human-communism/
intended in a rather casual way, with the suggestion that its imagery is a way of organising, emphasising and accompanying the intensities of the soundtrack, or simply as a way of dismissing it. It’s actually quite insightful: we can see direct echoes in the film of the work of Hype Williams’ imperious late 90s phase - the likes of ‘Mo Money Mo Problems’, ‘Still D.R.E.’ and ‘Get Out’ - and later to the aesthetics of hyphy and trap rap videos (e.g. ‘Hard in Da Paint’ and Gucci Mane’s recent ‘Nothin’ On Ya’). The resemblance isn’t merely one of imagery - oiled bodies, drink, smoke, beach and sunlight - but of technique: cuts between different diegetic points held together only by the continuity of sound; rapid-fire cuts are set against slow-motion shots that reduce movement to the undulation and glister of surfaces and colour; forward motion of the plot dissolves into close-ups of kitschy detail and languorous moving shots of sunsets and streaking neon. As with music videos, there’s a hyperactive saturation of information, but simultaneously the urge to return to and prolong the time that carries it; it’s less about exposure to sensory intensities (including rather obvious titillation) than their production, accumulation and recapitulation. In the Cockaygne of sun-drenched overproduction, novelty and stasis work through each other.

What few critics have noted is the film’s strange portrait of work and economic life, which would seem to sit askew from the logic of unending intensity the film tries to project. Joshua Clover and Shane Boyle, in a piece written for The New Inquiry, observe that the film’s story hinges on the fact that the girls don’t seem to have credit cards. Needless to say it’s a strange student who isn’t already entirely used to living on credit. For Clover and Boyle this lacuna becomes the crack that opens in the image of material and sensory abundance that the soundtrack, more than anything, carries. Mysteriously lacking access to ready cash, Brit, Candy and Cotty rob a local chicken-shop. This is what prepares Brit and Candy, who actually carry out the robbery, for their entry into the world of crime. When the girls meet Alien after he bails them out of jail, they ask him: “so what do you do? For, like, a job?” To which he replies, with some incredulity, “I hustle”; “I’m a G”; the self-evidence of this vocation is present in the vast collection of commodities in his bedroom: “look at my shit!” he demands, from guns to money to coke to Calvin Klein boxers to snapbacks to CDs, both the evidence – the proceeds – and the implements of his work. As Clover and Boyle note, it’s at the moment the girls go over to the darker, criminal side of Spring Break that the background of the film’s first half comes to the fore – that is, the “real economy”, “that place of actual toil, grime and danger where our coed protagonists must venture to get hard currency once the cash and the Smirnoff run dry”, populated by the mostly black and working-class subjects who sell the spring breakers’ coke and weed and, presumably, clean their hotels. There is, in fact, just before the climactic shootout, a replay of the chicken-shop sequence, an action that the girls had recounted as a frictionless operation, “a fucking videogame”, this time seen from behind the counter that they rob, that plays out (if I remember rightly) to a track by Grouper; the girls are shown singing out a black man peaceably eating chicken. Their entry into the weightless dream of the commodity world is also their entry into the world of the wage, of immiseration and racialised violence. They are now part of the very workforce they rob.

This isn’t exactly a critique of work, nor of the social system that it perpetuates. The girls certainly don’t have second thoughts, precisely because this replay belongs to the text rather than its protagonists. Neither does it diminish the libidinal force of the film – it doesn’t suddenly become depressed; it continues to take its protagonists pleasure seriously, we could say. It’s worth here, for a moment, adverting to some recent work that the philosopher and musicologist Robin James has been doing about what she calls “neoliberal pop”. For James, neoliberal pop – trance-pop and brostep, the kind of thing on the soundtrack, more than anything, carries. Mysteriously lacking access to ready cash, Brit, Candy and Cotty rob a local chicken-shop. This is what prepares Brit and Candy, who actually carry out the robbery, for their entry into the world of crime. When the girls meet Alien after he bails them out of jail, they ask him: “so what do you do? For, like, a job?” To which he replies, with some incredulity, “I hustle”; “I’m a G”; the self-evidence of this vocation is present in the vast collection of commodities in his bedroom: “look at my shit!” he demands, from guns to money to coke to Calvin Klein boxers to snapbacks to CDs, both the evidence – the proceeds – and the implements of his work. As Clover and Boyle note, it’s at the moment the girls go over to the darker, criminal side of Spring Break that the background of the film’s first half comes to the fore – that is, the “real economy”, “that place of actual toil, grime and danger where our coed protagonists must venture to get hard currency once the cash and the Smirnoff run dry”, populated by the mostly black and working-class subjects who sell the spring breakers’ coke and weed and, presumably, clean their hotels. There is, in fact, just before the climactic shootout, a replay of the chicken-shop sequence, an action that the girls had recounted as a frictionless operation, “a fucking videogame”, this time seen from behind the counter that they rob, that plays out (if I remember rightly) to a track by Grouper; the girls are shown singing out a black man peaceably eating chicken. Their entry into the weightless dream of the commodity world is also their entry into the world of the wage, of immiseration and racialised violence. They are now part of the very workforce they rob.

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3 http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/high-as-finance/
4 http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/loving-the-alien/
crystallises in recent songs and videos – in Rihanna and Calvin Harris’s ‘We Found Love’, with its very odd video, released just after the riots, of an impoverished but glamorous young couple running around kissing passionately, dancing and looting a supermarket; or Will.i.am’s ‘Scream and Shout’, in which the entry into pleasure becomes the bestowal of a kind of aristocratic aura, where, when “up in the club / all eyes [are] on us”.

My problem here is that this reading doesn’t quite seem to capture the specificity of what’s happened to pop over the last few years: it doesn’t account for the qualitative change between the dominant moves in pop songwriting, including in R&B and hip-hop, and that of the ‘neoliberal pop’ produced before the financial crisis. (And, parenthetically, I don’t think it’s a coincidence that hip-hop should be the currency that’s been so devalued in the pop economy of the last few years – the form, namely, most invested in virtual and cultural capital, with its recurrent dream of making mega-money via rap talent.) Very much related to this problem is that of time: James’s vision of Pavlovian clubbing seems to take place in a temporal void, or at least a fully achieved atemporality (the phrase that Simon Reynolds has used to describe the current condition of pop); the peaks of sensation on the bloated choruses of contemporary pop are just the uppermost instances of a continuous current. Contemporary pop becomes a double of the abstract or flattened present that Clark imagines as the terrain of leftist work, in which we strive “to assemble the material for a society Nietzsche thought had vanished from the earth”, reimagined not as a time of political work but of a pleasure that refers to nothing except its own expanse and that of the mode of social production that constitutes it. But the present Clark imagines, as we encounter it in an everyday life that encompasses radio, house parties, shop PAs, the club and private listening, is interrupted by a temporality that renders that present, as present, precariously, that continually liquidates social structures, fixed experiential points, breaks down the defences that once demarcated leisure time. Under the initiative of state violence known as austerity, that strange combination of overbearing injunctions to ‘aspire’ and armed repression, time becomes the element most subject to the shearing pressure of social contradiction, what Nina Power refers to as its “weaponisation”.5 The club, the workplace, the jobcentre, the open Facebook tab, the strip mall, the barrack and the prison are strung together by a single form of time, in which the momentary immersion of hedonism is always-already being turned into an instance of social capital, into a gilded memory siphoned off into the enclosures of Instagram. The pleasure of contemporary ‘neoliberal’ pop is now also inescapably work. The often turbulent neophilia of pop during the boom years, a kind of paradigmatic image of pop itself, becomes a dream of peace in Daniel Lopatin’s Ecco Jam remixes – JoJo or Ian van Dahl resonating in the ruins of their own voices – or Hype Williams’ surreal drifts through Wiley, Drake and Cassie.

Voyou Desoeuvre concludes that Spring Breakers is a curious but admirably vulgar communist film. It doesn’t place ironic quotation marks around its pleasure, but instead heightens it, via the extremes of the soundtrack, into a sublimity of capitalist hedonism, Lava/Ignite reimagined as alpine vista. “Spring break forever”, via the temporal longeurs and dilations of the film, becomes the image of the utopia that lies within the present form of production. It is, in other words, a future that is no future, in which the present discovers itself in its self-pleasure. To me this seems both right and wrong. If it appears to some people vulgar or unpleasant, this Arcadia of bongs, pendulous genitalia and deafening trap-rap is at least preferable to the hipster utopia of expensively muted couture and endless organic brunch by the Regents’ Canal, neither being any less predicated on exploitation and the racialised division of labour. But in this Eden time does not quite belong to its young Eves, with the original sin of work entering, as it were, through the back door. I think it is right that we should take the structure and the weight of the affect of contemporary pop very seriously, and not to condense to it even if we object to it politically, because it testifies to libidinal resources not expressed but bound by hegemonic forms of pleasure: the amount of energy people put into enjoying Rihanna post-2008 suggests the astonishing things they could do otherwise. In this sense, Spring Breakers opens up the central problematic of late capitalist culture, articulated in exhausted affect, precisely by turning it into a lacuna. Time and timelessness, speed and doped inertia, motion and its blur that resembles stillness, are rendered interchangeable. Around the gap in the film’s schema the binaries that dominate the contemporary – organic/inorganic, digital/analogue, the social/the individual, pleasure/anhedonia, work/leisure, time/no time – are intertwined and obliterated as the shadow divisions of a single economic metabolism. The farmer’s

market's exuberance of Mumford & Sons and the digital exhaustion of James Blake or Burial are the terrifying figments of an economy in which control of time is held by an inaccessible Other with whom we must plead and placate, into whose arms we crumple. The vanishing point of this struggle's teleology disappears. “YOLO” becomes a variant of Nietzsche's fable in *The Gay Science*: you only live once, but must loop back endlessly through the same present. It is with horror and desire that *Spring Breakers* presents us with this vision of contemporary pop music.

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6 The author has never actually been to a farmer's market, apologies to any agriculturalists offended by this remark. The Bloomsbury Farmer's Market, a weekly occurrence outside the author's former institution, was expensive enough to inspire a lifelong distaste for this particular economic phenomenon.